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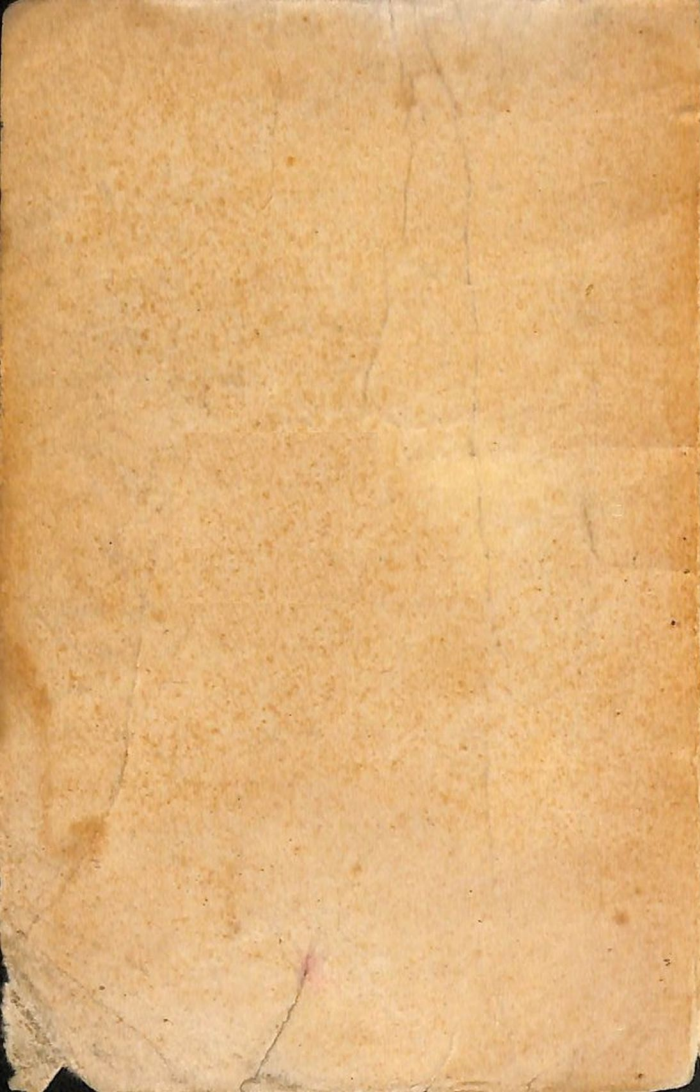
HE MADE A DEAL TO SHARE A RUSTLER'S FATE

CONTRACT IN CARTRIDGES

BEN ELLIOTT

Complete Novel





RIDE, RUSTLER, RIDE!

"Beneath his thighs, he could feel the sorrel's flanks pumping like bellows as the animal fought to crest the ridge with the last of its flagging strength. The horse was dead-beat, finished, after two fiercely cruel days of flight through the heat-blasted nightmare of the low border country with the posse always just a little behind. And because his mount was finished, Clell Yates knew now that he was finished, too."

That was the story of Clell Yates—a man with a rep, a man always on the run from somewhere, a man who seemed to draw posses like vultures to a rotting carcass. Now they had him cornered and it appeared that Clell would do no more running. In another minute, the posse would open up, and, this time there was no way out. . . .

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Clell Yates

Dodging the law was his way of life, but now he was fed up with running.

Josh Carter

A one-armed man with more determination than he could handle.

Nancy Carter

She had too much beauty for any man.

Bart Roman

A cattle baron with a crumbling kingdom.

Jack Younger

On the frontier, the fast die young—and he was no exception.

Sharon Coe

Weary and lonely, but a fighter to the end.

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BEN ELLIOTT

ACE BOOKS, INC.
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New York, N.Y. 10036

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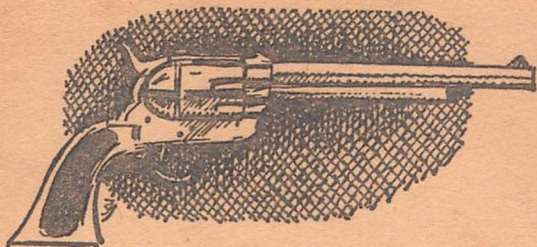
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DON'T CROSS MY LINE

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I

“YATES,” the town marshal said.

