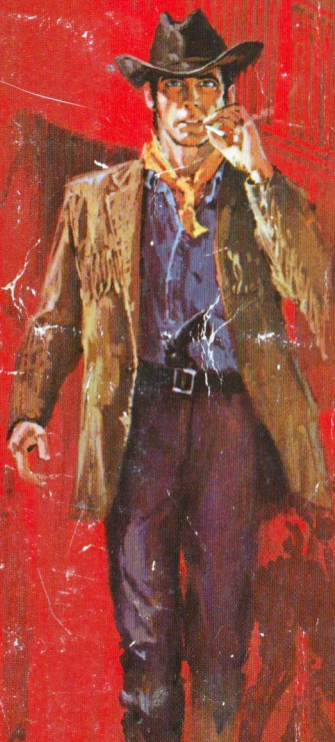


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# THE PLUNDERERS

NORMAN DANIELS



The gold, the deeds, and  
the gunmen will all arrive together



There were whispers about Luke Conway. He never carried a gun—but what they were saying was that the man did not live who could outdraw him.

When a mysterious stranger started buying up all the townfolks' land—at uncalled-for bonanza prices—Luke decided to look into it. Unlike his neighbors, Luke figured there had to be something more behind the purchases than just good will. What he didn't know then was that the man behind the stranger was Jim Eagle, one of the deadliest killers in the West. And the day came when they had to meet face to face.

Luke was rusty. He hadn't drawn on a man in a long time.

Then one of these drew fast. . . .

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# **THE PLUNDERERS**

**NORMAN DANIELS**

**AN ACE BOOK**

**Ace Publishing Corporation  
1120 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, N. Y. 10036**

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**Printed in U.S.A.**

## ONE

THE STREET had quickly cleared of people and, except for the loudmouthed, drunken, highly-dangerous man who walked down the middle of the road, the little town looked abandoned. Yet, behind every window and door, the lone man was observed as he strode along the sunbaked road, defiantly stamping his boots to send up spirals of yellow dust. It was a hot summer's day, as only a late Arizona afternoon in August can be.

The man was trail-dressed—leather jacket over a shirt open to the waist, showing a hairy torso glistening with sweat. He wore boots with worn spurs, twill pants, a disreputable, flat-crowned hat, the usual wide, thick, black belt and a gun with holster tied down.

So far he hadn't drawn. He had dared anyone to stand up to him, but there'd been no takers. Vista was not a tough town, but one of ranchers, farmers, herders, small businessmen, and of wives and families with kids who flocked to the school. There hadn't been a shooting in Vista for almost two years. Men didn't wear guns in town any more. After the war nobody wanted any part of them.

The stranger had simply ridden into Vista, bellied up to the bar, drunk himself into a state of belligerence and refused to pay—mainly, it was figured, to start an argument. He was one of those gun-happy men who can

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go only so long without facing another gun and risking his life. The town believed such men to be crazy. But they were also deadly, and it was good that they didn't come along very often.

This one was here now, and unless he was stopped somebody was going to get hurt. Sheriff Sam Dodd had locked his office door, laid a shotgun across his desk, pulled the shades down and hoped the gunman would pass him by. For the most part, gunmen like this were not willing to take on lawmen because some of those badge-wearers could shoot fast and well. But Sam Dodd could not—and he knew it.

Luke Conway, just cantering into the head of Main Street, had no idea of what was going on. He was a slim man of thirty, still boyish-looking with a smooth skin the angry sun hadn't yet touched, though it had bleached his hair to a sandy yellow color. Certainly, he expected no trouble, because he held the reins with one hand and a bunch of wild flowers with the other.

The swaggering, staggering gunslick spotted him right away and noticed the bouquet, a likely subject for his taunts.

"Either you're headin' for a gal or you're headin' for the graveyard," he said. "An' if you don't get down off that horse in ten seconds, it'll be the graveyard—and no question 'bout it."

Luke wore no gun, but he carefully kept his hands in view. He swung one leg up and over the horn so that he could slide off the horse with one quick, smooth movement of the hips.

"Afternoon," he said affably. "Sure's no graveyard I'm going to. Not on a nice day like this."

"You got four seconds left," the gunman warned.

"I'm comin'," Luke said, showing no offense at the



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threat. "Took me awhile to gather these flowers and I don't like to scatter 'em all over the street, so kinda let me ease myself . . ."

The gunman was close enough now. Luke set his elbows against the saddle, shot his legs straight out, pushed hard and came down off the horse like a battering ram. Both feet hit the gunman in the face before he knew what had happened. He staggered back, but retained his balance and was reaching for his gun when Luke scrambled to his feet. Luke brought up a fist from as low a point as he could reach in the little time he had to spare. It collided with a hard jaw, but the fist was harder. The gunman flew backward and fell.

Luke bent down, pulled the gun from its holster, flicked it open, scattered the bullets onto the ground and shoved the empty weapon back where it belonged. He walked slowly down the street, dusting off the seat of his pants with his free hand. His horse trailed behind him.

The town was coming to life. Doors opened, windows were raised high to relieve the sweltering people inside. A dog trotted down the street, stopped long enough to sniff of the unconscious gunman, wagged his tail a couple of times, and went on.

Luke entered the bank. Before either of the two tellers, or the two customers, could comment on the way he dispatched the gunman, Nate Turner hurried up, his hand outstretched. Nate was fifty or more, paunchy and genial. He owned the bank and was everybody's friend.

"The way you kicked him in the face!" He pumped Luke's hand. "Never did see anything like that. But you called it kinda close, Luke. Leastwise, so it appeared to me."

"Man was drunk," Luke said. "Stranger, isn't he?"

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"Trouble-making stranger. Rode in a couple of hours ago and been itching to fight somebody. Five years ago he'd have been carted to the burying ground before now. These days nobody's got much sand."

"Trouble is," Luke reminded him, "maybe one or two good men might be ridin' to the cemetery along with him. But I came on a matter of business. You got time for me, Nate?"

"After what you did, I got plenty of time. Come on over to my desk and sit down."

After they were comfortably seated, Nate handed Luke a cheroot, lit it and his own, leaned back and blew smoke at the ceiling while he listened to Luke's problem.

"Come by to borrow a thousand dollars, Nate. I'm planning to add two rooms to my ranchhouse 'cause I'm about to ask Ann Hunter to marry me. Not right to bring her to a two-room shack."

"One month ago, I'd hand you the money and be glad to do it," Nate said, "but things are changing in Vista. Haven't you heard?"

Luke shook his head. "Been busy with my roundup chores. Haven't been to town in three weeks. What's goin' on that makes it hard for you to loan me a thousand? Ranch is free and clear. That's security enough."

"Wouldn't need that with you, but the way I see it now, I won't be in business much longer."

"What're you talking about? Town can't do without a bank."

"Reckon this one can. You been approached by a man named Walt Bradley yet?"

Luke shook his head. "Never even heard of him."

"That explains it, then. Bradley's here from the East and he's buying up every piece of property he can lay

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his hands on—and for a fair price. A mighty fair price, I'd say."

"What the hell for? What's he want with a whole town?"

"You got me. When we ask, he just says it's for an Eastern outfit that's aiming to move out here. To do what, nobody knows. Nobody asks too many questions anyway, because Bradley names a figure and it's a very good one. More than we could get from anyone else. I'm even selling the bank—vault and all."

"Where's everybody goin' when they leave here?"

"Scatter all over, I suppose. Like I said, the money's too good. I wouldn't worry much about raising that loan. You won't need it. Bradley will come see you any day and make you an offer. Claude Marlow got eight thousand for that run-down place he's got a couple of miles from your spread."

"Man's got to have a mighty good reason to spend that kind of money. Well, he wants my land, he's got to tell me what it's going to be used for and who I'm selling it to—not just the name of an agent. I worked hard to build up my place and I don't aim to just stand aside and hand it to somebody else, no matter how much he pays."

"Wait," Nate said, "and see—after he tells you how much he'll pay. Sorry. That's the way it is."

Luke picked up the bouquet, slightly wilted from the heat, and walked out of the bank. He untied his horse, led it to the end of the street and turned down a short, narrow lane where Ann Hunter lived with her father and mother. He tied the horse to the neat, white-painted fence, climbed the three wooden steps to the porch and knocked on the door.

Ann admitted him. When he saw her look at him

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the way she did now, there wasn't anything he couldn't overcome. He gravely handed her the bouquet.

"Thank you, Luke," she said. "I'll put these in water right away. Looks like you picked them some time back, but they'll revive."

"Stopped by the bank," he explained.

"Pa's wanting to see you. Sit down and I'll tell him you're here. How you been? It's been three weeks, you know."

"Finished the roundup with more head than I figured on. Fetching a fancy price too—prime stuff."

"I'm glad." Her hazel eyes seemed to grow warmer, as if she sensed how much it meant to him when he told of a successful season. She left the parlor quickly and he watched her move away. He always liked to, because she was so trim and neat. He'd never known anyone like her.

Gabe Hunter dwarfed the doorway when he entered. He was a heavy, thick-set man who owned the blacksmith shop, though he left most of the shoeing and hard work to those he employed. He could still do it himself, however. His muscles were as firm as ever.

"Nice to see you again, Luke. Heard you been doin' real well."

"Can't complain. Takes hard work, but I'm making out."

Gabe sat down. "Seen Mr. Bradley yet?"

"Just heard about him from Nate. Buyin' everything in sight, Nate says."

"That's right. Don't know what for. Gets me—unless there's a mine under this town, or the railroad's coming this way. Never heard of any minerals worth the taking around here and ain't no railroad lookin' to this hell-and-begone place. Still, he's payin' mighty good money.

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You take this house. Land cost me a hundred and ten dollars for all three acres of it. That was eleven years ago. House cost me twelve hundred to build. Makes thirteen hundred and ten dollars I got invested and most of it paid off. Now I'm offered seven thousand. Imagine that! Seven thousand dollars for this place. I'd be crazy not to sell."

Luke nodded. "No doubt of it. Only thing, there's got to be a hitch someplace."

"What hitch? All we do is agree to sell. Don't sign anything. Soon's the folks Bradley represents figure they got all the land they need, then the papers are drawn up. We meet at the bank, sign, they pay us in double-eagles and that's all there is to it. I can't see any way of them cheating us."

"Not if it works out like you say. Sure is a crazy way of doing business, though."

"What's crazy about it?"

"Cause they won't say why they want the land."

"Bradley says he don't know, and I believe him. Only thing I can figure is, this is a deal got up by some Eastern combine that's goin' to set up one of them over-big ranches here and import their own help. They'll need plenty of land and all the houses, along with everything else in town, to make it a going place even before the new folks move in. That makes a little sense. A lot more'n the ideas some other people have."

"Where you going to settle?"

"Haven't figured that out yet. Sure are enough towns within a hundred miles or so. Lots of 'em better than Vista. Won't have any trouble deciding."

Ann's mother came in with a small metal tray on which were two glasses of lemonade.

"Afternoon, Luke," she said. "Don't get up, boy. Just

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wanted to give you and Gabe some refreshment. Got the water from the spring minutes ago so it's nice and cold."

They savored the tart, cool drink and nodded approval.

"Don't know what we'll do, Gabe sells out," she went on. "Got used to this place and I like the town real well. Pulling up stakes won't be easy. Losing all my friends won't be, either."

"Be worth all that gold," Gabe said, smacking his lips as he finished his drink. "Well, you didn't come here to see me, and Ann's been standin' out in the kitchen waitin' for Molly and me to clear out. Funny Bradley ain't been to see you yet. Says himself he ain't near done with buying."

Ann came in and closed the door. It would be hot in this small, over-furnished room, and a horsehair sofa wasn't the coolest thing to sit on, but at least they'd have privacy.

"I left the flowers in the dining room, because it's cooler there. What do you think of Mr. Bradley?"

"I wish I knew."

Ann nodded thoughtfully. "The more I think about it, the more suspicious I become. But Pa says it's a good price."

"Which it is," Luke conceded.

"So he's going to take Mr. Bradley's offer and go somewhere else."

"I don't want you to go," he said, blurting it out before he really meant to. "I mean by that . . . I'm not selling no matter what the price and I'm going to add two more rooms to the ranchhouse and then I thought maybe I'd ask you . . . to marry me."

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"I'm very complimented," she said. "It took you long enough."

He drew a long breath. "You mean that?"

"Luke," she said, "I've been in love with you since I was old enough to begin taking an interest in boys. Now just don't sit there. . . ."

The sound of a man's running footsteps and a banging on the door were a welcome release for Luke's astonishment. Gabe let someone in and Luke heard his name mentioned. The parlor door was flung open and Sheriff Sam Dodd strode in, carrying a cartridge belt and a holster with a six-gun in it. His burly body quivered with excitement and his shock of white hair was tousled.

"Trouble out there," he told Luke. "Man you kicked in the face is sober and hunting you. Says you don't show up pretty soon, he'll start shooting at anybody."

"Luke," Ann said, "You can get out the back door. I'll bring your horse around."

"No need," Luke said. "This hombre talks big. Nothing behind him."

"But you're not even armed," she argued.

The sheriff handed Luke the gunbelt. "Strap this on. Now stand still a second while I pin on the star. Raise your right hand. You solemnly swear you'll perform the duties of the office. . . . Now that makes you deputy. You got to shoot him, it'll be legal. Don't help much, but some. Might make him think twice."

Luke accepted the belt, the gun and the badge. "Just for now," he told Sam. "I'm a rancher, not a lawman, but like you say, maybe the sight of the star will scare him."

"This one don't scare," Sam warned. "You know how to draw?"

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"I get along," Luke said. He turned to Ann. "Now don't worry none. Won't take me but a couple of minutes to straighten this out. Won't be any shooting if I can help it. Then I'll come back and ask you, formal, to marry me. Let's go, Sam."

Luke walked out ahead of the sheriff. He told himself he should have known, ten seconds after he kicked the man in the face, it would likely end this way.

He whipped a hand down to the holster, drew fast, slipped the gun back, drew again. Without the holster tied down, he was very fast and Sam's eyes opened wider. Luke tied the holster down firmly, drew again—this time even faster. He resumed his walk toward the corner saloon where that ornery cuss would surely be, priming himself for trouble.

Then Luke stopped short. "Sam, go in there and tell him I'm waiting on him. That way nobody'll get hurt but me or him. Everybody else stay inside. Liable to be some lead thrown around."

"Whatever you say. Remember, this one's bad. I ain't seen him draw against anybody, but he looks fast and mean."

"Suits me," Luke said. He reached into his pocket for the makings, rolled a cigarette and leaned against the post at Gabe's blacksmith shop.

The man came out immediately. At least he wasn't afraid of a fight. Luke kept smoking, his hands steady, his nerves like ice. The man came to a stop.

"Hear tell you wanted to see me, you no-good sonuva-bitch," he said calmly. "This time I ain't drunk. Let's see you kick me in the face again."

Luke kept smoking. He knew he must appear insolent and contemptuous of this stranger and that's how he wanted it to be. The stranger was a little too sure



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of himself, which meant he was good, and he knew it. But if the man he threatened didn't knuckle under and crawl, he was going to get sore and the madder he got, the poorer the gunfighter he'd be. Killing a man in a fair fight took icy-calm nerves and a brain clear of everything, including fear and hate.

"I got no fight with you," Luke said finally. "But if you're looking for one, I'm here too oblige."

"Step out." The challenge came. "Step out and draw."

Luke threw away the butt, straightened up, walked a few steps toward the man, watching not his face, but his right hand. He saw the fingers curl and the wrist grow rigid. He never took his eyes off the stranger's hand. When it moved, so did Luke's. The stranger cleared his gun, half raised it and then went hurtling back under the impact of the heavy slug Luke fired squarely into his chest. He fell, sprawled out, looking up at the sky which he could no longer see. He still held his gun. Later, the undertaker said the gunman's finger was still tight on the trigger.

Luke unpinning the star, unbuckled the gunbelt and walked slowly back toward Ann's house. She was on the porch with her father. Luke gave the star and the gunbelt to Gabe.

"See that Sam gets these, please. Ann, I'm real sorry about this."

"What was it all about?" she asked.

"When I rode in, he kinda took a dislike to me, I guess," Luke explained. "My mistake was not turning him over to the sheriff to be locked up."

"Sure he didn't even know you?" Ann asked.

"Couldn't have. I never saw him before in my life."

It was the first time he'd ever lied to Ann, but the circumstances, he thought, made it necessary.

## TWO

LUKE HAD BEEN chopping wood for two unrelieved hours and he was drenched with sweat. He buried the ax in the block and wiped his face while he looked about him at the ranch that had taken so much hard work to bring along this far. The house sure wasn't much, a two-room adobe-and-frame building. He would have to add to this before Ann came out here to live.

The ranch was on a slight rise in an otherwise flat country. The long bunkhouse was dirt-roofed on adobe, but it was cool in summer, snug in winter. None of his hands ever criticized it. The sheds needed repair work, but all fencing was in good order, the branding chute sturdy and built to last. The stock pond could stand a dredging and he'd have to see to that soon.