Clell Yates reined in his dusty sorrel, shoved back his sweat-stained hat, and looked down into the leathery face of the lawman, who stood planted in the middle of the street, a double-barreled riot gun cradled in his arm. The marshal was in his late forties; his cowhorn mustaches were touched with gray; nevertheless, Yates immediately sensed a dangerous quality in the man.

Yates sat stiffly, not betraying any of the tension that filled him. “Howdy,” he said, pleasantly enough, his voice a little harsh with the dryness of a long ride.

“Howdy.” The marshal’s cold, jet eyes moved over Clell Yates slowly, not missing a thing. The marshal gazed over Yates’ hard-featured, hawk-nosed face, aged beyond its twenty-seven years by trouble and weather; he saw the six muscular feet of rangy body that sat loosely in the saddle, wide-shouldered, lean-hipped, not an ounce of fat on it. The

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marshal kept careful tabs on the whereabouts of Yates's hands, one on the reins, one on the horn.

A little impatiently, Yates waited for the marshal to go on. He knew what was coming—the same thing he went through sooner or later when he entered any town that had a conscientious lawman. He hoped the marshal would not be long-winded. He was hot and tired and thirsty, and for the past five miles he had been able to think only of how good a cold beer would taste when he hit Sutler's Springs.

The marshal motioned with the shotgun. "Hitch up your horse and come talk to me a spell."

Yates opened his mouth to protest, then shut it again. "Shore," he said and he reined toward the hitchrack.

Sutler's Springs, he thought, was not a hell of a lot of town to boast such a razor-sharp badgetoter—a few wood buildings, a few adobe ones, a street three inches deep in hot, red dust. Nobody much was stirring at this time of day, unless you counted the redbone hound scratching fleas in the shadow of an alley or the razor back shoat rooting at a pile of garbage somebody had tossed into the road. A dribbled-out nothing of a town—but it had a couple of saloons and a hotel-cafe and a barber shop, and it would do for a stopover. That is, if he and the marshal didn't lock horns. . . .

He swung down off the sorrel a little awkwardly, being bound up with saddle stiffness, and he looped the reins around the hitchrack. His big hand patted the horse's lather-ridged neck. "Won't hurt you to cool a few minutes before you drink, anyhow," he told the sorrel, and he walked up on the board sidewalk where the marshal was waiting.

The marshal was a half head shorter than Clell Yates. "My name's Whipple," he said, and Yates knew immediately from the truculence in his voice that the marshal was stretching hard to give the impression that he was every bit as big as any other man.

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"Glad to know you," Clell said mildly. "'Pears like you've already recognized me."

"I've seen you before," Whipple said. "Saw you in a gunfight in Tascosa once."

Yate's eyes shadowed slightly. "Yes," he said.

"You burned down two men," Whipple said.

Yates said nothing. He was beginning not to like Whipple at all.

"Come on in my office," Whipple said abruptly, and he turned and entered a small adobe building.

Clell followed him slowly, blinking to accustom his eyes to the dimness inside. It was not much cooler in here. Whipple sat down on the edge of a battered table that obviously served as his desk. He still had the shotgun cradled in his arms.

"Two men," he said. "In four shots. Outside Hampton's Saloon."

Yate's lips made a thin line. "That was three years ago. They tried to whipsaw me. It didn't work. Besides, I didn't start the fuss. One of them was drunk and proddy. His cousin backed him up. It was shoot or get shot. They had a hearing—I come off with self defense."

"Tascosa ain't Sutler's Springs," the marshal said tersely. At last he laid aside the shotgun and stood up. "Look here, Yates. You're a gunfighter. We don't need no gunfighters in Sutler's Springs."

Yates let out a long, fluttering sigh. "I ain't no gunfighter. I do a cowhand's work—when I can find it."

"You got a rep like a snowball," the marshal went on, ignoring him. "Gits bigger all the time."

"Range gossip. Riders talk like old granny-women. Build a thing up yarning around a fire."

"Gossip or no, you're fast with a gun and you've killed men. Five years ago you were mixed up in a range war over in the Big Thicket country. You must have played it cagy, because nobody ever brought charges against you—but the

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story's got around. You were the head gunny for the outfit you rode for."

"Old John Wheless over there raised me," Yates answered slowly, distinctly, trying hard to make the marshal understand. "That's good sheep and goat country over there. John brought in some sheep. He ranged 'em on his own land, but even so he had some neighbors that started crowdin' him about it. One day John's team come home with him lyin' dead in the buckboard—cutbanked by somebody with a Sharps needle gun. Nearest law was two hundred miles away. I didn't aim to be the next one cutbanked. There was some shootin' before matters was settled, yes. Again, a man's got a right to protect his own hide." His voice went harsh. "Besides, I done told you, John was like a daddy to me."

"Be that as it may," the marshal said. "I reckon Billy Bonney could tell a pretty good story about the Lincoln County mess over in New Mexico, too, if you was to ask him. The thing is, Yates, from that time on you've had a tough rep. Now I run a quiet town here. I don't aim to have any trouble." His hand dropped to the stock of the shotgun on the table beside him. "So I'm telling you, while you're in Sutler's Springs, you check your hardware with me."

The dim interior of the little office was silent for a long moment. Then Clell Yates shook his head slowly.

The marshal picked up the shotgun and cradled it in his arms again. "You tellin' me you won't?"

"I ain't tellin' you anything," Yates said softly. "But let me ask a question first. This a town rule? Everybody checks a gun?"

The marshal hesitated. "Everbody ain't Clell Yates," he said.

"The rest of the town goes heeled if it wants to huh?"

"The rest of the town ain't gunfighters."

Clell Yates heaved a big sigh. "No, marshal. If it ain't a town rule, I don't check my gun."

Whipple's blown-out breath made his mustaches flutter. His black eyes went hard and shiny as obsidian, and for a moment Clell thought the marshal would stand on tiptoes, trying to intimidate him by looking face to face. But Whipple didn't.

Clell said quickly, "I ain't trying to be hard to get along with. But you saw that mess in Tascosa. All right, I'll admit I have got a rep. You ain't the only one that knows it. Seems like every so often there's a local hardcase feels like he's got to stand up to me and make me back down. I'll take a lot to avoid a shootin', marshal, but sometimes it can't be avoided, and when it can't, I don't aim to be standin' there helpless and without an iron. I don't know what kind of bully-boys you maybe have in this town. I don't know what likkerhead is liable to try to fatten his own rep or show off for his girl by bracin' me. No, sir. If the rest of the town totes guns, I tote one too."

For a moment he thought Whipple was going to bring the issue to a head. He felt an old, familiar vibrancy in his own body, a quickening of every sense, a loose, efficient poising of his muscles. It would be hard to fight that god-dam Greener at such close range, but he knew by hard experience that, unarmed in a strange town, his life wouldn't be worth a plugged dobe dollar anyhow. So if he had to do it . . .

Then Whipple seemed to relax. The muzzles of the shotgun pointed downward at the dirt floor. Whipple blew against his mustaches. "All right, Yates." His voice was like the strike of flint against flint. "All right, there's no ordinance allows me to disarm you unless you're mixed up in trouble or you give up your gun voluntarily. But you've been warned. Trouble here and I'll show you what nine buckshot to the barrel can do to a man."

Clell Yates did not relax his tension. He had a feeling that this marshal had set out to crowd him deliberately. He

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said, "There won't be no trouble unless somebody else starts it. I'm riding through, and all I want from this town is water and grain for my horse and a bath, bed and beer for me. This time tomorrow, I'll be long gone. But if you know the local hotshots, you give them the same warnin' you gave me. You tell 'em to stay off my corns and I won't step on theirs. Nice meetin' you, Marshal Whipple." And he turned deliberately and went out into the hot, bright scale of the sunlight, the space between his shoulder blades uncomfortable from the presence of that ten-gauge riot gun behind him.