He was proud of it all. This represented an accomplishment, and it was only the beginning. Now that he had his roots down, he could grow. If the bank wouldn't lend him the money, he'd have to cut corners somewhere else and use the profits that would soon come in from the sale of his herd. If the winter was not too severe, his cattle would be fat and glossy by spring and bring another fine price.

No matter what happened, he'd make this a good place for Ann. He vowed that as he loosened the ax from the block and began swinging it again.

After another half hour of this, he shaded his eyes to peer into the distance and try to make out who was driving the buggy heading this way.

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When the buggy pulled up, the passenger alighted. He was a big man, tall, gross of weight, thick-necked with a massive head that was almost entirely bald. He wasn't handsome, but he had a warm and ready smile and a hearty handshake.

"I'm Walt Bradley, he said. "Heard about the fight you had with that stranger last night. They say you're fast for a rancher.

"I was lucky, Mr. Bradley. I take it you're here to make me an offer for my spread."

"My fame seems to have gotten around," Bradley said. "You willing to sell if the price is right?"

"Depends on what you call a right price."

"Well, I can't make a snap offer without looking around and asking a few questions, but I think we can come to terms pleasing to both of us."

"You're calling it." Luke didn't know whether he liked this man or not. Now that he'd seen him, he knew he had never met him before. That had worried him greatly. He felt safe once more and he was curious to see how far the man would go.

"How many head left? I know you just shipped out a herd."

"Five hundred, most prime."

"Nice. Acreage?"

"Ninety, close by. Four hundred spread up into the hills. All fenced. Water enough, and I own the rights fair and square. House is kinda small, but it's snug. Got a barn full of equipment, some thirty horses, all but six broken. Hire ten to fifteen hands in season. Got none now because I paid them all after I sold the herd and they stayed in the railroad town to spend it."

Bradley had been making a few notes. Now he added figures, chewed on the end of the stub of pencil, looked

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wise, smiled and made an offer of nineteen thousand. Luke figured that was just about five thousand too much.

"Generous," Luke admitted. "What you aiming to do with it?"

"I don't know. The hardest part of my work is buying property and not telling what's going to be done with it. You understand I'm just an agent. I know the man I work for and I know he's got plenty of money, but he never told me why he wanted a whole town. Most of it, anyway. Few shanties I can't be bothered with. Told him it'd be slow going not being able to answer questions, but he said let the money talk. That's what I'm doing."

"I'd rather hear you talk, Mr. Bradley."

"Yes, sir, don't blame you. Like I told everybody else, nobobody's forcing you to sell. I'm making better'n a fair offer. Up to you to take it or leave it. But I'll say this—if you don't take it, you're going to be a mighty lonely man, because just about every property owner in town, and most of the farms and small spreads, have agreed to sell."

"Suppose I tell you I'll sell. What happens then? How much time I got before I clear out? When do the papers get signed and when do you pay?"

"Fair enough. We'll allow you seven . . . no, in your case, ten months to clear out. That'll give you time to sell off the best part of your herd. Man I represent ain't interested in cattle, only land."

"The papers don't get signed until then?"

"They'll be signed in two weeks. You get the money one minute after you sign. It'll all be done in the bank, legal and square. You can stay on the spread until next June. That'll be in the bill of sale. Oh yes, you don't have

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to pay any rent, just agree not to bust up the property more'n you can help."

"Seems to me there's something wrong, Mr. Bradley. Do we ever get to find out who bought our property?"

"The day everything is signed, everybody gets paid off, then he'll ride into town for all to see. And he'll explain it. You ain't being cheated. In a plain and simple deal like I been telling, it ain't possible to cheat."

"I'll think it over," Luke said.

"Don't take long. Not more'n a day or two, friend, because we got to know how much gold we have to ship in to pay for all this."

"Two days," Luke said. "I'll ride in. Before that, if I make up my mind."

Bradley offered a very large, soft hand. "You won't be sorry, friend, if you sell out. I've seen better spreads than this in Texas and that ain't my favorite state by a long shot. You should see the ranches in Wyoming! Green, lush grass the critters drool over while they're grazing, and it puts good solid beef on 'em. Well, I'll expect to hear from you."

Luke nodded. Bradley climbed into the buggy, turned it around and headed back to town. Luke picked up the ax and went back to work. He could think best when he was working and sweating. More and more, the deal appealed to him. If Gabe sold out and moved far away, Ann wouldn't be happy. She was too close to her folks to be content to live very far away from them. Above all else, he wanted her happy and easy in mind. Even if it meant starting over again.

He was far more worried about the presence of Andy Tule in town. There'd been a reason for his being here. Certainly no resident of Vista would have had anything to do with a man of his type, and Andy didn't just drop

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in. The only person in town he might have known and been in contact with secretly would have to be another stranger. That meant Walt Bradley.

But what could be the connection between a drifting outlaw and a man like Bradley? There seemed to be none. Luke walked over to the well and drew a bucket of cold water. He sloshed some of it on his face and neck, drank enough to quench his thirst and then made himself a cigarette. He had some thinking to do and this was the time for it, when nobody was around.

Everything hinged on the fact that Andy Tule had ridden into town and raised hell. He did that naturally, but why a tamed town like Vista, where there was nothing for him? No bawdy houses, no rich bank to hold up. No one had much worth stealing. Yet this was where Andy had come, so there was a reason.

Luke thought back on a night of gunfire, arson and cold-blooded murder. It was one of the few times in his life that he'd been genuinely scared.

Four years before, he'd held the horses of a four-man gang that stuck up a bank in New Mexico. The idea was for them to dismount, put him in charge of the horses and have him wait until he was given the signal. Then he was to bring those horses up fast. Four men, even strangers, would not be regarded as suspicious if they were not mounted and prepared for a getaway. So they'd ambled down the street. Three of them had gone into the bank, one remaining outside to guard.

There was some shooting—two men were wounded. The four outlaws fled by way of the back door, the one in front joining his three confederates. There was a hitch-rack behind the bank and the quartette had simply stolen four horses and ridden away. While this went on, Luke answered the signal of the shooting, rode down the

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street with four horses in tow and was quickly surrounded by an outraged citizenry.

He had one difficult question to answer. What was he, a complete stranger, doing with four saddled horses strung out behind his own mount? The only answer was that the quartette was supposed to have used these horses, but they'd chosen to steal four others. So Luke was left high and dry.

Luckily for him, none of the wounded died, but he was going to face a long prison term because it was so obvious he was involved in the holdup, and so stubborn about giving his name and those of the four outlaws who escaped with a sack full of money.

Luke might have been tried quickly and sent to prison all within twenty-four hours except that a posse tracking down the men with whom Luke had ridden, accidentally came across Jim Eagle. Eagle was wanted in a dozen places, most of them for murder, and his capture was of vital importance. They'd put off Luke's trial and substituted Jim Eagle's. The jury took ten minutes to order him hung. None of those minutes were spent on wondering whose murder he should be hung for, since he was credited with enough to be hanged five times.

So Jim Eagle had been locked up in the cell next to Luke. In the morning he was to be hung and the scaffold was already in the process of being erected. Nobody seemed to remember that Eagle was the leader of a tough band of outlaws, all of them on the loose. That night they came for Eagle and they shot up the town, killed the sheriff and his deputy because they'd hidden the cell room keys, wounded three other men who interfered, and then torn the jail apart to get Eagle out. They'd blown the main door with dynamite, shot away the lock on Eagle's cell, but jammed it so

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that the door had to be ripped off. They did that by tying a chain to the cell door, hitching it to four horses and using their combined strength to tear the door off. The door to Luke's cell had come partially away too, enough so that he could squeeze out—but not until Jim Eagle and his men were keeping the town busy with more shooting.

Luke had faded into the dark, walked ten miles before he stole a horse. A hundred miles from that town he turned the horse loose, got a job wrangling, worked hard and kept his ears open and his nose clean. There was a lot of talk about Jim Eagle's bloody escape, but no one even mentioned the fact that a nameless young man unconnected with Eagle's gang had also gotten free.

At no time had Eagle seen Luke's face. He'd heard his voice many times during that one day before the jail-break party arrived, but Eagle had no idea what Luke looked like. Their cells were separated by a brick wall. Some of his men might, because they had peered into Luke's cell while they were getting their leader free, but Luke had stayed as far back as possible and tried to keep his features concealed without making a point of it. He'd seen Jim Eagle clearly, however, as the outlaw escaped.

Andy Tule had been one of the men who'd helped rescue Jim Eagle, but he'd either not recognized Luke or he hadn't seen him that night. It was all back now. Four years couldn't wipe it away. Once—only once—Luke had ridden with an outlaw gang. He'd been young, full of ginger, very slick with a six-gun and he'd enjoyed the admiration of men who lived by the gun. That had been his single mistake in life, and it looked as if he was finally going to pay for it.

Fleeing the jail that night had, in his mind, been a



necessity brought about by the fact that, after the shooting, the town would be inclined to hang anybody with any connection with an outlaw band, and Luke would have been the only one available. He had no desire to swing at that tender age, so he'd simply taken off as the best way of preserving his life.

He'd lived nervously under the cloud of being branded an outlaw, but gradually the incident had faded and there were times when Luke almost forgot he'd once ridden that trail. He'd worked hard, saved, scrimped, finally drifted to look for a place of his own. He found it in this ranch. He had enough money to make the down payment and he'd cleared the mortgage in two years. Now he was on the verge of a steady and profitable growth, and a marriage he craved with all his being.

If his record came out, he'd lose everything. Even Ann, because even if she didn't turn against him, he would have to abandon all hope of ever marrying her. He wouldn't want her marked with the same brand already burned into him.

However, there was no clear evidence that there'd been any connection between Bradley and Andy Tule. In fact, there was nothing to show that Bradley was a crook. Luke peeled off his shirt and washed himself before going inside to make his supper, a lonely routine he'd never gotten used to. It would be different when Ann got here and took over.

His supper was tasteless. One thing he'd never learned to do well was cook. He decided, halfway through the meal, to go into town and eat at the hotel. A man deserved a good meal now and then. Actually, he knew he was craving company more than food. When the hands were around, a good poker game was usually go-

ing in the bunkhouse, which helped pass the time. But there was no one on the ranch now and the silence was more than Luke could stand.

Possibly, he thought, he wanted to see Ann again, this time to talk over plans. He also felt that, after that gun fight, he was still stoked up with tenseness and craved some excitement. Whatever the reason, he threw away the scraps from his plate, shaved, slicked up some, saddled a horse and rode to town.

A drink was the first order of business because the excitement he wanted would be found in the saloon. He tied his horse and immediately noted the fact that there were four tired mounts racked in front of the saloon.

Quartettes of strange riders always reminded him of the gang he'd gone with for a short time. They'd come into town, just like this, to look it over. Or, perhaps they'd been friends of Andy Tule, whose grave was still mounded with fresh earth. There could be trouble. Luke carried no gun and he was half tempted to seek out Sheriff Dodd and borrow one—maybe the same six-gun he'd been loaned before, because it was a well-balanced weapon and finely made to handle with the utmost of ease. He decided he wouldn't look for trouble, only face it if it showed up.

He went on in. The four men were at the bar, as he expected they might be. Three of them were regulation owlhoot types, lean, saddle-hardened, squint-eyed and tending to be jumpy. He didn't know any of those three, but the fourth man he did. He'd been Jim Eagle's right hand, and he'd directed the jail break that night. Luke had seen him plainly. His name was Rebel Kade, a lean, long-boned, wintry-eyed Texan who'd once headed a gang of his own, but wisely gave in to the more pro-

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ductive leadership of Jim Eagle who was admittedly cleverer.

They were watching Luke in the mirror as he ranged himself at the bar. All four were quiet, they paid every time they poured another round, they didn't rough anybody, and even politely made way when the bar became crowded.

All the talk was about the sale of the whole town and surrounding area. There was nothing else of importance in Vista. One man heard they were going to turn the place into a dude ranch for tuberculars from the East. Petey Alben had developed the idea that a potentate from a foreign country wanted to come here and live in strict isolation, but Petey usually came up with some of the fanciest theories of anyone in town.

"Why, he might be a sultan who wants to come here to live in a country that ain't all desert. Yes sir, he would have all the sand he wanted in a day's riding, but he'd have green grass and mountains too. Be hot enough for him, and cold enough too. Maybe like in his own country."

"Petey," Luke joined the conversation, "what'd a sultan want living so far out?"

Petey had a good imaginative answer to that. "Why, Luke, them sultans has ten wives, maybe fifty or a hundred. Now he wants to live in the United States, but he can't bring all them women with him. It's agin the law here. But way out like this, with the land for miles around owned by him, it wouldn't be nobody's business how many women he had livin' with him. Now don't that sound like the answer?"

"Have another drink, Petey," Luke invited, "and kinda steady that dream you're dreaming."

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"You going to sell?" Petey asked. There was a cluster of men around them now, all interested.

"Haven't made up my mind. Mr. Bradley made me a mighty good offer, but I put plenty of sweat into that spread."

"That's the way I feel too, and maybe half the folks got the same idea. Ain't like we just came here and moved into a place somebody else built. When we got here, there wasn't nothing around but grass and prairie and rattlesnakes. We cleared the land, we built the houses. Ain't easy to just up and leave a place like that."

"Hell, Petey," someone argued, "we're getting enough out of it to pay for all the backbreakin' work we done."

"The town's just like any other," someone else broke in.

The arguments began to grow hotter and the whiskey flowed faster. Luke limited himself. He never did drink too much, but even if he were so inclined, he'd have taken it easy tonight. He sensed something wrong. Maybe it was the presence of the quartette still at the bar, listening with too much interest for strangers, to the arguments about whether to sell or not to sell. They even forgot to pour from the bottle set before them for their convenience.

From the gist of the talk and the arguments, Luke figured that one out of three citizens was hesitant about selling. Bradley, it seemed, was just as determined they would sell. Luke had an idea most of those who resisted now would give in when their neighbors sold. As Bradley had said, making it a selling point, this was going to be one lonely town for those who didn't sell and clear out, but even that didn't seem to deter those who spurned the offer.

Luke had an uneasy feeling that the four outlaws were

also watching him with more than average interest, but he was sure if Rebel Kade had recognized him, he'd have been told of it by now.

So interested in the arguments and the four strangers was Luke that he forgot about the time. His watch told him it was after nine and Ann didn't stay up much later than this, so Luke decided not to call on her tonight. He had enough to think about.

There was something wrong. The feeling was so thick he felt he could almost touch it. Bradley and his strange offers. A mysterious man or men, wanting the whole town. An outlaw riding in looking for trouble and now four more of them headed by Rebel Kade. There must be a connection between these differing factors. Luke would have to find it before he would sell. He made up his mind to that, and he meant to adhere to it.

### THREE

THE RIDE BACK to his ranch reminded Luke of what it was going to be like if everyone else sold out and he didn't. The loneliness crept into his bones and he realized that only the hardest possible work had kept him from mulling on this before.

He was in no hurry. The night was fairly well moonlit, though somewhat cloudy. It was sultry; tomorrow it would be real hot. He made up his mind to ride back to town and have a long talk with Ann. If she was going to marry him, she had an equal share in making any decision as important as selling the ranch and beginning again somewhere else. Also, she happened to be highly intelligent and he'd found out that her arguments and decisions were often the right ones.

That settled, he felt easier in his mind. He was approaching a cut in the low hills a mile this side of his ranch. It was a dark, rock-strewn area he hadn't especially liked when he first arrived, but that was because he'd been riding outlaw trails and this was the sort of spot he'd have picked to stage a holdup.

The man on the slow-moving horse was slumped over the horn. The reins were so slack that the horse was grazing and had apparently strayed off the trail. The man looked to be far more than just sick or hurt. He seemed to be dead and if the horse made a sudden move the man would pitch out of the saddle.

Luke dug his heels lightly and his horse responded

well. He rode beside the stricken man and reached out to secure the reins when the hunched-over man straightened up and grinned broadly behind a six-gun aimed at Luke's heart.

"Just sit easy," the man said. "We don't want no trouble, but you start any and it'll sure as hell be us who finish it."

Three men were riding up from a position behind the rocks. As they neared him, Luke recognized Rebel Kade, and then the other men who'd been with Rebel in the saloon.

"I'm not wearing a gun," Luke said. "Whatever you gents want, I reckon you can just take."

"Get down," Rebel said. "Monty, go over him good."

Luke climbed out of the saddle. The man named Monty was waiting for him. "Kinda stretch your arms as high as you can get 'em," he ordered.

"Now look here. . . ." Luke began.

A large and very powerful fist hit him in the belly. It doubled him up and pain raced through his middle. He retched, tried to straighten up and found he had to do it slowly, so great was the pain.

"What was the idea . . . of that?" he gasped.

"When I tell you to do somethin', don't start askin' questions," Monty said.

Luke raised his arms, enduring the pain, beginning to develop a cold anger at these men, but an even greater curiosity. He was searched, every inch of him, before Monty was satisfied, then given a hard shove in the direction of his horse.

"You walk and lead the horse," Rebel ordered. "It'd be healthy if you stayed ahead of us lessen we ride you down one by one. Get movin'!"

Luke walked as rapidly as possible, leading his horse

and staying ahead, though at times he thought one of them would ride him down just for the sheer hell of it. He had no idea what they were going to do to him, but he did realize that he was on the trail back to his own ranch and they were not telling him to deviate from it.

When he came into view of the ranch, his steps were faltering. He was so tired he was ready to drop. Now and then, one of the four would ride his horse clear up to Luke's heels, laughing at his antics to move faster. Some of his strength returned when he saw the ranch-house. There were lights in the windows.

He plodded on, completely puzzled as to the significance of this strange move on the part of Rebel Kade. He was more certain than ever that Rebel hadn't recognized him. At the time of the jail break, the place had been full of smoke, of Jim Eagle's riders, gunplay and general hell-raising. All through it, Luke had huddled in a corner of the cell, his hand covering his face to try in some impossible fashion to keep from breathing in the smoke. No, he had not been seen. Not by anyone except, possibly, a pair who'd come in first, before the ruckus really got out of hand. Luke hadn't known what they were up to, even after hearing the shooting out front, so he hadn't kept himself hidden. However, neither of those men had paid the slightest attention to him. They were concerned only with pulling down the jail so Jim Eagle could escape.

Luke stumbled up to his own doorstep. One of the men gun-prodded him painfully in the small of the back and Luke went on inside. The lamplight gave ample illumination so that he recognized the man standing at the fireplace, one foot on a firedog, drinking coffee from one of Luke's cups. It was Jim Eagle.



He had Indian blood—maybe a quarter or a third—which gave him a darker-than-usual skin, but his features were those of a white man. He was tall and yet wiry. Except for the deep lines in his face and neck, he might have been considered quite good-looking.

"Have a cup of coffee, Luke," Eagle said affably. "It's your own, so you're welcome to it. Made it kinda strong. Like it that way myself."

"Thank you kindly," Luke said, hoping he didn't give away his surprise, because if he did, that meant he knew Jim Eagle and that signified trouble. He poured himself a cup and stood drinking it at the stove.

"He come along with no fuss, Reb?" Eagle asked his lieutenant.

"Monty kinda busted him one, but he learned fast. No trouble."

"That's how I like it," Eagle commented.

"I don't care for it myself," Luke said, "but seems to me you sure brought enough of it to my ranch."

"Got a little business with you, Luke. How long you been in this miserable town?"

"Years . . . lots of years. I started this ranch from scratch."

"Reckon you did by the looks of it. That's fine. I ain't against a man grubbing for a living. It ain't my way, but then I reckon you wouldn't care for mine either."

Luke put down the cup. The coffee had been very hot and his mouth and throat felt scalded. He was extremely worried now. If Jim Eagle recognized him, he was going to be given a choice and no matter which way he went, it wasn't going to be pleasant. Eagle would demand he join his outlaw band and work with them—or somebody behind Luke would get a covert signal, pull a gun and shoot Luke in the back. He knew

how men like Jim Eagle operated. Hadn't he once been a part of them himself?

"Set," Eagle invited, and Luke dropped into a chair beside the table. Three of the men remained in the ranchhouse, the fourth apparently tending the horses.

"Thank you for making me welcome in my own house," Luke said. He didn't intend to meekly knuckle under to anything Eagle demanded. "Now I'd like to know why."

"Reason we looked you up is simple. You gunned down a man named Andy Tule yesterday."

"I gunned him and he damn well deserved it."

"So happens Andy was one of the best men with a six-gun I ever knew. That makes you better'n him, and I want to know how that happens."

Luke permitted himself a harsh laugh. "This man Andy was drunk. He'd been drinking all day. That's what made him so damned mean. I don't say he wasn't fast, but I do say I ain't. I was part lucky and Andy was all unlucky."

"He pulled his gun free, they tell me."

"Sure he did, but it took him so long mine was aimed at him by then. If he'd let go of that gun, I wouldn't have shot him."

Rebel said, "I seen Andy draw faster'n I could follow when he was damn drunk. This don't sound right to me, Jim."

"It happens that he ain't told a lie yet," Eagle said. "I know, because I talked to plenty of people who saw it happen. Only thing they said, which Luke here ain't mentioned much, is that Luke was mighty fast."

"By comparison with a drunken man," Luke said. "That's all—just by comparison. I don't even wear a gun."

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Eagle stepped into the bedroom and came back with the worn gunbelt, holster and pearl-handled six-gun Luke had worn with so much youthful pride.

"This here gun looks plenty used to me, and it's a mighty good one. So's the belt and holster. You don't wear a gun, how come this one's been worn so much?"

"Belonged to my father."

"Was he a fast gun?"

"Not fast, not slow. But when he came West, everybody wore a gun. Wasn't he used it, he just wore it."

Eagle nodded. "Strap it on."

"What for? Look, this has gone far enough."

The burly man named Monty moved up at a signal from Eagle. He drew back his fist, aiming it at Luke's jaw as he was seated in a chair beside the table. Luke came out of the chair before Monty got set. In one leap he reached the startled man and clubbed him across the forehead, sending him reeling backwards. He followed this up with two fast and hard punches to the stomach, the same kind Monty had inflicted on him. Monty sat down on the floor, groaning.

Two of the other men drew guns, but Eagle laughed uproariously and waved them aside. "Just when I was figurin' this farmer didn't have any sand, he hauls off and clouts Monty."

Monty got to his feet. "I'm going to take his head off, right now!"

"Get over against the wall," Eagle ordered harshly. "Move, Monty. You heard me. I'll take care of this gent in my own way. Luke, I said strap on the gun."

"You tell me why," Luke said.

"Sure I will. Because you and me are goin' to have a little duel. If you shoot me first, you win. If I shoot you first, you're mighty dead."

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Luke didn't touch the gun. "If I shoot you first, I'll get a dozen bullets in the back. No thanks, I don't want the honor."

"Ain't a question of honor any more," Eagle said. "It's a question of you living or dying. I want to see how fast you are before I kill you. Otherwise, I'll just cut you down right now."

Luke eyed the gun, looked down at Eagle still seated at the table. "Reckon I don't have much to say about this, do I?"

"Let the gun do the talking."

"I'd go into this feeling much better if I knew why you went to all this trouble. I don't even know who you are. Maybe you know me?"

"I get the feelin' I do, but I can't seem to find you when I think back. You sure we never met?"

"Not unless you were born and bred in these parts."

"Seeing I was not, I guess I'm mistaken."

"Then why gun me? Because I shot your friend?"

"Far as Andy Tule went, I don't give a damn you gunned him or not. He was gettin' so ornery he was a problem. I don't even say you lied about the way you got him, 'cause your story is exactly the same as the one everybody told me. And they all say you're a peaceable man, who don't wear a gun."

"All right then, why this?" Luke was earnestly seeking a way out. The only weapon he had was the facility of his own tongue, but he doubted that was going to be enough.

"You were wearing a star at the time."

"The sheriff pinned it on me. He said if I wore the star, maybe it would scare Andy and if it didn't and I killed him, then it was legal."

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"Also make it nice and legal to hang Andy on the spot if he killed you."

Luke nodded. "Now I never thought of that. No sir, it didn't enter my head. The sheriff gets kinda foxy sometimes."

"What I'm interested in is whether or not you really are a lawman, or ever been one. Don't answer 'cause you'll have to lie if it's true. I want to know if me and my boys kinda loaf around this town for a few days, we'll come up against you should we do a little hell-raising. If they do, I want to know if you're good enough to take them one by one."

Luke said, "So I put on the gun and draw against you."

"That's about it."

"Which gives you an answer quick and neat. I get killed."

"Not if you're very good with that gun."

"Then you get killed."

"Risk I'm willing to take. Are you?"

Luke was already trying to analyze the situation. He thought he had an answer, but a highly dangerous one. Jim Eagle wasn't going to kill him. If that's what he wanted, he wouldn't go through all this. He was, however, going to test him, which meant Jim Eagle wasn't intending to take any chances. To face Luke, dare him to draw, was plain foolishness unless Eagle had a hole card and the only one would be an unloaded gun in Luke's holster. Unloaded, or the cartridges empty of powder. It had to be that.

If he was wrong, Luke knew he was going to die and this was only Eagle's way of having fun, tantalizing a man before killing him. It was a risk Luke had to take if he wished to stay alive.

He buckled on the gun, propped a foot on a kitchen chair and tied down the holster, not being clumsy about it. Eagle would be watching for any exaggerated ineptness. Luke never forgot for a moment that he was dealing with a clever man. An outlaw, yes, but one who'd flouted the law more than a dozen years and, except for the episode of being accidentally picked up, he'd never been in serious trouble.

"We just stand here and draw?" Luke asked.

"You got any bright ideas it's done any other way?"

Luke didn't reply but backed away. Eagle passed a big paw across his face, blinked a couple of times, assumed the apparently idle pose a gunslick so often adopts to try and fool his opponent, and he was set.

Luke reached first. He held back his speed about half, but still made a good showing of a quick draw. Before his gun was level, he stared at the muzzle of Eagle's. Luke slowly lowered his gun and stood there, still not certain but that Eagle was going to kill him.

"Tell you what I'll do," Eagle said. "I'll give you the first shot."

"You crazy?" Rebel Kade yelled. "Shoot him now!"

"You keep your fat mouth shut," Eagle said. "Luke, the first shot is yours. In five seconds, you forfeit that chance and I'll kill you where you stand."

Luke brought the gun up fast, pulled the trigger. The hammer fell on either an empty chamber or a dud. He let himself seem confused and suddenly Eagle holstered his gun, slapped his thighs and roared with laughter.

"Never did see a man so surprised. Or so scared," he howled gleefully. "What'd you think, Luke, when I said I'd give you first shot?"

"Like this friend of yours said—I thought you were crazy too."

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"Haw-haw! Did you really think I was going to let you shoot me? Hell, all I wanted to see was how lucky you are and I got you pegged as a mighty lucky man because Andy Tule could have cut you down without half trying. He must've been powerful drunk."

Luke unbuckled the gunbelt after he untied the holster. "I said he was, didn't I?"

Eagle went to the stove and poured himself more coffee. He sat down, tilted the chair back and decorated the edge of the table with his boots.

"Suppose you tell me what this is all about?" Luke asked.

"Figure you got a right to know seein' you stood up to me in what you thought was a fair fight. Me and my friends expect to spend a little time in Vista. Kind of rest up a bit. We know the sheriff ain't worth a lick of salt and that makes it good in case we want a little fun. What worried me was that maybe you were a fast gun, hiding out. Or a marshal hanging around for some reason. Now I know you're just one hell of a lucky farmer."

"Cattleman," Luke corrected mildly.

"Same thing. Grub for a living. Make ten bucks and think you're successful."

"Are you and your friends fixin' to stay here on my place?"

"Hell, no," Eagle declared loudly. "What's here but a bunch of cows and a lot of grass? I said we wanted some fun. No reason we can't begin now." He put down the cup with a bang. "Boys, we're going back and do some drinking. Luke, you're comin' with us. I owe you a drink."

"Rather not," Luke began. "I got work to do in the morning."

Eagle said, "I asked you to drink with me and that's

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what you're going to do. Now ride along with us or we'll leave you out here and you won't worry none about getting to work in the morning."

"All of a sudden," Luke said, "I got a powerful thirst."



## FOUR

THE SALOON was crowded and noisy. While the number of customers didn't diminish when Eagle and Luke walked in, followed by Eagle's men, the noise abated.

Eagle called for a bottle, poured a brimful glass for Luke, another for himself and slid the bottle down the wet bar for his men.

"It pleasures me to drink with a man who's got enough sand to stand up to me," Eagle said loudly. "I like you, Luke Conway, and I like this town. Man can get rested real nice here, if he don't fall dead of boredom first. Me and my friends are staying awhile." He turned around, put his back against the bar and looked over the room. "Anybody got any objections?"

Nobody had. Eagle laughed, turned back and poured more whiskey. When Luke reached for the bottle, Eagle slapped his hand away.

"I treat a man once and that's all. You drink from now on, you pay."

Luke pushed the bottle away. "Don't taste as good if it costs me money. You got any reason for wanting me to hang around?"

"Can't think of any right now." Eagle suddenly spat a mouthful of whiskey on the floor. "This stuff ain't fit to drink. Get me something better, right now."

The bartender was frantically pawing the dark recesses beneath the bar, hunting for one of half a dozen bottles of a special brand he'd ordered from St. Louis. They

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were for important occasions and the bartender couldn't think of one more important.

Luke drifted toward the batwings, but before he reached them, Walt Bradley came in, letting the doors flap noisily behind him.

"Howdy," he greeted Luke. "Ain't you up kinda late for a farmer?"

"Been an exciting evening, sort of," Luke said. "I'm goin' home pretty soon."

He didn't resume his exit, but sat down at a table where a desultory poker game was going on. Nobody was interested enough in the game to play well so long as Jim Eagle was present, and potential hell-raising became an increasing possibility. Luke was curious too, about how Jim Eagle would handle Walt Bradley.

Bradley looked casually at Eagle, but continued on his way to the bar. He lined up close by Eagle's men and he reached for the glass the barkeep spun over the bar toward him. Bradley saw the special bottle and grunted as he made a grab for it.

"Hold on," Jim Eagle said sharply, from behind Bradley.

Bradley calmly poured from the special bottle before he picked up the glass and turned around. Jim Eagle was three feet away, glaring at him.

"Something troubling you, friend?" Bradley asked.

"It troubles me when somebody I don't know drinks from my bottle of whiskey."

"It was on the bar, belonged to whoever wanted it. Unless you bought and paid for it, friend. In that case, I apologize." He brought the glass to his lips and drank from it.

Eagle knocked the glass out of his hand. Bradley

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backed up tight against the bar. "I'm without a gun, friend."

"Seen that," Eagle said tersely. "Don't make one damn bit of difference to me. I hate a man who drinks my liquor. And I hate the barkeep who lets him."

Eagle drew very fast, and shot holes in the backbar mirror, the bullets whizzing only a few inches from Bradley's head. As the last slivers of glass tinkled to the floor, Eagle put up his gun.

"Just in case that don't give you the idea I like my whiskey for myself, maybe this'll help."

He drew back his fist, slammed it in Bradley's direction. Luke, watching narrowly, saw Eagle open the fist just before he hit Bradley on the side of the head. It looked and sounded like a massive blow, but it was little more than a slap. Bradley toppled over sideways and landed on the floor.

He sat there, amidst the butts of cigarettes and the contents of an overturned spittoon. He looked up at Eagle in considerable dismay and some pain, indicated by his wincing as he stroked his jaw.

"Now what'n tarnation you do that for?" he asked mildly.

"Get outta here," Eagle said harshly. "I don't like your face."

Bradley arose, clinging to the bar for support, until his wits seemed to steady. Then he drew himself up and walked out. Luke tried to reconcile the fact that Eagle and Bradley weren't supposed to know one another, but that Eagle struck at Bradley without hurting him, while Bradley made it appear he'd been half killed. Then Eagle had ordered Bradley out. It didn't make any more sense than the way Eagle had shot up the back-

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bar mirror. Luke arose and walked from the place, wishing it wasn't so late so he might call on Ann.

Bradley was at the watering trough, splashing cold water on his face and looking rueful and puzzled.

"Evening, Mr. Conway," he said. "You see what happened in there?"

"Be blind if I didn't."

"Now why'd that crazy galoot take a poke at me? If I made a mistake and grabbed his whiskey, all he had to do was tell me in a nice way. Hell, I'd have bought him a whole bottle rather than get hit the way I did."

"Had a run-in with him myself," Luke said.

"He haul off and hit you too?"

"He didn't, but one of his men did."

"Must be crazy, the lot of 'em." He dried his face with his sleeve. "Made up your mind to sell yet, Mr. Conway?"

"Thinking about it."

"Don't wait too long. The price might go down. There be many more incidents like this one and I'll tell you right now, there won't be as much money paid. Not to a town that harbors a man like that one. Who is he?"

"Don't know. Only that he must be a friend of the man I killed."

"You were lucky he didn't gun you. I'm going to speak to the sheriff about this. One reason the people I represent picked this town was because it was peaceable."

"It will be again," Luke assured him, "soon as these men leave. Their kind don't stay long in one place."

"It's hell while they do, though," Bradley opined. "Well, I guess I'll go to my room. I enjoy passing a friendly word or two with all the fine people in Vista, but not while the likes of that gunslick is around."

The batwings suddenly flew open and Jim Eagle stood

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framed in the doorway for a moment. Then he walked across the wooden sidewalk, jumped to the road, walked up to where Luke and Bradley stood. He grinned at Luke and clapped him on the shoulder. He spat at Bradley's feet before he turned his back on them, went to where his horse was racked and rode noisily down the street.

Bradley's shoulders sagged and he looked as if he needed support to stand up. "I thought he'd decided to kill me," he said. "Two minutes ago I wouldn't have given ten cents for my life. Mr. Conway, you think he's crazy?"

"His kind are always some loco. But not the kind of crazy you lock behind bars. Wonder where he's heading this time of night? Well, I know where I am. Good night, Mr. Bradley."

"Good night, Mr. Conway. Be sure to think about that offer. It won't go any higher, I assure you."