He felt sour inside and he was cursing softly to himself when he mounted the sorrel and rode it down the end of the street to the livery stable. The hostler was an old man with a pinched face and mischievous little eyes. He watched Yates as Yates stripped saddle and blanket from the sorrel and turned the sorrel into the corral and watched it roll. When the sorrel went over on the third try and got up and trotted to the watering trough, Yates turned back to the hostler. "Oats and hay—and I want good cured hay that's plenty dry, none of this green and musty stuff."

"Yes, sir," the hostler nodded. "You bet, Mister Yates."

Yates tensed. "How'd you know my name?"

The hostler grinned. "I was comin' back from buyin' a plug of chewin' tobaccy when you went in the marshal's office. I heerd him talkin' to you."

Clell Yates grunted disgustedly. The little man had big ears. Probably a big mouth, too. The marshal might not have spread Yates's identity around, but there was no doubt that the hostler would go through Sutler's Springs like the town crier. Well, if the hostler would talk in one direction, he'd talk in another, too. Yates said, "This Whipple, the marshal. What kinda man is he?"

The hostler gave a happy little chuckle at the opportunity to gossip. "Mr. Whipple's a mighty-short-tempered sort of man, Mr. Yates. Seems like he used to be a lawman in

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some really big towns. But people with bigger names come along—people like Earp and Masterson and customers like that—and he kinda got shoved off here into the backwoods. I don't think Mr. Whipple's happy here in Sutler's Springs. I kinda think he misses bein' where the main show's goin' on."

Yates nodded. That was sort of the impression he'd gathered himself. He flipped the hostler a silver dollar. "That'll cover it for the night, I reckon."

The hostler nodded. "Yes, sir, shore will." He craned his neck.

"What the hell you starin' at?" Yates asked, irritated.

"Nothin'." The hostler drew back quickly. But Yates knew. The hostler had been looking to see how many notches were cut in the butt of Clell Yates's now famous Colt.

"Well, you gonna throw your neck out of joint if you ain't careful," Yates grunted and strode angrily out of the barn.

Even the cold beer did not help any. His reception to this town had put him on edge and made him nervous and jumpy. He sat at a table in the narrow, dingy little saloon, his back to the adobe wall, and nursed the beer. He wanted several, but he knew that he did not dare drink more than this one. Not until he had the lay of the land and knew whether he was going to get out of Sutler's Springs without running into trouble.

Trouble . . . His lips twisted, and he took another swallow of beer. Trouble had been following him like a dog at heel for five years. He didn't regret a damn bit what he'd done down in the Big Thicket country. When somebody killed a fine old man like John Wheless, somebody had to pay. And the somebody had paid, and so had the somebody's hired bodyguard. That was water over the dam. If it happened again the same way, he'd do again what he had done—take vengeance for old John in blood.

But what wasn't water over the dam was the aftermath

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of the trouble. Trouble seemed to feed on itself. You got a reputation as a gunhand and suddenly that was all you were good for. Maybe you were a tophand rider, but nobody would hire you to work cows. Any damnfool could work cows, but there weren't many men who could throw a gun like Clell Yates. So when an employer took you on, he wasn't hiring just a rider. He was hiring a Colt .45 and a man to use it.

There were too many needs for a man who could use a Colt these days. The country was building up, and it turned out that there wasn't enough range to go around after all. Or even if there was enough grazing, there wasn't enough water. So that you had these little spurting fights blossoming all over, and there was plenty of demand for a gunhand. Because he owned nothing—he'd been John Wheless's heir, but John had died in debt, the sheep and goats a last-gasp try to stave off bankruptcy—he'd had to take what work he could get, and it had been mostly gun work. He generally tried to line up on the right side, but a stranger couldn't always tell about those things until it was too late.

There was, too, the matter of the little men who wanted to get big in a hurry. Little men who thought the shortcut way to get big was to kill a man with a big reputation. They crowded you when you least expected it, and that was why he'd had to kill the two men in Tascosa—and why he wouldn't give up his gun here. And why, too, he was so jumpy and nervous right now, wondering, each time a man came in the saloon, if it were somebody who had heard that Clell Yates was in town and who had made up his mind to try his luck.

Yates finished the beer and set the glass aside disgustedly. Well, he'd had enough of it. He'd be riding on in the morning, and if possible, he'd keep riding until he'd out-riden his reputation. Maybe there was work for a hand out in California. He'd never seen the ocean, and he'd always

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had a hankering to; and there was a good chance that in California nobody would know Clell Yates from Adam's off ox. It was a kind of sanctuary that his mind grasped at, a place that seemed to him now like the promised land, where he could slough off the past and live like any other human being and maybe build up a stake and find a woman and settle down and raise kids. . . .

A shadow fell across the table and he looked up. A big, florid-faced man in white shirt and vest was looking down at him. "Clell Yates?" the man asked crisply.

"Uh-huh." Clell moved his hand under the table, so that it was closer to his holster.

"Mind if I sit down?" The big man pulled out a chair.

"All right," said Clell. "What's on your mind, Mister?"

The big man leaned forward. "My name's Jacoby. I'm Marshal Whipple's brother-in-law, married his sister."

"Good for you," said Clell with more acid than he intended.

Jacoby's face shadowed, but he took no offense. He leaned close to Yates. "Listen," he said, "can I give you some advice?"

"Assuming it don't cost nothing."

"It'll be the best damned advice you ever got," Jacoby said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Yates, why don't you go saddle up and ride on out of Sutler's Springs?"

Yates frowned, anger rising in him harshly. "Goddam it, I've been ridin' for two days. I dry-camped last night and I'm dirty as a billy-goat. I don't want this goddam town for breakfast; all I want is a chance to git a little rest."

"Shh. Now don't git all excited." Jacoby made a monitory gesture. "This is for your own good. Look, Yates, I don't know you. You may be a fine fella, the salt of the earth or you may be just the opposite—I don't know and I don't care. Thing is, I do know Doyle Whipple. Doyle's a proud man, Yates. He likes bein' a peace officer, but he don't like bein' a peace officer in a one-horse town like this. He

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wants to git back to work in a bigger place, but he feels like he can't do it unless he's got the kind of rep that'll make him draw some water alongside of people like Masterson and Earp and Tom Smith and that kind. Listen, Yates, I know Doyle Whipple like the back of my hand. He's got you sized up as the opportunity he's been needin'. If he could hang you up by the heels, he'd be known all over the state overnight."

Yates stared at Jacoby, trying to read his face. The big man looked earnest and guileless. At last Clell said wearily, "All right. I guess you're telling it straight. But there's one thing I don't understand. How come, if Whipple's your brother-in-law, you're telling me to leave and spoil his chance."

"Because I don't think he's got any chance," Jacoby said simply. "And because he's my wife's brother and she would be tore up real bad if anything happens to him. Doyle likes to think he's some punkins with a gun, but he couldn't cut it in Santone, and that's why he wound up here. I know he wouldn't stand a chance against you, Yates, but I couldn't convince him of that. Maybe I can convince you. If you don't want trouble with him, why not ride on out?"

Clell stared at the man a moment more. "This is all for your wife's sake?"

"It is. Doyle's her last blood relation. Besides, if you do kill him, Yates, then I'd have to see that you hanged for it." He grinned ruefully and without mirth. "Otherwise, I'd never be able to face her again. So it's partly for my sake, too. I got nothin' against you and I don't have any real warm feelin's for Doyle—but a man's got to fulfill his family obligations. And I just about own this town and if you were to do something to Doyle, I'd have thirty men coming against you before you could bat your eyes. So ride on, Yates, and make it easier for everybody."