Bradley watched him canter off toward the end of the street and the trail which began there. After the night had swallowed Luke up, Bradley turned his steps to the hotel. The clerk was sound asleep. Bradley walked up the stairs to his second floor room. He opened the door. A gun was jammed into his ribs.

"Take it easy, Jim," Bradley said irritably. "You getting gun-happy these days?"

Jim Eagle stuffed the gun back in its holster and waited until Bradley lit the lone lamp. Bradley shucked his coat, loosened his string tie and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Think it went off all right?" he asked.

"Maybe. I should have hit you real, not faked it like I did. Somebody might've noticed."

"These peasants don't expect anything so they don't

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look for anything, and that Luke Conway you been so all-fired het-up about, he's worse than the rest of 'em."

"You sure about that? Me, I ain't. Don't ask me why, but I just ain't. I don't like the smell of him. I don't like the way he looks at me. Most of all, I don't like the way he gunned down Andy Tule."

"You worry too much. He's just a cattle raiser. You can bet even the sheriff was surprised that he killed Andy. I tell you there's nothing wrong with him except that he's stubborn and don't want to sell his ranch."

"Maybe I'm wrong. But I'm keepin' an eye on him. I ain't met many people in this town, but if there were three more like him, I'd say pull out now and let everything drop."

"What's the matter with you? Didn't we pull this little scheme in Middlespring? And in Altea? Went like clockwork."

Eagle nodded. "Worked fine, but there wasn't anybody in either town looked and acted like this Luke Conway. Maybe I worry about him 'cause I got a strange feelin' I met him before."

"You'd remember him if you did. Big man, good looking like he is, way he acts . . . he ain't a man you'd forget."

"Reckon not. I'm just getting nervous, that's all. This is the third time we try this trick and I'm a big believer that third times don't work."

"You're being stupid," Bradley declared with some heat.

"You ever ride an outlaw trail? You ever rob a bank? You ever cut a couple of hundred cattle from a herd and run 'em off? Oh no, not you. The likes of you just does all the scheming and takes most of the gold."

"Calm down, will you? We made an agreement. I'm

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sticking by it. There's nothing to fear from Luke Conway or anyone else. He told me what happened at his ranchhouse when your boys took him there. He's so green he can't figure anything out. He's got no idea why you did that. And he thinks you walloped me kinda hard and for no reason."

"You say so," Jim Eagle said.

"You been listening to me, ain't you? Forget it now. Tomorrow start some hell-raising. Not too much. About a third of the folks here are holding out. They don't want to sell. You and the boys got to make 'em see the light. But, again, be careful you don't go too far."

"With my boys backing me up, I could take the whole town over right now."

"We don't want to take the town over. You'd better get out of here now in case somebody comes. Don't worry about the desk clerk. I give him a pint every night and he falls asleep."

At the door, Jim Eagle paused and turned around. "You ever look right into Luke Conway's eyes?"

"What're you getting at?"

"Just for one second back there at his place, when he was getting ready to dig for his gun, I saw something in his eyes I've seen before."

"You're talking in riddles."

"I saw that look before—when I look at myself in a mirror sometimes, when I'm good and riled. You don't forget that look, Walt. Leastwise, I don't."

"Wait now! You ain't turning yellow by some chance."

"I'll stand up to any man you name at any time and place. Don't get me wrong on that. I'm only saying that I have a feeling I know Luke Conway and if I do, he's a damn liar and that makes him dangerous. I saw that look in his eyes and it bothers me some. Not that I can't

take him. That'd be easy, but if he's smart as I think, he could throw a big monkey wrench in this whole thing, and after pulling the same game in two other towns, it wouldn't take long for Luke to find out what's goin' on."

"Hell, Jim," Bradley said, "the folks in those two towns don't even know what happened yet. They never will. Beat it, like I said before. I want to get some sleep."

Jim Eagle walked out, sauntering past the dozing clerk in the small lobby and continuing on to the street. His horse was there and he was undecided whether to ride out to Luke's place again for a look-see by himself, or to stable the horse and get a room. He was tired. It had been a long day. He decided to get some rest.

He met Rebel Kade in the livery, but they didn't talk much, only arranged for the horses to be fed. He and Rebel wandered toward the far end of town where there was no likelihood of being overheard.

"What do you think of Luke Conway?" Jim asked.

"Not much. I don't figure on him to give us any trouble."

"You ever get the feeling you knew him from someplace?"

"No! Think you did?"

"I'm not sure. That's it, I'm just not sure, and if I hadn't met him I ought to be able to shake off the feeling, but I can't. That's what worries me."

Rebel had a moment of near panic. "You think he's a Pinkerton? A Secret Service man? Maybe a marshal?"

"I doubt it. He don't act like a man with authority. Them kind always gives themselves away. No, Luke's a cattleman all right. What I want to know is what did he do before that. Well, we won't be here too long if things go right. I guess he's nothing to worry 'bout."

"Walt say how things were going?"



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"A third holding out. They'll come around soon as we put the fear of the devil himself into them. Tomorrow night we start. Tell the boys I want them mean and tough, ornery as a snake and loud as they can be. I want the womenfolk to steer clear of 'em and the men to shy away. But I don't want anybody killed. Is that clear?"

"No reason to gun anybody, Jim. Don't I always do like you say?"

Jim Eagle nodded, rolled himself a cigarette and then walked slowly back. A few men on the street eyed him, but didn't say anything. He continued on his way to the hotel where he arranged for a room. He didn't sign in the register as the hotel required of gents who traveled light, but the desk clerk didn't think it wise to insist. It was easier to just sit back, feel the glow of the whiskey that nice Mr. Bradley had given him and let others do the worrying.

Jim Eagle stripped down to his underwear and then sat by the open window for the coolness it offered. He was still thinking about Luke Conway.

## FIVE

ANN DROVE a buggy out to Luke's place four days later and he was never so happy to see anyone. He helped her down, kissed her hungrily, and kept on kissing her until she squirmed free of him, breathless and slightly disheveled.

"It's very nice to be welcomed that way, but you are rough on a girl's hair and her clothes."

"Heck with that. I'm just happy you drove out. Been meaning to go into town, but I got tied up with sick steers and birthing cows. Been at it day and night."

"And you haven't been eating regularly," she said. "I can tell by the leanness of you. I declare, Luke, you ought to get married."

"I know. There's a girl I been aiming to ask. Think she'd say yes?"

"She might, but first she'd like to see how you appreciate her cooking. I don't suppose you have anything to cook. I mean food."

"Well, there's bacon. Been living on that mostly."

"I thought so. I brought along fresh eggs, ham, boiled potatoes and pie. Today you're going to be fed properly and while you're eating, I'll tell you what's going on in town. I hope it doesn't spoil your appetite."

He stripped to the waist and washed thoroughly before going into the house. The food was cooking and Ann had straightened things up somewhat, though she continued to shake her head in dismay at some of the disarray.

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"Have you made up your mind to sell yet?" she asked.

"I made it up not to sell. Look here, Ann, this is a pretty good house, add two or three rooms. Sure, I'd make money if I sold, but I'd rather have this ranch. It's growing and it'll get better and bigger in no time. I sort of spread myself over this place and I don't want to tear loose."

"You can't live out here if the town goes," she said.

"Bad as that?" He laid down his fork. "*Everybody* goin' to sell?"

"More and more sign up. That gang who rode in have been doing everything except actually shooting up the town. They're making it impossible for decent folks to carry on. Everyone's afraid of them, and with good reason. I don't think they'd stop at anything."

Luke nodded somberly.

"My father's done something, though. He has friends with the big silver mines north of here and he wrote them letters asking if they heard about any mineral finds around Vista. They all wrote back that Vista had been tested long ago and there's not a scrap of any kind of mineral worth the digging."

"Could be the railroad."

"There's only one with lines near here. Papa wrote the president and asked him if there were any plans to reach the line out to Vista and the answer was very short. No such plans were being made and never would be. What's *left* to make a man want to pay twenty-five percent better than market value for a lot of old houses?"

He tackled the pie and grew mellow over the taste of the apples and the thick, crisp crust. He ate all but one slice of it, reluctantly putting that aside for breakfast.

"What're you getting at?"

She didn't answer for three or four minutes. Whenever that happened, serious ideas were taking shape in that fine mind of hers. She uttered a little sigh, then spoke.

"Sheriff Dodd is riding out to see you this afternoon."

"He in need of help?"

"He can't handle these men. He wants to make you a deputy."

Luke shook his head. "Not a chance."

"I'm glad of that. Very pleased, I might say. When you put on a badge, it becomes a target for those kind of men. Please just stay out here until they go away."

"Aim to. Everybody else wants to move, let 'em. Your pa still willing to sell out?"

"We're beginning to pack. Mr. Bradley gave us three months, but Ma says she couldn't stand living here, knowing all the time we'll have to leave. Besides, she's afraid to go out of the house."

"That means if you don't go with them, you'll have to come out here to live as my wife."

She reached across the table and took his big hand gently. "That's why I'm cheering them on! The sooner they clear out, the better."

"Give me one day's notice. One hour'll do, but a day would be better. And if anything happens that comes too close to you, ride out here."

"I will, Luke. I'll clean up now and then head for town before it gets dark."

He helped with the dishes. Getting in training, he told her. As she drove away, ahead of the yellow dust-cloud her horse created, Luke watched until he couldn't see the buggy anymore. He didn't go right back to work, but instead went to the bunkhouse. Its long dormitory-type spaciousness was depressing to him. He

liked the place full of shouting, horsing-around men. It would be a month before they came back. Or before he'd need them, for that matter. Besides, he'd be marrying soon and he sure didn't want those men around then.

He opened a built-in cupboard which was full of blankets. He removed these to reveal another door leading to a small compartment in which a rifle hung from pegs. He took down the carbine and checked the action. It was a Winchester .94, accommodating the new smokeless powder shells. Its sights were perfectly lined, the trigger was smooth, the nickel-steel made it a hefty, durable and deadly weapon. He helped himself to two of the several boxes of cartridges also kept in that secret cupboard before closing it up, replacing the blankets and securing the cabinet door.

He walked into the stable where he slid the carbine into his saddle boot and placed the shells in one of the saddlebags. The carbine was loaded and ready for bear. He blessed the intuition that had warned him to keep this expensive and somewhat rare weapon well hidden. If he'd not done so, Jim Eagle would surely come across it and wondered why a cattleman kept a gun like that.

Luke was on his way back to the house when he heard a rider approach. In the late afternoon shadows he could identify the rider because he expected him. He waited in front of the house until Sheriff Sam Dodd climbed stiffly out of the saddle and waddled toward him like a man who'd been riding a long trail for days, instead of a slow horse for a distance of about three miles.

"Glad to find you here, Luke," Dodd said. He shook Luke's hand warmly.

"I ain't so sure I'm glad about it, Sheriff. You never pay anyone a social visit I know of."

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"I'm not starting now, either. You've got to ride into town and let me swear you in as deputy."

"That gang making a fuss?"

"The leader is Jim Eagle. Ever hear of him? No? Well, it's to be expected, you being a peaceable man and all that. Jim Eagle is wanted for more'n one murder. Not in this state, a bit of luck I'm grateful for. I couldn't arrest him. I'd be no match for him. Not even for any of his men. They've been getting drunk, pushing people around, insultin' the women."

"Why don't you telegraph for help? There must be some lawmen who'd ride in for a chance to take Jim Eagle on."

"Trouble is, they pay for everything. They spend money like gold miners after a big strike. The merchants would just as soon they hung around, even if it means somebody might get killed one of these days. I put it up to some of the most important men in town and they want me to let it ride, seein' almost the whole danged town will soon be sold anyway. But I can't much longer. I'm goin' to be called out one of these days, just to let those tough hombres practice on."

"I can't do it, Sam. I don't want to get mixed up with them."

"You didn't mind taking on that ornery Andy Tule."

"I had to. He was gunnin' for me. Sam, I was just lucky that time. I'll never have that much luck again. Besides, I'm getting ready to ride fence and do some branding soon as my men get back."

Sam Dodd sighed deeply. "I didn't have much hope you would help, but I had to try. I'm scared these men will go too far. Then I'll have to step in whether I think I can handle the situation or not."

"Sam, if it comes to that, delay the showdown some-

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how and ride out again. I'm not unreasonable, but I just don't want trouble now. How's Bradley doing?"

"Half the folks who been holding out are disgusted over the way this gang acts and they've agreed to sell. Maybe fifteen or twenty percent are still stalling. Bill Manners is telling them to stick. He says he's suspicious of the whole thing and he don't intend to be caught short on some smart hocus-pocus. Says he trusts Bradley, but he can't trust the people behind him because they won't show themselves."

"He's right, too. Remember—if it gets real out of hand, let me know."

After Sam Dodd rode away, Luke made coffee and ate the piece of pie he'd saved. He was at a complete loss. He didn't know which way to turn. Should he be caught in a showdown and have to draw, he'd be gambling his life and he'd have to use all that old skill he'd worked so hard to perfect. Then everyone would want to know how he acquired it.

Jim Eagle and Rebel Kade were still likely wondering who he was, unsatisfied with his performance when they'd ambushed him. Being outlaws, they'd know outlaws, and if they got in touch with others, it was likely Luke would soon be identified. The gang he'd ridden with off and on before he took up with the four who abandoned him had been large, its members widespread. Luke hadn't changed much from those days. A good description would jog the memories of the men he used to call friends.

Once Jim Eagle knew who he was, that would be the end of it. Jim would approach him and demand he keep his hands off no matter what, or he'd arrange to have him picked up for jail-breaking. If that happened, he'd

go to prison. He'd lose the ranch and, worst of all, he'd lose Ann forever.

His wisest move would be to keep out of it. If Jim Eagle or Rebel approached him again, to humiliate him or try to scare him, he'd have to go along with it. The main thing was not to let them suspect.

These thoughts didn't make for easy sleeping, and he stayed awake half the night. He planned to ride fence in the morning, but he abandoned that to stay close to the house in case Ann rode out again.

There'd been many times when he was tempted to tell her the truth about himself, and this was one of them, but he knew he never would. It seemed impossible to him that he must risk losing her just to get this off his chest. He wasn't an outlaw now. Besides, his part had been minor, either as lookout, or being put in charge of the horses. If there was loot divided, they threw him a crumb or two, never a share. He'd broken with that life long ago and he'd paid well for his youthful foolishness already.

He dreaded seeing a rider or a buggy approach, but when none did, he was even more uneasy wondering what was going on in town. Twice, he buckled on the gunbelt. The second time he left it on, supplied himself with a full box of cartridges and went well out back to set up tin cans and practice his aim and draw. There really had been an element of luck in his meeting with Andy Tule. Had Andy not been drunk, Luke figured he might have been killed that day. A man gets rusty after all these years.

A man also eliminates the rust quickly when it comes to something he was once perfect at. By the time the bullets were gone, Luke was satisfied he could draw



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and shoot with the best of them. Not that it gave him any comfort, for shooting it out was the one thing he dreaded.

In no manner was he given to flights of fancy, but more and more he had the feeling that things were not right in Vista. He worried a good deal about Ann. He was vulnerable so far as she was concerned. Let her be harmed or threatened in any way and he'd remove the cloak of respectability he'd created and reveal himself for what he'd been—a gunslinging outlaw, a man who had escaped from jail. There'd be no halfway measures then. He'd sacrifice his freedom if need be, for nothing was going to harm Ann.

He spent the morning cleaning and oiling his six-gun and the .30-30 carbine. It seemed like old times, when guns were his friends and he babied them. By mid-afternoon, not one cloud of dust had been raised by any rider. His mind was beginning to conjure up horrible reasons for Ann not riding out or for Sam Dodd not being able to because he might be dead at the hands of Rebel Kade or Jim Eagle.

He ate soggy bacon and warmed up beans for an early supper, drank several cups of coffee, and went to the window overlooking the trail to town every five minutes.

It was still daylight so he went out to the branding chute and nailed some boards which didn't need it. He swung the hammer with an angry deliberateness, calming his jumpy nerves that way. Finally, he walked to the barn where he threw a saddle on the gelding he used for riding to town. After the animal was saddled, he changed his mind and removed the saddle, cursing his indecision and his nervousness.

He felt hungry again, so he fried some of the ham

left over from Ann's visit, wolfed it, damned the silence and finally he felt he couldn't stand this any longer. There was trouble in town. Ann, living there, could be involved. He found it impossible to remain out here, not knowing what was going on. He saddled the gelding again, but before he left, he put the rifle back in its hiding place. He jammed his gunbelt and six-gun into a saddle bag and then he headed for town, feeling a welcome sense of relief in the fact that he was finally doing something about the situation.

He could hear the shouting, laughing and general roughhouse even before he reached the outskirts. The main street was dark except for the saloon, which must have added a dozen or more lamps, because the yellow glow spread all the way across the street.

Horses and buggies were racked in such numbers that it became hard for Luke to find a place for his own horse. There was nobody on the street, almost all the houses were dark even though it was early evening. He'd seen towns like this before—frightened, nervous towns living in constant dread because of a few men who cared little for human life.

He heard a store door close somewhere behind him and he turned to look across the street. Bill Manners, who built houses and bought and sold real estate, was coming out of his office. Luke hadn't noticed the light that had been glowing dimly within, as Manners worked late on his books.

"Howdy," Luke said. "Been some time since I saw you."

"Been busy." Manners was a gruff man, not unkind or thoughtless, but he wasted few words. "Fools selling out to that pilgrim. . . ."

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"He made me a mighty fine offer," Luke reminded him.

"You taking him up on it?"

"No. Don't know why, but I don't trust him."

Bill Manners looked down along the dark, though by no means silent, street. "This is a nice town with good chances for growth. But that's all. There's nothing here to exploit, to make a quick dollar on. I tell you, when I don't understand something, I have no faith in it, and the same goes for people. Gets me real hard. There's Joe Martin's house down there a piece. I built it of fine lumber, put some careful work into it so Joe would have a place he'd be proud of. Now, a year later, he's bucking like a wild bronc to sell because he'll make a dollar."

"Seems like you just about built this town with your own hands," Luke admitted. "Can't say I blame you for getting sore."

"Well, I'm going to take me a little walk. Seems like all I want to do is look at the places I built, because it'll likely be one of the last times."

"You clearing out?"

Manners shrugged. "What else can I do? Takes people who want to settle down to keep a builder and real estate man busy. I have to go where people are and I don't see any new families coming here. Good night, Luke. I'm pleased you're staying on."

Luke nodded and walked to the saloon. Inside, he found the place jammed. Every table that could make room for a card game was in action. Luke looked closer to see if there were any professional gamblers in town, but the games were friendly, not for high stakes. There was plenty of whiskey flowing, however, and three more bartenders had been added.

Jim Eagle, with his back against the bar, surveyed the crowd with considerable amusement. Rebel and the other outlaws were taking part in poker games. Again Luke looked sharp to see if they were winning too much, but they seemed to be actually losing. Eagle didn't notice Luke enter. He suddenly turned to the bar.

"Drinks for everybody," he proclaimed in a loud voice.

Luke lined up with the rest of them, not being given to missing a free drink. From what Sheriff Dodd and Ann had said, these men were terrorizing the town, but it didn't look like it here. Of course they could shoot it <sup>up</sup> some, but there'd been no killings that he'd heard of. However, keeping the men busy in the saloon night after night might remove the objections of some womenfolk who didn't want to move and were making their husbands hold out. Dodd had said they were insulting women too, which didn't make the town attractive to live in. Luke felt sure that this was nothing more than a way to weaken the resolve of those who had so far resisted Bradley's blandishments.

One of Jim Eagle's men took offense at something said at his table. He jumped up, tipping the table over, backing away, ready for gunplay. When there were no takers, he shot holes in the ceiling and the floor. It was done with deliberation and Luke was more certain than ever it was part of a scheme.

He didn't want to talk to Jim Eagle. He'd had enough of this town for one evening, short as it might have been. Luke quietly passed through the crowd and left. At the end of the street he saw Bill Manners walking slowly along, a solitary man in a deserted street on a dark night.

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"You didn't stay long," Bill called out. "Can't say I blame you none. Good night."

Luke rode back, more thoughtful and puzzled than ever. Worried, too, lest the plan behind all this scheming would boil over and bring him into the mess.

## SIX

SHORTLY AFTER THE batwings flapped behind Luke Conway, Jim Eagle crooked a finger at Rebel, who got up from the table and joined him.

"You see Luke Conway come in?" Eagle asked.

"Sure didn't stay long. Jim, I don't think you're right about him. He ain't on the prod or he'd have busted loose before now. You did everything but rub his face in the dirt."

"Maybe, but I got a feeling I'm going to have to gun him before this is over. I just got the word from one of the boys who went out for a look that Luke's gone home. And that Bill Manners is alone, walking down the street all by hisself. Now wouldn't you say that's convenient? He's the one who heads up the holdouts. Time we took a hand. More days we spend here, the more dangerous it gets."

Reb nodded. "I'll sort of get him jumping mad first. Be back in ten minutes."

Rebel Kade walked out of the saloon. When he reached the sidewalk, he took time to tie down his holster before he ambled casually toward the lone figure he saw walking down the street. Reb decided he'd gone far enough to meet the man so he stepped into a doorway and waited. When Bill Manners was almost abreast of him, Reb stepped out, reeling slightly.

The first thing Reb looked for was a gun. Manners wore one. He almost always did because he rode a

great deal over the countryside inspecting land and there were rattlers crawling about, sometimes in profusion, so a gun had become second nature to him.

"Hold up, there," Reb said harshly. "Why ain't you in the saloon drinking with the rest of us?"

"Get out of my way," Manners sensed that he'd made a mistake. Rebel wasn't drunk, only pretending. He was here for a purpose and when a gunman seeks out a lone man on a deserted street, the reason is obvious.

"I don't take kindly to that sort of talk," Rebel said. "You going to apologize?"

Bill Manners ate more crow than he liked. "I'm sorry. I was mistaken. Good night."

"Not yet. You're going into the saloon and drink with us."

"If you insist," Bill said. At least he'd be safer in the saloon. He walked toward the lighted door and Rebel fell in behind him. Manners had taken only a dozen steps when his heart began to pound and the chill of the anticipation of death came upon him.

"You sure ain't a man who takes offense easy," Rebel said from behind. "You can turn around now so I don't have to shoot you in the back."

Bill Manners didn't hesitate. His hand dropped to his gun butt. He whirled about. Two slugs caught him full in the chest. The gun flew out of his hand as he went hurtling back until he fell heavily.

A door opened to Rebel's left. Sheriff Dodd, strapping on his gunbelt, blinking sleepily from his nap behind the desk, stumbled into the street, searching for the trouble that brought on gunshots. He saw Bill Manners and he saw Rebel a second later. Rebel still held a six-gun.

Dodd steeled himself. He was too old for this. He

was going to die, but he wasn't old enough for that. Not yet. There wasn't anything he could do now except take off his gunbelt and his badge and ride out of town—or attempt to arrest this man who had just killed and would be ready to kill again.

"Let go of the gun," Dodd called out. "I'm warning you, let go of the gun 'til I see what this is all about."

"You taking me in, Sheriff?" Rebel asked casually. "Now that wouldn't be wise. You'd be dumber'n this man who drew on me."

"I don't talk to a man with a gun in his hand. Put it away," Dodd said. He'd committed himself and he had to go through with it. He knew that everyone in the saloon was outside now, watching. Dodd took two steps in the direction of the gunman. Rebel merely lifted the muzzle of his gun slightly and fired once. Dodd stumbled half a dozen more steps, clawing weakly at his gun butt without the strength to clear the weapon. Then he simply collapsed and lay there, moaning softly. Rebel holstered his gun and walked toward the saloon. He pushed aside those who were in his way. As he passed Jim Eagle, who stood just outside the door, Rebel Kade winked broadly. Then he went in and began drinking.

Someone called out that Dodd was alive. He was picked up and carried to his own office where he was gently placed on the long table he used as a desk. Someone sent for the doctor and that was all they could do.

Outside, men gathered in small groups, all dwelling on the same subject. The quicker they and their families got out of this town, the better. Some were going to move at daylight even if they had to leave things behind. But they changed their minds abruptly when they



were reminded they couldn't get their money from Bradley for another five or six days.

"Thing is," someone said, "Bradley ain't ready to pay off until he has all the property he wants. I say give it to him. The hell with this town. Bill Manners told us we'd be crazy to sell no matter what the price. Look at Bill now! I won't want to wind up in the burying grounds of Vista."

There were many murmurs of assent and the word spread from one group to another. Jim Eagle, observing it, felt grimly satisfied. He'd had to play the final card, but it was going to work. He went back into the saloon.

He didn't see Ann Hunter drive her father's buggy in the direction of Luke's spread. The moment she learned what had happened, she made her way to the stable, hitched the horse and now she flicked at the mare's haunches with the whip, something she rarely did.

Luke woke up when the pounding of hoofs reached his sleepy brain. He jumped out of bed, pulling his gun free of its holster hanging off the back of a chair. He hurried to the door and then he scrambled for his shirt and pants which he slipped over his nightgown.

He was outside to help Ann off the buggy when she pulled up. She went into his arms and let him hold her for a moment. He could feel the shudders that swept over her slim body.

"They killed Bill Manners and maybe Sheriff Dodd," she said. "Luke, they're growing more and more violent. I'm afraid they're going to kill everyone who won't sell to Bradley."

"You're afraid they'll come after me next," Luke said gently. "Don't fret, Ann. They won't have to come after me. I'm going after them."

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"I thought you would," she confessed. "I don't know whether I'm proud of you or I think you're crazy."

"Come inside," he said. "There's no big hurry. The shooting is over and whatever I aim to do can wait a bit."

She put on the coffee pot and presently they were seated and drinking the hot beverage. Luke kept his ears open for the sounds of any approach, though he never let Ann know this.

"Why do you feel you must go?" she asked.

"Bill was a friend of mine. Dodd is a good sheriff. He wasn't a fast gun and he is kind of old. Rebel knew this as well as I did. I don't like my friends shot down."

"Would it help them if you were shot down too?"

"Nope. But I don't intend to be."

She regarded him solemnly for a moment. "You're very sure of yourself. I thought that the day you killed that man who was after you. It was no accident. You didn't shoot first because the other man was drunk, but because you were much faster. Tell me the truth."

"Rather not talk about it," he said.

"Why not? I'm going to marry you."

"Then trust me."

"I do, but I know so little about you. I don't know where you came from or who your folks are. I don't even know where you were born. All I know is I'm in love with a man who rode into Vista one day, bought this ranch and has done well here. I want to know the man this rider was before he reached Vista."

He shook his head. "Not now. I'm asking you to have some faith in me."

"I have—all the faith in the world. I love you as you are now. It doesn't matter what you once were. Not to

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me. Because I know that the Luke Conway I'm going to marry could never have been an evil man."

"Thanks, Ann. I'm still asking you to trust me."

She sighed. "I do. I'll never ask again, Luke. Maybe it's better I don't know."

"Maybe," he said.

"Do you know these men? From before?"

He nodded. "Two of 'em. The others are just leeching their way along, hanging onto Rebel Kade and Jim Eagle. I want you to stay here."

"Yes, Luke."

"Like I said, there's no big hurry so I'll wait until morning. Tonight you sleep in my bed. I'm going into the barn and sort of keep my eyes open."

"Do you think they'll come looking for you?"

"I'll be surprised if they do. You never can tell, though, so I'll stay awake. We'll talk some more in the morning."

They both remained awake all night, not saying much, sitting by a window that looked out over the approaches from the trail. Before dawn, Ann dozed.

In the morning, Luke handled his usual chores while Ann worked around the house. It was mid-afternoon when he finally came in from the bunkhouse carrying the rifle. He placed it on the kitchen table.

"I don't need this," he said. "You keep it close by. If anybody you don't know rides up, give them one warning and then shoot. I know you're pretty good with a rifle and, with this one, you can shoot the whiskers off a gnat. Don't be afraid to use it."

"I won't," she promised firmly.

"I'll be back soon as I can, or send word. Don't ride to town for any reason. You wouldn't help me any."

"I know. Take care, Luke."

He nodded. "Always do."

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She turned away from him so he wouldn't see the sudden start of the tears. His horse was waiting and he rode away without looking back. He forced her out of his mind and suddenly he felt himself experiencing the inner excitement that comes of danger. He'd felt it many times before, and it had been one of the compelling urges that had driven him on until reason set in.

He knew exactly what he faced in town. The killing of Bill Manners had been deliberate because Bill opposed selling the town to Bradley. For a few moments, Luke considered putting Bradley at the end of a gun and making him talk, but he realized the futility of it unless he got Jim Eagle and Rebel first. If they were no longer around, Bradley might be more easily induced to tell why he was buying the town.

There were a few people on the street, though significantly none of them were women. Luke rode down the center of the street, openly, even brazenly. He pulled up in front of the sheriff's office. He found the door unlocked and went on in. The office was empty. He explored the contents of the drawer built into the desk-table until he came upon a badge. He pinned this on, walked out and looked up and down the street.

Ann's father was the first of the startled citizens to approach him. "Ann's gone," he said. "She told us she was riding out."

"Ann's safe," Luke assured him. "Don't worry about her."

"You figure on taking Sam Dodd's place?" He was eyeing the badge.

"Somebody has to."

"Doc's got Sam over to his house. He's hurt bad, but Doc says he's got a chance."

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"Glad to hear that. I'll go over and see him right away. You know what happened last night?"

Gabe Hunter looked away. "One of them gunslicks shot Bill Manners dead. Sam tried to arrest him and he got shot too."

"Ann said it was the one called Rebel."

"That's right."

"He still around?"

"They all are. You think they're scared of anybody in this town?"

Luke disregarded the question. "How many folks are anxious to sell out now?"

"Just about all. Bill Manners was holding them together, but when he got killed, everybody just caved in, sort of. I don't blame 'em. Bradley's been around all day saying it won't make any difference about the price. He'll pay just as much."

"He didn't say why?"

"That's all he said. No difference in price."

"Now don't you think a man out to make a fair profit would take advantage of something like this? Another killing, a near killing, a gang that doesn't give a damn what they do? That's how a town is ruined, and property gets cheap. But Bradley says it makes no difference. He's a liar, Gabe. There ain't a man with money who'd not bid lower when he knew the seller wanted to get out of town."

"You tell me why," Gabe challenged.

"I don't know why. Makes no sense to me so far, except that one friend of mine's been killed and another badly hurt. Tell your wife not to fret any over Ann."

"I'll tell her."

Luke nodded and walked away. He strode along the

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wooden sidewalk, badge prominently displayed. He went directly to the doctor's office and walked in.

Doc shook hands with him. "Sam'll be glad to see you're wearing a badge. Sam ain't much of a sheriff, but he's got the good of the town in mind and he's been worrying there's no law here."

"Will he make it, Doc?"

"I think so. He'll have a better chance if you rid the town of those varmints."

"I'm working on it," Luke said. "Can I see Sam?"

He was led to a bedroom at the rear of the office. Sam, pale and barely conscious, managed a weak smile at the sight of the star Luke was wearing. He didn't try to speak. Luke doubted he was capable of it.

"I'm going to lock up Rebel Kade," Luke said. "And anybody who tries to stop me. You rest, easy, Sam, and you'll be up and about before you know it."

Luke left the doctor's office and walked over to the saloon. At this time of afternoon it was almost deserted.

Walt Bradley, drinking at the bar, eyed the badge. "What in hell you aiming to do, Luke? Get yourself killed?"

"I've got a question to ask, Mr. Bradley, and I want an honest answer."

Bradley's eyes grew shifty and for a moment Luke thought he saw signs of near panic in them.

"Since the shooting yesterday, have many holdouts signed with you to sell their property?" Luke went on.

The near panic died away. "Why do you ask that question, Luke? I'll answer it, but I'd like to know why."

"Because if this town is about to be turned over to whoever you represent, there's no sense in me staying on trying to take Sam Dodd's place. If the people are going to move, they don't need a sheriff."

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"They'll move," Bradley said. "Most of 'em already agreed. I'm drawing up the papers tomorrow and we'll settle the whole thing maybe in five days. That's next Wednesday."

"You mean that's when they get paid off and the deed transfers will be made?"

"In Nate Turner's bank with Nate supervising the whole thing."

Luke nodded. The bartender had placed a bottle and glass on the bar for Luke, but he didn't even notice them. He walked out, still sorely puzzled, went directly to the bank and talked with Nate Turner.

"Luke, you wearing that badge I reckon you got a right to be suspicious, but I can't see one doggone thing wrong with this transaction. Bradley wants to buy; he's paying well. When the papers are signed, each property owner will be paid in gold. I'll handle the signing and the paying. How can there be anything dishonest in it?"

"I don't know, but if there is, I sure as hell intend to find out."

Luke entered the hotel lobby and went by the desk clerk without looking his way. He came to a halt on the second-floor landing and peered down the gloomy corridor of doors.

"Rebel Kade," he called out in a loud voice. "I'll wait in the sheriff's office for an hour. If you don't come in and give yourself up, I'll come looking for you. If you don't come alone, my first bullet will be for you."

Luke ran lightly down the steps, walked to the sheriff's office, opened the door wide and sat down behind the desk. The street, which had been lively, was quickly being deserted as word got around. Luke waited patiently. Rebel would come. He had to. If he tried to run, he knew Luke would find him. The only thing that worried

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Luke was an ambush set up by Jim Eagle who, Luke guessed, would cheerfully sacrifice Rebel Kade to kill Luke. Whatever happened would be done quickly and cleanly.

He began thinking of what had happened these last few days and how his plans and his life had been so affected. A nice town—sold because of greed. A man who believed in preserving the town shot down because he was obstinate. A sheriff wounded when he tried to arrest the gunman. Ann, frantic with worry, things closing in around Luke. It was only a matter of time now before Jim Eagle discovered who Luke was. Eagle would already have lines out seeking information about this cattle rancher who could shoot faster and better than an accomplished gunman named Andy Tule.

Two dogs trotted by, the only moving things on the street. One looked into the sheriff's office and then moved on. Luke had no knowledge of exactly how much time had elapsed. Finally he arose and walked out to the street where he stood for a few minutes. He seemed disappointed when he went back inside, but once there, he moved rapidly, heading for the rear door at the end of the cell room. He passed the four empty cells, opened the rear door carefully, saw no one lurking outside. He stepped out quickly, closing the door behind him. He looked about for a hiding place, selected the pile of lumber waiting to be used in rebuilding part of the millinery store. The renovating had been abandoned when the property was sold, but the lumber was still there and it was piled high enough to offer a good hiding place.

Luke had called it close. On the theory that no outlaw like Rebel Kade would come alone in answer to the challenge of a sheriff who might be faster than he



was, Luke was prepared for one of the gang to attack from the rear, as Rebel kept Luke's attention riveted on him. It was an age-old trick. Men like Jim Eagle and Rebel Kade never failed to use it if the opportunity was there.

Jim Eagle had chosen to back his lieutenant and he crept stealthily toward the rear door. He crouched, gun in hand, and looked about for a long time before he reached for the latch. He pushed the door open only far enough that he might be able to listen and determine when Rebel would enter the sheriff's office. Then he'd move quickly. Eagle was intent on this move when he drew a sharp breath as the muzzle of a six-gun gently touched the back of his neck.

"You move one finger, you make one sound, and you're dead," Luke warned. He reached down, extracted Eagle's six-gun from its holster and stuck it under his own belt. Then he searched Eagle for a smaller weapon, found none and herded him into the cell room. He opened one cell door, pushed Eagle inside, slammed the door and locked it. Then he closed the back door and returned to the front office, paying no heed to Eagle's indignation.

He looked up the street again, but there was no sign of Rebel. He'd come soon now, to make his meeting with Luke coincide with the arrival of Eagle at the back door.

"Kinda surprised," Luke called to Eagle in the cell. "Figured you'd take care of this yourself and let Reb do the bushwacking."

"I ain't worried none," Eagle called back. "In five minutes you're a dead man."

"So far I'm still kicking."

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"Luke, what you got against me? Ever since I came to Vista, you been riding my tail."

"Never figured you were worth riding your tail," Luke said.

"You need money. You were trying to raise a loan at the bank, I heard. You let me go, I'll see that Reb stays away and when you get back to your ranch, you'll find all the gold you need waiting for you. And never a word said how it got there."

"Go to hell," Luke said cheerfully.

"You ain't being neighborly," Eagle said. "Reb was wrong cutting down that man and wounding the sheriff. I got no call to back him. He's a troublemaker. Suppose I tell you how to take him? He ain't so fast. I can tell you how to beat him to the draw."

"I already know," Luke answered. "Draw faster."

"Funny thing. I like you, even if you been nothing but trouble for me. I picked the wrong town to hamstring, with you in it. You going to let me go?"

"Not very likely," Luke said. Eagle was talking too much, asking too many questions. Luke looked out the door again. There was no sign of Reb.

"Hey, Luke," Eagle called. "How about a drink of water? I'm dying of thirst."

"That's good," Luke said, again puzzled by this burst of talk from a man who should hate him so much he'd not utter a word in his presence.

"Hell of a thing, you don't give a thirsty man some water."

Luke said, "Shut up! I'm sick of listening to you."

He slammed the cell room door, feeling a wave of uneasiness. He heard Eagle break into laughter and the outlaw kept calling him, but Luke was waiting for Rebel now. He'd be here any moment.

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Outside, there was a sudden stillness. Luke literally jumped across the room to get out of line with the door and the single window. He was against the wall when Rebel suddenly appeared. Not in the doorway, but firing through the window. His idea was simple to guess. He would keep Luke pinned down until Eagle moved in from the rear. Luke pointed his gun at the floor, fired once and emitted a loud groan.

Rebel appeared in the doorway, his face alight in the anticipation of seeing his enemy already dead or dying, on the floor. Instead, he saw Luke with a gun in his fist and the cold gleam of a killer in his eyes.

Rebel gave vent to a screech of surprise and terror. He tried to move his gun into position, but Luke shot him twice, aiming for the heart and sudden death. Rebel skidded out the door backwards, kept going until he toppled off the raised wooden sidewalk and lay still in the road.

Luke opened the main cell door and went down to face Eagle. "It didn't work," he said. "Reb is dead."

"So are you," Eagle told him. "You died a little while ago when all of a sudden I knew why I always thought I'd met you someplace before. I couldn't place you. No matter how hard I tried. But now I know. You were in the next cell to mine. We used to talk. I couldn't see you, but I remember your voice. You're wanted for a bank holdup and that's a hanging offense in Kansas where it happened."

Luke said, "With wild ideas like that, you shouldn't mind being alone because you're good company for yourself."

He walked out. The street was lively again. Just about everyone had emerged to see how the shooting came out. Luke walked briskly along. He saw Bradley eyeing

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the dead man. Luke changed course and headed for the hotel.

He glanced at the register to find Bradley's room number, ran up the stairs armed with the extra key he'd found in the mail slot. He let himself in. The room was tidy. It was, in fact, too neat. There were no clothes in the closet, yet Bradley dressed very well. Luke hauled out three large suitcases. Bradley had packed everything. He was getting ready to leave in a hurry. Maybe not today, or tomorrow, or the next day, but when he went, he'd do so in great haste.

Luke opened one bag. There was nothing in it to help him solve the mystery. In the second, he discovered a hotel key, but not for this hotel. The tag on it read HOTEL COMMERCIAL, ALTEA.

That was a town thirty-odd miles north. A small town, much like Vista. Luke appropriated the key, stowed the bags in the closet just as they had been, and left the hotel by the back door.

Emerging to the street, he almost ran into Gabe again. Ann's father promptly seized him by the arm.

"The whole town is grateful for what you just did. Reb was getting to be pretty bad."

"He was worse than that. He was a killer."

"No doubt of it. Is Ann coming home, now there's no more danger from Reb?"

"I'm not sure. I've got to go to Altea and she may want to ride with me. In fact, I think she should. Rebel Kade is dead; but his sidekicks are not."

"Maybe so, but you just put the fear of the devil in them. They won't make any more fuss. What's in Altea to bring you there?"

"Personal business. I've got to run. Ann's probably worried by now."

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"We're all mighty proud of you, Luke."

Luke merely nodded, walked briskly to where he'd racked his horse and soon rode out of town at a full gallop.

## SEVEN

THE LAMP in his ranchhouse went out as he rode noisily toward it. Ann would be watching, rifle in hand. He yelled her name, pulled up short and vaulted out of the saddle. She rushed out to meet him. He held her very briefly.

"I've got to go to Altea. Don't know what I'll find there, but I think it might be the answer to what Bradley's up to."

"I'm going with you," she said.

"That's what I was hoping you'd say."

"What about . . . the gunman?"

"He's dead. Jim Eagle is locked in a cell. There's a lot I've got to tell you. About myself."

"I was hoping for that too."

"Get together some grub," he said, "while I hitch up the buckboard. Best we clear out pronto in case Eagle gets out of the cell somehow. When he does, all hell will break loose and we've got to know the answers before he finishes whatever he came to Vista to do."

She went inside and minutes later emerged with a hamper of food. She put it in the back, climbed aboard and Luke touched the horse with the whip. They rolled rapidly across the prairie, following the vague trail to Altea and points north. They wouldn't arrive until the next day and then there'd be the same journey back. Luke hoped he'd get there in time.

"Tired?" he asked.

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"I've done nothing much except some cleaning up," she replied. "Nothing to be tired from. I've made a few plans about the house if you want to hear them."

"It'll wait," Luke said grimly. "After you hear what I got to say, there likely won't be any addition built. Won't even be a ranch there any more because I'll be moving on."

"Is it as bad as that?" she asked. For the first time she sounded genuinely worried, as if, before now, she'd expected a confession of some boyhood escapade.

"I'd have told you before we were married," he said. "Should have told you right off, but it's hard for a man to throw away something he wants so badly. In you, I found what my life lacked. Giving that up isn't easy."

"You haven't given it up," she said. "Tell me!"

"Four, five years ago, I rode with outlaw gangs. More than one. I was young and full of beans. I was awful fast with a gun. The outlaws didn't cotton to taking a kid along, but when they saw me shoot, they took me with them. I helped rob banks, one stage for a gold shipment. I did rustling, cutting half a herd from the drivers and daring them to stop us. I never shot anyone. Not until I was forced to kill Andy Tule and now Reb Kade."

"I'm not going to hold that against you," she said after a moment's thought. "What you did as a boy doesn't count. It's what you've done as a man that I respect."

"Sure haven't done much," he sighed.

"You set up a ranch from scratch and made it work fine. You rode into town to help a wounded sheriff, and you risked your life doing it. Besides, it can be our secret."

He shook his head. "I got into trouble in Kansas and they locked me up. Jim Eagle was in the next cell."

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"Jim Eagle knows who you are, then?"

"Told me so. I caught him setting to bushwhack me and I threw him in a cell so he couldn't shoot me in the back when Rebel Kade came gunning for me. We talked, back and forth. Eagle always thought he'd met me before, but when he heard my voice, in a cell room where it echoes kind of, he remembered."

"Who's going to believe him? Voices aren't like faces. Besides, Jim Eagle could be looking for revenge and that's why he accused you."

"If he notified Kansas, they'd send enough men to pick me out real easy. Means I'll either have to run or go to jail. Either way, I can't take you with me."

"I can wait."

"Might be too long. It wouldn't be fair."

"Luke . . . is that your right name?"

"Yes. Never saw any reason to use another. When I was arrested, I didn't give them any name."

"How'd you get mixed up with outlaws?" she asked, her tone sympathetic.

He shrugged. "I could say my pa was no good, mean as sin and drove me to it. I could say he was dead and I joined outlaws to get money to support my ma. I could say a lot of things, but with you it's got to be the truth. My pa was a God-fearing man, not poor by a long shot, and he never raised a hand to me. Ma was the kindest person I ever knew until I met you. My home was a little stuffy and there wasn't much fun, but it was clean, the food was the best. I never wanted for anything. I joined the outlaws because I was naturally good with a six-gun and I wanted excitement."

"That all of it?"

"Good gosh, girl, isn't that enough?"

"What do you think you'll find in Altea?"



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"I asked you if that wasn't enough."

"And I asked you what you hope to find in Altea. Why are we going there?"

"I found a key from an Altea hotel in his suitcase. I figured whatever he's going to pull in Vista was worked somewhere else and if he was in Altea lately, maybe that's the place."

"Worth the trip," she agreed. "What if you find nothing?"

"Then I go back and start again in Vista."

"You go back? You didn't include me."

"Ann, if you're there, Jim Eagle will try to reach you so he can handle me. If he should, he wins. I need a free hand. I won't have it if you're in Vista."

"Yes," she said. "I see what you mean. I don't like it, but I have to admit you're right."

Somehow he didn't believe her, but he made no comment. They settled down then for a night of driving across prairie country, along a trail difficult even by daylight, but there was no time to waste. Ann fell asleep with her head against his shoulder while he guided the horse and wondered if Jim Eagle was free by this time, telling his story of the would-be sheriff who was wanted for robbery and escape from jail.

Ever since he'd ridden frantically away from that little Kansas town, Luke knew there'd be a day when things would catch up with him and that day was here now. Everything he'd accomplished since his escape was of no value now. He would be taken back to Kansas. They might go easy on him when they learned all the facts, but he was prison bound no matter how merciful a Kansas judge or jury could be. There was no getting around the fact that he was an escapee.

What he should have done was light out the moment

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Jim Eagle appeared in Vista, but while that might have gained him a longer time until the reckoning, it would have cost him Ann. Nothing was worth that, though he couldn't figure out how she could wait for him. It was bound to be a long, long time.

At dawn, Ann drove the wagon while Luke slept fitfully. They were both awake when they first sighted Altea in mid-afternoon. It was a hot, dry day and the heat had exhausted her so that she was limp with fatigue by the time he turned into the livery where the tired horse could be rested, fed and cooled.

They entered the hotel dining room. While they waited for their meal to be served, they discussed their problems.

"I have to see this all the way," Luke said. "What happens after that depends on how we make out. No matter, I've got to give myself up. No help for it now that Jim Eagle knows who I am."

"Let it wait until we get back," she urged. "We've enough on our minds now. What will you do first?"

"Make sure Bradley was checked in here. Then talk to the sheriff, maybe the banker."

Ann didn't eat much, contenting herself with only a few bites of steak and about half the slab of pie served for dessert. "I'm beat," she said. "I'm just tired out, Luke. I want to be with you when you talk to these people, but I just can't. Will you get me a room so I can sleep?"

"Right away," he said. "Wait here."

He hurried from the dining room into the hotel lobby where he registered Ann. When that transaction was completed, he placed the key he'd found in Bradley's possession on the desk.

"I take it this is your property," he said.

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The desk clerk nodded. "Sure is. I'm obliged you brought it back."

"I was never here before," Luke said. "I got that from a man named Walt Bradley."

"Bradley? Don't remember the name."

The clerk flipped through the pages of his register, going back three months. He shook his head.

"Big man, five feet ten or so. Heavy—maybe two hundred and twenty. Got a fat neck and a big head that's got no more hair on it than a rock."

The clerk's jaw muscles twitched slightly. "Got me an idea maybe I can help you, mister." He raised his voice. "Ernie! Ernie, get your lazy hide out here."

A boy of about fifteen popped in from a room behind the desk.

"Go fetch Mr. Trawley, hear? Tell him to get over here fast as he can."

"Mr. Trawley? The. . ."

"Shut your mouth and git!"

The boy fled. Luke leaned against the desk. "What the boy started to say was 'sheriff.' That's who you sent him after, ain't it?"

The gun appeared from below the desk level. "Mister, you stand just like you are. If you're a friend of this man you described, I got plenty of reason to blow you wide open. So keep your mouth shut and your hands where I can see them."

"I don't like guns pointed at me," Luke said calmly. "But I'll overlook it if you let me sort of move my coat open some so you can see my badge."

"That's just about what Matt Tucker would do—send a man who says he's a sheriff. Stand still and don't touch that coat."

The sheriff, a replica of Sam Dodd, bustled into the

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lobby in a high state of excitement. "Keep the gun on him," he told the clerk. He faced Luke. "Mister, what do you know about Matt Tucker?"

"Never heard of him. Man I came about calls himself Walt Bradley, but that don't mean it's his real name. I'm Luke Conway, got myself a small spread over in Vista. I'm also the sheriff there since Sam Dodd got shot."

"Sam . . . shot? He's dead?"

"No—he was lucky. I'm wearing the badge he gave me so I could handle things until he's back on his feet."

"You can put the gun up," the sheriff told the hotel clerk. "Now, Mr. Conway, it appears you met a dirty, low-down skunk who went by the name of Matt Tucker here in Altea. I take it he's now in Vista—and probably trying to buy up *that* town like he did *ours*."

## EIGHT

GABE HUNTER JOINED the crowd drawn to the sheriff's office by the shooting. Walt Bradley was there, taking charge of things, it seemed to Gabe. With him was Jim Eagle, freshly released from the cell. As the crowd grew larger, Eagle quietly drifted away and then vanished in the direction of the hotel.

"Anything else happen here?" Gabe asked. "Oh, Mr. Bradley . . . good evening, sir."

"Evening, Gabe. Looks like Luke Conway went on a real rampage. Threw Mr. Eagle into a cell and then shot and killed Rebel Kade. Not that Reb didn't ask for it, mind you, but seems to me Luke's mighty handy with a six-gun. More'n a run-of-the-mill rancher for sure."

"Luke killed him because he had to," Gabe said. "He told me so."

Bradley seemed surprised. "You seen him since he shot Reb?"

"Immediately afterwards. He told me he's going off with my daughter."

Bradley's eyes narrowed a trifle. "Don't seem likely to me a girl as nice as your Ann would go off and marry a man who killed another soul ten minutes before."

"Gosh," Gabe gasped. "She didn't say anything about getting married. Neither did Luke. Oh, no. They wouldn't do a thing like that without telling me and Ma."

"They must have had a powerful reason, Gabe."

"Luke had some business. They haven't gone far. Just to Altea."

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Bradley nodded. "That ain't much of a wedding trip, to be sure. I didn't know Luke had any business to tend to in Altea."

"Neither did I, but they were in such an all-fired hurry, I didn't get a chance to ask many questions."

"Well, it's too bad they won't be here for the signing of the papers and the arrival of the gold," Bradley said.

"So soon? I didn't think that would happen for a couple of more weeks."

Bradley wagged his head solemnly from side to side. "Gabe, there's too much killing going on in Vista. The man I work for don't cotton to it, so before he finds out, I'll get everything settled. Then he can't change his mind."

"Well, that's the best news I heard in years. When'll it be, Mr. Bradley?"

"Day after tomorrow. High noon, in the bank. The gold will arrive by special stage. Nate will have all the papers ready and all you have to do is write down the final signatures, we hand you the gold and it's over. You might pass the word along. I've got to get busy myself. Good night, Gabe."

Bradley walked away casually, though his instincts told him to bolt. He strolled through the lobby of the hotel, even stopped long enough to present the night clerk with his usual pint. Upstairs, Bradley found Eagle lying on his bed, eyes closed, but they flew open when Bradley came in. Eagle sat up and swung his legs off the edge of the bed.

Bradley said, "We're working between the devil and a time limit now. That was a wrong move, killing Bill Manners."

"Hell, you told us to."

"Maybe I did. It was still a fool idea killing Manners,

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just because he was keeping too many folks from signing. When he died, that brought in Luke Conway."

"So it did. So it did, and where might he be now? I'll take good care of him real quick."

"I think he could take you hands down."

"So do I—but I don't have to shoot him. A lot of good people will hang him for me."

"What in hell are you talking about?" Bradley asked.

"Luke Conway. He made the break from that Kansas jail the same time I did."

"That ain't going to help," Bradley said.

"I don't see why not. All you got to do is tell the sheriff in that Kansas town. He'll send for Luke. 'Course I can't get mixed up in it, so you'll have to handle . . ."

"Luke went to Altea. You know what that means. He guessed what's going on. And for you, that means Kansas and a rope."

Jim Eagle seized the gunbelt he'd draped over the bedpost and strapped it on. "I'll head him off before he can get back. You handle the rest of it. I'll send one of the boys to arrange for the gold to get here. When you figure on setting off this firecracker?"

"Day after tomorrow. At noon. I don't think Luke can make it back by then. If he does, I'll do my best to shut him up."

"Won't be any need for it. I'll kill him before he gets here. When do you want the rest of the boys to move in?"

"I'll work fast. Take maybe an hour to get all the papers signed and the gold ready to shell out. Make it one o'clock sharp."

Eagle hurried out. From the window, Bradley saw him give directions to one of his men. He mounted and rode away fast. The others of Eagle's gang rode beside

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the outlaw leader and they headed for the trail. Bradley picked up the white pitcher to pour water into the wash bowl. He hurled the pitcher at the further wall and sat down heavily. He was torn between the desire to pack up and run like a deer, or to risk staying so he might collect a neat little fortune which would fall into his hands. Greed was stronger than lack of courage. He decided to stay.

Bradley hauled out his suitcases and wadded a few more items into them. As usual, he always kept them packed.

In the morning he appeared at the bank and went into immediate consultation with Nate Turner. Bradley had brought with him a bundle of legal-looking documents, all filled in except for the signatures. He placed these on Nate's desk.

"These are the deeds to all the property we want. Look them over and make sure everything's all legal and tight. You know more about that than I, so I leave it up to you. Noon tomorrow the folks will gather and sign. Then I'll break out the gold and pass it around, according to the bills of sale."

Nate glanced at three deeds, studying the documents he selected at random from the group. He placed them aside.

"Far as I can see, these are very generous contracts. Mine is included, I hope?"

"For your house and for the bank," Bradley assured him. "No man can say the price ain't fair."

"Generous, Mr. Bradley. More than generous. I'll have the folks here at noon, I'll initial every deed as having passed me as honest and legal. It's a pleasure to do business with you, sir."

They shook hands and Bradley lit the cheroot Nate



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had given him. He proceeded immediately to the saloon and drank until he realized tomorrow's business transactions wouldn't stand for his having a big head.

Two of the three bartenders were loafing at the end of the bar. The owner served Bradley and spoke in a voice heavy with disappointment. "Them hard-riding hands didn't show up tonight."

Bradley stared at him with a deep frown. "Luke Conway killed one of them, and threw another into a cell without telling him what for. Do you think they'll hang around this town after being treated like that?"

"Never knew Luke was so all-fired quick-tempered. Didn't think he was worth shucks with a six-gun either, and was I wrong there!"

Bradley went back to his hotel room where he crawled into bed and tried to sleep, but his mind was a confusion of a vengeance-bent Luke Conway coming for him, and a committee with tar, feathers and a rail to ride him out of town on. There were some visions of cells and prisons. Bradley did not have much sleep that night.

In the morning he arose as usual. He dragged his suitcases out of the closet and lined them up so they could be seized in a minimum length of time if things went wrong. Then he shaved, buttoned on his shirt and stood by the window looking out.

It was like a holiday. Everyone was already abroad, dressed in Sunday best. Even the kids had been freed from a day in school. Bradley watched the little groups assemble and talk earnestly about where they would relocate and what they'd do with all that gold.

The suckers, he smiled shrewdly, were lining up to be shorn. Bradley had a part to play, far more important than Jim Eagle's. He waited until an hour before

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noon and walked out into the street. He shook hands with several men nearby, removed his hat and bowed gravely to the women, handed out hard candy from a large sack of it to the kids. They must all think well of him, so when he gave them the bad news, they'd not blame him too much.

He pulled a thick gold watch from his waistcoat pocket and consulted it. "Well, my friends," he said in a loud voice, "the stage bearing the gold should be here in an hour. I'll meet all of you at the bank at exactly noon. After it's over, I invite the town to a picnic. There'll be food and drink for everyone. This is a great day for all of you. Except," he added ruefully, "those who held out against my offer. Might be, if you few see the light after today, I can arrange to buy your property, too. I hold nothing against you. Man's got a right to sell or not to sell."

He left everyone satisfied and excited, even those who had never quite trusted him. There simply didn't seem to be any way for Bradley to cheat them. The whole transaction was too clean-cut, and Nate Turner at the bank had already made certain the deeds were properly drawn up.

Bradley visited the doctor's office where he inquired after Sheriff Dodd and paid him a brief visit. He'd brought with him a handful of good cigars. Though the sheriff was in no condition to smoke them, Bradley left them anyway, as part of the goodwill he was fostering.

"I'll be pulling out tomorrow or the next day," he said. "Giving the folks a little picnic this afternoon. You unfortunately can't be there so I wanted to bring you something."

"You hear where Luke Conway went to?" Sheriff Dodd asked.

"Heard it was Altea."

"What in thunder he going there for?"

"I don't know. I thought maybe you did."

"Can't figure him out. No sir, just can't get it straight in my mind what kind of a man he is."

"Sheriff, I can. I don't like to say anything about a young man as brave and helpful as Luke, but there's something. . . . Oh, well, let it wait. I might be wrong. Better to give him a chance to explain." He arose and patted Dodd's shoulder. "Now don't get yourself into a stew. I said I'm probably wrong about Luke. See you after the business at the bank."

Bradley nodded to the doctor on his way out. He strolled down the street in the direction of the bank. He liked banks. They contained not only money, but a constant challenge to Bradley. This time, like the two times before, he thought he could win. There was no reason why not. It was too late for Luke to do anything, even if he did manage to avoid Jim Eagle and his men. This should be another bonanza day for Walt Bradley.

## NINE


THE MORNING AFTER they arrived in Altea, Luke told Ann what it was about while they had breakfast in the hotel dining room.

"I'll be heading back right away," he said. "I want you to stay here until I send for you."

"Now see here," she began angrily, "if you're leaving me out . . ."

"Jim Eagle may have found out we headed for Altea. If he did, he'll be coming for us, or try to stop us on the way back. I don't want you running into that kind of danger."

"First, tell me what's happening in Vista and how it's connected with Altea."

Luke gave her a brief run-down, then continued: "So the gold is hauled in. The folks line up, the deeds are signed and witnessed, the gold counted out. Doesn't take long, just to sign a name and count the gold. In an hour or less, it's completed. That's when a gang of outlaws rides in. Enough of them to handle the town easy. Jim Eagle and his boys aren't there. That would be too obvious, but these outlaws belong to Eagle. They stick up the bank and everybody in it. They steal all the gold and get away. This takes not more than ten minutes at the most." 

Ann shook her head. "I still don't see," she gasped. "The deeds are signed, the gold has been paid. The houses and land belong to Bradley or whoever he represents. The gold was stolen from the townspeople."

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"Now you got it. Here's an entire town—or most of it—bought and paid for, but the folks haven't got a dime. Bradley sits there with all the deeds. Now he makes a big speech, says he's very worry, but the way it is, everything belongs to the holder of the deeds. The law would have to agree with him."

"Does he have the nerve to stay in Vista and try to collect? To sell the houses back?"

"He's too smart for that. Besides, someone is going to hear that this happened in other towns too. Bradley has already arranged to sell the deeds to a business that specializes in handling real estate. Maybe some big financial firm in St. Louis, or Chicago. The houses will be sold back, but everybody is now paying twice for the same property he had before."

"Why, that black-hearted crook," Ann exclaimed angrily. "He ought to be locked up."

"He will be if I can get back before the deeds are signed and the gold turned over."

"You can't keep me from going with you. We'll leave right away."

"You stay here," Luke said. "Eagle will try to cut me off if he's heard I'm in Altea. He won't be gentle about it and I'll have to move fast."

"I can move right along with you," she vowed.

"Ann, if Eagle should happen to take you, where would I be? That's what I'm afraid of. He may have already reached Altea and may make a try to get at you. If he does, my hands are tied. I'd rather the whole town went down the drain than have you harmed."

She considered that for a few moments. "All right. I can see why I'd slow you down and make it more difficult. There isn't even a telegraph station in Vista. Without the railroad coming through, nobody thought

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it necessary to string wires. Luke, you've got to reach town before tomorrow noon."

"I'm leaving right away. First, I got to buy me a fast horse. I'll leave the buckboard. But don't you head for Vista until I, or somebody you know you can trust, comes for you."

"Please get going," she begged. "Stop them! And . . . stay away from Jim Eagle."

"If I can. He's after me, remember. I can take care of myself. Best I leave now."

He finished his coffee and arranged for a package of fried chicken to be readied to sustain him on the fast journey back to Vista. He would pick it up after he bought a horse.

"Stay in your room and don't let anybody in," he told Ann. "There's been time enough for Eagle to have reached here, so be on guard."

"I'll be careful," she promised. "There's no need to come back. Just get to Vista in time."

He nodded, escorted her to her room and waited until he heard the key turn. Then he hurried to the livery where he inspected a dozen horses before selecting a sleek golden stallion with good legs and a big chest cage. He bought a secondhand saddle as well. He led the horse to the hotel, tied him up and ran upstairs to the room he'd rented. There he strapped on his gun-belt, took along the .30-30 rifle and the cartridges he'd brought. He walked up another floor to Ann's room and knocked.

"It's me," he announced.

There was no answer. He knocked again and finally he tried the door. It was not locked. He darted into the room. Ann was not there. He raced down to the lobby, but nobody had seen her.

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"Were there any strangers around?" he asked the clerk. "Men who'd looked like they'd done a lot of hard riding?"

"I didn't see anybody."

"Did you hear any strange sounds? A cry maybe, or a quick fight of some kind?"

"Nary a thing, Mr. Conway. Been real quiet this morning."

"I'm checking out, but Miss Ann Hunter is staying. I can't find her and I have to leave right away, so will you tell her . . . maybe I better write a note."

He was given paper, pen and an envelope. He wrote a brief warning that she was not to go out of the room. That was all he had time for, yet even as he wrote, he had a sinking feeling that Jim Eagle must have managed to reach her. Luke gave the letter to the clerk and saw it placed in Ann's key slot. Then he rushed out to where he'd tied his horse and a moment later he was riding hard along the main street, heading south toward Vista with the bitter knowledge that even if he managed to reach there in time, he'd be unable to do anything but stand aside if Eagle had Ann. He cursed himself for not being hard enough to have shot Eagle the night he was part of the ambush.

Now he'd have to ride hard all day and night to reach Vista by noon tomorrow. He wouldn't have minded if it was not for the disappearance of Ann.

For four hours he drove the stallion, but then, in a green and lush little valley with a thin brook coursing through it, he had to rest the animal and let it graze a little while. From here on, there'd be no rest until late at night, when the going became dangerous and Jim Eagle would be best favored to set a trap.

In the saddle again, Luke rode to the top of a rolling, low hillock to scan the countryside. The arid conditions

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made it impossible for a rider to cross the range of his view without raising dust, but he was in the same predicament. They could follow his trail too.

He didn't see them until the middle of the afternoon. There were exactly ten of them. Jim Eagle had either recruited members of another gang or some of his own men had been waiting. More likely, they were part of his gang. The rest would be heading for Vista by now, set to stage the holdup.

They were strung out over a distance of a mile or more. Eagle was trying to cover as much territory as possible. Luke dismounted and led his horse to a clump of stunted trees and mesquite. He squatted down, resting, while he tried to figure out how best to handle this.

He'd have no chance if they closed in. So long as they were strung out, he might slip through the line, but soon after he did, they were going to find his sign and read it correctly. They'd know then he had eased through and was on his way back. They'd start riding hard then. Some were bound to catch up.

Luke considered flanking them, but it was too late for that. The best he could do now was stay put, hope they'd miss him and, once they passed by, try to slip away quietly and without raising too much dust. If he could get an hour's start, he might make it.

Trouble was, most of the landscape was unsheltered. Just wide open range with few trees and little brush. He might hide and get away with it, but there was no way to conceal a horse after he left this stand of brush. He heard them riding closer and he backed the horse deeper into the brush. He kept him quiet by talking softly and stroking the long light-brown neck until the riders were quite close and then he clamped his hands



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gently around the horse's muzzle as he kept whispering into his ear. The horse remained quiet.

Through the sear leaves and dry branches, Luke saw two men ride by. They were sitting easy, not looking about too much. But they'd be checking for signs presently and then the race would begin.

The line must have passed by now. Luke led the stallion out of the brush, mounted, and kept him down to a trot until they'd covered a full half mile. Then he sent the animal running at top speed.

For a little while he thought he was going to make it. Another half an hour and he might have, but when he glanced over his shoulder, he saw them coming. They were bunched up now, but not for very long. Eagle would realize that he'd slipped through and might double back and do it again. Before long, the men were spread out once more, but not as far apart as before. They were riding hard. Luke concentrated on getting the most out of the stallion and he hoped his judgment of horse flesh was accurate and that he had a fast, durable mount under him.

He'd already studied the line of men as well as he could, considering the distance between them, and he was certain they did not have Ann with them. She'd have been tied to her saddle and her slim form would be easy to spot. That didn't mean she wasn't a prisoner. She could be held back in Altea, or at some campsite not far from where Luke was at this moment. They must have seized her seconds after he'd left her to buy the horse.

Well ahead he saw mesquite. Not much, and somewhat thin, but it would serve to hide him and perhaps keep down the dust somewhat. He rode into it fast, then slowed and finally stopped to twist around in the

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saddle and watch the horizon, lit now by the late afternoon sun. They were coming. The little dots of yellow dust were evidence of it. Strung out rather well, too, and moving fast. It was still between fifteen and twenty miles to Vista. If he made it by noon tomorrow, he'd be fortunate and if he escaped being cornered by Eagle and those men, he'd be luckier still.

The fate of the town wasn't important now. Even if Bradley got away with it and the townspeople were threatened with eviction, it would be possible, in view of what had happened at Altea, to have the property returned to its rightful owners. Once the scheme became known, Bradley was out on a limb. The company to whom he sold the deeds wouldn't be able to defend itself either. Luke had an idea the company may have supplied the heavy financing. The trick of this bit of larceny was to get out from under, fast.

So he wasn't unduly concerned with what happened in town. What worried him was the fate of Ann. He'd been a fool to have left her alone. If she was with him now, she wouldn't be any worse off. Then there was the undeniable fact that Eagle must have told Bradley that Luke Conway was an escaped outlaw. Bradley would pass the word to Kansas and that would be the end of Luke's dreams and all his hard work.

He rode for another hour, the mesquite cover far behind him, but right after sundown he'd reached mountain foothills where there was brush and refuge. He had to rest his horse before much longer. He paused at a stream long enough for the horse to drink and he had some difficulty getting the animal to move on without grazing.

They were getting so close to him that he could hear their shouts. If they got around him, he was finished.

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Travel by night would be hopeless because all they'd have to do was lie perfectly still and listen for him. He was the one who had to move out.

He sent the horse climbing among the rocks until he discovered a narrow pass between two huge, overhanging cliffs. He dismounted and led the horse through the pass, around behind the rocks and tethered him there, within reach of some low, dry brush. It was better than nothing to a hungry horse. From the saddle bags, Luke broke out the sack of chicken. He ate this, drank from his water bottle and crouched down, listening for pursuit.

There seemed to be none. He frowned darkly, reverting to his days of outlaw riding. What would he have done in Eagle's place? Easy! Eagle wanted to kill him, of course. However, it was even more important to Eagle to keep Luke from reaching Vista before Bradley had done his work. The killing could come later. So Eagle knew he was up here, somewhere among the rocks. It was likely he'd stay here until sunup, or just before, because he'd sure risk a broken neck riding by night through this kind of country.

Eagle would be resting too, his men spread to cover every possible exit. Luke pondered the problem for a few moments before he recalled a trick Kerry Kinkaid had used long ago. Kinkaid was a bank robber who had never been caught, who'd escaped from posses by using his head. For the first time since he'd left the outlaw trail, Luke was glad he'd once been part of it so he'd learned some of these tricks.

He made certain the exhausted horse was resting, not moving much. He took the rifle from the boot, cartridges from the saddle bag and, hanging onto the sack of chicken, he climbed higher among the rocks. It was

dark now and unless he made any undue noise, he could move about to a limited extent.

When he reached a sheltered spot, he crumbled part of the paper bag, covered it with dry weeds, placed a piece of chicken skin and bone on top and set it afire. He got out of there quickly.

The fire would only burn a few minutes, but the odor of the burned chicken would spread and cling. He was a thousand yards away when he heard them closing in on the elusive source of the smell.

He built another miniature fire, added more of the chicken. He got away from this spot too, but not very far. He guessed that Eagle would send half his men to track down the source of the cooking smell, but when it seemed to come from an altogether different direction, he'd dispatch others, weakening his line of men. So Luke waited patiently.

He heard the man coming. There was only one, it seemed. He moved boldly and without caution. Luke stepped out and swung the rifle by the barrel. It was a formidable club and the man sank to the ground without uttering a sound. Luke left him there and then retreated boldly in the direction from which the man had come. They'd think it was the outlaw returning, so there was no need for present stealth.

He heard someone sing out from a distance that there was nobody near the fire. Luke knew they meant the first one. It was Eagle's voice answering them, ordering them to fan out and check every rock.

Luke saw the dim glow of their shielded fire. He circled it, heading for their horses. They were being guarded by one man, the saddles had been left on for a quick start if it became necessary. Luke crouched, then crawled. He reached the first of the horses and

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untied the animal. He untied a second and a third, but the fourth one moved restlessly and whinnied in alarm.

The guard, rifle level, rushed up. He dropped to the ground as one of Luke's bullets smashed through his leg. Luke vaulted into the saddle of the fourth horse, shouted and fired his six-gun to alarm the other three who were free of restraint and they went galloping madly off into the night.

He jumped out of the saddle after giving his borrowed mount a sharp dig with his heels. He hit the ground, rolled over without dropping his rifle and then he scurried back into the hills to where his own horse was waiting.

He crouched down there, grinning slightly. So far, not too bad. Four horses sent racing into the night. By dawn, they'd be too far away to round up easily. That meant, of the six mounts left, four would be carrying double, or four of the men would be walking. Either way was a break for Luke.

When the excitement and the cursing died away, he led his horse down to the trail. There wasn't even a star in the sky and a summer storm seemed to be brewing. If it would only break, his chances would increase, but Luke knew these storm threats. One in twenty materialized at this time of year. The deep darkness was, however, a definite asset.

Someone moved, not too far from his left. He stepped quietly away from the stallion and ducked down beside one of the great boulders. In the night, the stallion would look like any other horse, especially to an outlaw whose own mount had been frightened away. A man afoot in this country with a long, long walk in prospect might be alert for trouble and an enemy, but

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he'd forget both if he saw what he thought was one of the missing horses.

The man called out to someone and began running toward the stallion. Others were coming. Luke leaped out behind the man and swung the rifle again. Then, as the man crashed to the ground, Luke swung into the saddle and rode straight down the trail.

He saw, dimly, one man riding in his direction. He veered off, waving an arm and yelling hoarsely. The outlaw didn't know what he meant, but gathered the idea he was to follow. Some ten minutes later, the rider floundered about in the darkness, temporarily lost, and only able to guess how he got there.

Luke found himself enough brush to hide both himself and the stallion. He huddled under a thin, worn blanket which had come with the saddle. The wind sweeping in over the prairie was chill. It brought back memories of the outlaw trails, but there was no comfort in that.

The wind carried with it some topsoil and small branches. They whipped about him and he endured them because there was nothing else to do. Eagle's men could be anywhere in the dark. They'd been tricked and lured into traps and now they'd be wary, move only in no less than pairs. Added to all this discomfort was the uncertainty of exactly where he was. The darkness could be deceptive. All he was sure of was the fact that the land sloped, which meant he was still in the foothills, wide open to the prairie and backed by the rocky range rising through this area of the territory.

He didn't have a saddle for a pillow because he hadn't dared unsaddle the stallion. He needed sleep, but didn't dare court it because if he was asleep at dawn, they were going to find him before he could

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awaken and defend himself. The snorting of the stallion gave him added chills until he realized the sound of the wind would have drowned that out except to the ears of someone very close by.

He lifted sleep-heavy eyelids with the first gray of the morning and scrambled to his feet in alarm, afraid he'd slept too long. Over the crisp, now quite-still air, he could smell a campfire, coffee boiling, beef frying. He wasn't fooled by this. Jim Eagle's men hadn't found their missing horses. Not by night and, by dawn, they were far away. That left four men unmounted. One bullet-wounded, but the other three sound. They could be deliberately letting those tantalizing food odors drift over the prairie so that Luke would try to make good his escape, believing they were busy eating. They were adopting the trick Luke had taught them the night before.

His first impulse was to ride out as fast as possible, but that could be suicide, so he walked his horse down the slope, eyes shifting from one craggy rock-top to another. The day was going to be gray, for the storm threat was still in the sky. He figured he was six or seven hours out of Vista with straight, fast riding. This he could not do, so he was going to miss the excitement when Bradley offered his condolences to the good citizens whose money had been stolen. No doubt Bradley would also magnanimously state that the man backing him would be generous and let the people stay in Vista. Of course they'd have to pay for their houses all over again, but that could be arranged. Then, before they realized how sharply they'd been swindled, Bradley would be off and away, his ever-packed suitcases riding behind him.

The townspeople's anger would be heightened when

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they discovered that Luke, whom they trusted so completely, was an ex-bandit and jail escapee.

More than that, he had the safety of Ann to worry about. He was certain she wasn't riding with Eagle and his men. They'd be holding her back at Altea, but that made her no less an important hostage. It surprised Luke that Eagle hadn't ridden close enough to yell a warning that she'd be killed if he didn't give himself up.

In the gray morning light, he saw that he had reached the limit of the foothills during the dawn and now the prairie stretched out before him once again.

He climbed aboard the stallion and sat quietly surveying the land. Of course they were out there, somewhere. This would be Eagle's last chance and he wasn't going to muff it.

Enough thickets and small stands of trees dotted the distances and a hundred men could have hidden there. Directly ahead was Vista. The temptation to bend low, ride hard and take his chances was almost irresistible, but Luke turned his horse and sent it scrambling up the slope.

He'd be too late to prevent Bradley's scheme from working, but since he couldn't be there, he felt he must take time in trying to elude Eagle. He'd made up his mind that he must reach the outlaw somehow and demand from him what he'd done with Ann. But when he faced Eagle, he wanted to be holding a gun in his hand, so the task wasn't going to be an easy one.

Things were too quiet. Luke pulled up to sit and listen. Peering into the distance, he saw no sign of riders. Behind him, the slope had turned steeper and rock-ridden. A bushwhacker could be hidden anywhere. Un-



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easiness gripped him. He suddenly wanted this over with.

Something moved to his left. He dismounted fast and ducked behind one of the boulders. It had been little more than a fleeting shadow which aroused him, but he knew he hadn't been mistaken. A tiny rivulet of pebbles and dirt was trickling down the slope. There was someone behind another of these boulders.

It was rough country to attempt an escape when cut off, because while all these hiding places offered a haven for the refugee, they also concealed his enemies equally well. Luke figured they knew he was still up in the hills. That was why he hadn't been able to spot a trace of them over the reaches of the flatland.

His horse pawed nervously at the ground, making enough noise to locate him. Luke murmured an oath and began moving away. More pebbles cascaded down, warning him and giving him time to twist around while he brought up the Winchester.

A man, gun cocked and half aimed, stood up behind one of the low rocks. Luke fired fast, from his hip-steadied rifle. It was a trick shot, but it was good. The man screamed and fell back. Luke scurried up the incline. Someone took a shot at him, but missed by two feet. Luke dropped to the ground beside the man he'd wounded.

He wasn't dead. Luke had counted on that. He raised him slightly and scowled down at his pain-wracked face.

"You'll live," Luke said. "But only if you tell me what you did with that girl."

"Wh . . . what girl? No . . . girl . . ."

Luke drew his six-gun and placed the end of the barrel squarely between the outlaw's eyes. He cocked the weapon.

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"Goodbye," he said grimly.

"No . . . girl . . ." The man's eyes were frantic in terror and pain. "Swear . . . no girl . . ."

Luke let him drop back to the ground and then wiped his hand on his own shirt front, for it was blood smeared. The man was bleeding severely and a great deal of it stained Luke's right shoulder.

He stuffed the six-gun back in its holster and prepared to defend himself with the rifle. He raised his head. A bullet bit into the rock he used as a shield. He looked behind him. They'd soon be up there on higher ground and he'd be the perfect target then. Unless he could think of something, it was as good as over.

He had to change position. They knew exactly where he was now. The risk was great, but to remain here was even more dangerous. He picked out a high rock fifty feet upslope. He'd have to scramble very fast to make it.

He took a breath, dug his boots into the dirt and pushed himself upwards. He was five feet from the refuge he'd chosen when two guns barked. Luke made a miscalculation. He thought he was closer to the rock than he actually was and when he made a dive, it was short and he dropped flat on the ground just as the guns cut loose again.

He wasn't hit. He crawled the rest of the way. The shooting had stopped. Luke made the rock and got behind it. He was still not fully protected, but at least they'd have to climb some distance now to get above him, and he'd be aware of it for the ground was loose and pebble-strewn.

"Hold your fire!"

Luke grimaced. What kind of trick was this? That had been Eagle giving the order.

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"He's mine," Eagle called out again. "He's been hit. He's bleeding and he won't put up much of a fight. Cover me. I'm going after him."

## TEN

LUKE GLANCED DOWN at his shirt. In raising the outlaw, he became drenched with his blood. Eagle was coming in, expecting to find a near helpless man. A victim he could finish off with ease. Luke set the rifle down, leaning it against the side of the rock. He test-drew his six-gun and then waited.

Eagle was making a slow approach, aware that even a wounded man could be a dangerous one. But when he called out, he received no reply. When he tossed small stones in the general direction where he knew Luke to be, there was no bullet answer. Eagle became certain that Luke must have passed out from loss of blood. He'd surely been soaked with gore.

Eagle neared the rock. When he was in exactly the right position so that Luke could step out, and yet have the rock as a shield against the marksmanship of Eagle's men, Luke made his move.

Eagle suddenly saw this blood-decorated man standing before him, poised to draw and looking mighty healthy and sound.

Luke said, "I can outdraw you, Jim. You know that. I'll let you turn around and walk away from here if you tell me what happened to Ann."

Jim Eagle's lips thinned out. "Why'd I tell you that and give away my hole card? You want her, come to me and take your medicine. Otherwise, you won't see her again."

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"You haven't got her!" Luke yelled. "You're a dead man!"

Eagle drew fast and he died fast. Luke's bullet hit him full in the chest and he dropped heavily. Luke scooped up his rifle in case Eagle's men closed in.

Luke stood away from the rock. He raised his voice to a shout. "If I find that Eagle has Ann Hunter hidden away, or he's harmed her, I'll track down all of you, one by one, and kill you on sight. Where is she?"

"We ain't got her," one of the men shouted in a weary voice. "We didn't see a girl and neither did Jim. That's the truth."

"I have to accept it," Luke called back, "but remember my warning. If you lied, you'd better run fast and far."

"Go to hell," someone called back. Luke saw two of them join another pair and presently they were all gathered at the foot of the slope where they'd tethered their horses. They mounted and rode away, some riding double. They'd had enough. Luke went over to Jim Eagle. He was dead. The other man whose blood had stained Luke's shirt was also dead.

Luke found his stallion, swung into the saddle and, with the rifle held for quick action, he began riding. He didn't think he'd be molested the rest of the way. Their leader was dead. These men wanted no part of any action from which they'd likely profit nothing but a bullet.

He turned the stallion's nose toward Vista, riding warily, but no longer menaced on every side. The menace would be waiting for him in Vista where Bradley would have shot his mouth off by now and informed everyone that Luke was wanted in Kansas.

He was sorely troubled about Ann's whereabouts. He

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wouldn't have doubted that Jim Eagle could have put her to death, but the look on Eagle's face when Luke brought Ann's name into it had been a strong indication that Eagle was only taking advantage of a situation that existed only in Luke's mind. The man Luke had wounded, and who later died, had also denied knowing where Ann was—and certainly he'd have had little reason to lie about it.

There was no pursuit. Jim Eagle's men would be riding off in search of a new leader, a new gang. So far as they knew, the coup in Vista was complete and they'd share in the proceeds even better than before, because there were now less men to share it with.

Luke rode down Main Street. It was singularly quiet, with only a few people about. A shadow fell across the sidewalk in front of the sheriff's office. Gabe Hunter and Nate Turner came out and watched Luke dismount, rack the horse and step high onto the wooden walk.

"You're a little late," Gabe said. He didn't sound unfriendly.

"I was held up, sort of," Luke admitted with a wry grin. "Gabe, Ann disappeared back in Altea. I just don't understand because I told her to stay put."

"You know how women are. Tell them to do something and they sure as hell do the opposite." For a father, he seemed singularly unmoved by the fact that his daughter might be in the gravest danger.

Luke pushed his hat to the back of his head and mopped sweat, sand and dirt from his face. His kerchief, making a final swipe across his chin, froze. He stared at Ann as she stepped serenely out of the sheriff's office.

"What in tarnation . . . ?"

"Hello, Luke," she said. "I'm sorry I lit out on you,

but the buckboard was in the livery stable at Altea and I wanted to go home and tell the folks about Mr. Bradley. I thought you might be somewhat delayed. So I had the buckboard hitched up and I started out. I got here this morning. No trouble."

"It happened . . . like in Altea?" he asked, still marveling at this sudden change of fortune. "You arrived in time?"

"Plenty of time," Gabe said. "She got here before Bradley was out of bed."

"We just let him spread all those papers on the desk in my bank," Nate added, "and then we gave him the bad news. Six masked men rode in, thinking it was going to be easy, and we met them with a man on every roof, in every doorway and window. They didn't even draw, just gave up quiet and peaceful."

"The deeds weren't signed?"

"Nary a one," Gabe said.

"The gold is still in the bank," Ann said. "We thought it should stay there until the man, or men, who sent it, can call and claim it. If no one shows up—and they'll go to jail if they do—we plan to use it to make the town a little better."

"What about Bradley?" Luke asked.

"Well, now, he's a changed man. Not as friendly as before, and talking a lot of foolishness. You want to see him? Go right in. He's got a cell all to himself. The men who rode in to steal the gold are in the other cells."

Ann stepped up to him, raised her face for his kiss, linked her arm under his and walked with him into the office. She stepped aside so he could enter the cell room. The others pressed in behind him.

Bradley arose from the pallet and stood facing Luke.

## THE PLUNDERERS

He looked as pallid as if he'd spent ten years in this cell.

"What happened to Jim Eagle?" he asked.

"He died. Sudden."

"You killed him. Of course—you'd have to. But it's too late. Jim told me all about you."

"Then Jim Eagle was loco too," Nate said. "Luke, Bradley here tells us you're wanted in Kansas for running with an outlaw gang and for busting jail some three, four years ago."

Luke looked Nate straight in the eyes, but said nothing.

"No need to deny it, Luke," Gabe interrupted. "We already told Mr. Bradley that he's mistaken. You couldn't be wanted in Kansas for any crime because you never been there. You couldn't be wanted for breaking jail because you never been in jail."

"How could you?" Nate added. "You grew up in Vista. You been here since you were nine. You didn't ride with any outlaw band at nine years of age, did you?"

"Nate . . . there's no need. . . ."

"Of course there isn't. Every man, woman and child in Vista will swear you been here most of your life. All of your adult life, and we figure that as being from nine years up."

"Anyway," Ann said, "we'd be very stupid to take the word of an outlaw like Jim Eagle. Or a liar like Mr. Bradley."

"Well?" Nate asked. "What do you say to that?"

"It's a great town," Luke said. "I'm glad they didn't take it out from under your noses."

"We're kind of pleased about that, too," Gabe said.

"Are you fixing to stay here?" Ann asked.



## THE PLUNDERERS

"Not alone," he said.

"I don't mean for you to be alone."

"Then I'll stay."

"Ought to be a nice place to live and bring up a family," Nate opined. "Our treasury's got so much gold on hand there won't be any taxes here for years."

"Then I guess it's all right if I ask you for a loan once again, Nate?"

"For what purpose?" Nate asked in his banker's voice.

"I'm figuring on getting married and I have to build on to my ranchhouse."

"How many added rooms?"

Luke glanced at Ann. "Depends on my wife."

Ann smiled serenely. "It'll have to be a big house, Nate. I'm ready to ride out there and talk about it if you are, Luke."

"That's a pretty good idea," he said.

"The wedding will be tomorrow, Pa," Ann told her father. She glanced at Luke. "Did you think I'd forgotten that?"

"I hoped you hadn't," he said. He glanced back at Bradley in the cell room. "Goodbye, Mr. Bradley. I don't know how the folks feel in the first town you robbed, but they're awful mad at you in Altea. Come along, Ann. We got plans to make."

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