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Yates sought to fight down the savage anger that was rising in him. Damn it, what did this town think he was? A wolf with bloody jaws—and, at the same time, a cur who could be driven out of town with threats? Still, he knew that what Jacoby said made sense. And he'd long got past the point where he considered pride worth killing a man over. Nor was a bed, bath and beer worth the price of a gunfight. He was whipsawed here in Sutler's Springs, and what Jacoby said was true—the best thing was to go ahead and cut out.

Very slowly, he arose. He looked down at Jacoby. "How far," he asked quietly, "is it to the next town?"

Jacoby's face showed his gratification. "Now you're making sense."

"Damned if I know whether I am or not. But I've got a gut full of being crowded. I'm going to ride on, but it's because I don't want to kill your precious Doyle Whipple, not because I'm scared of him."

"I know." Jacoby stood up, and there was respect in his manner. "Look, if you need a stake, it's worth twenty-five dollars to me just not to have any trouble."

"I never hired out to run in my life," snapped Clell. "I'm going free." With that he turned, took his hat from a peg, and clapped it on his head disgustedly.

Leaving Jacoby standing there, he pushed through the swinging doors and out onto the sidewalk. He blinked at the bright light and then turned and began to walk swiftly, fiercely toward the livery stable, his boots making a quick cadenced clumping on the sidewalk boards.

He was almost there when a voice from the street halted him. "Yates."

He stopped and whirled.

Marshal Whipple was coming toward him from the livery stable. He was carrying the riot gun cradled in his arm.

Yates stood erect and loose, his hand dropping to his hip,

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where it swung just below his holster. "Marshal," he said harshly, "I've changed my plans. I'm leaving. Right now. So you don't have to worry about no trouble."

"You ain't leaving just yet," Whipple said softly, but in a voice that carried. "Not until you can show me a bill of sale for that sorrel."

Yates blinked. "Bill of sale? Hell's fire, I hand-raised that horse down on John Wheless's Rocking R. He ain't never been bought and he ain't never been sold. He's eight years old and there's never been the first paper on him."

"That's too bad," rasped Whipple. "Because I'm going to have to hold you and the horse until you show some proof of ownership."

Red rage flared in Clell Yates, but he restrained it.

"Listen, marshal. I got a pretty good idea of what you're up to. I've already told you, I want no trouble. Now let me leave. I'm asking you, man to man, don't crowd me. Just let me leave."

"I never let a horsethief loose in my life," said Whipple coldly. He straddled his legs and swung the shotgun around. Suddenly he yelled, "Don't draw, Yates!" and he was thumbling back the hammer.

Clell Yates dropped like a stone, flat on his back on the sidewalk, and the double charge of buckshot whistled over him with a whoosh like the passing of an express train. He rolled back on balance just as Whipple, his face white, threw the empty weapon aside and clawed for his Colt.

What Yates did then was pure instinct. He was not even aware that the gun was in his hand until it bucked. But he saw the impact of the bullet slam the marshal backwards, his half-drawn gun sliding back into the holster. Then the marshal was down and kicking.

Yates got to his feet, trembling. He was aware of eyes fastened on him from the windows of the town. He looked

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about him. Jacoby was standing in front of the saloon, his face white.

Yates swung his Colt.

"Goddam it," he said harshly, "he tried to blow me in two. Jacoby, I'm saddling up and riding out. You better hold your dogs back. I'll kill the first one that comes after me." Then, his gun poised and ready, he moved alertly to the livery stable.

"Put the saddle on the sorrel," he rasped to the hostler, watching the street of the town.

Jacoby was bending over the marshal's body. The marshal had stopped kicking now. Yates saw Jacoby straighten up helplessly.

Then the hostler said timidly from behind, "Y-your hawse is ready, Mister Y-Yates."

"Good." Yates gathered in the reins and swung up, his gun still unsheathed. Then he gigged the sorrel hard with his spurs.

It sprang into a run from a standing start. Yates whipped it around the corner of the livery stable. At that moment, he heard the ripping of bullets in the air and the staccato report of guns in the street. Then the stable was between him and the shots. The sorrel's hooves were drumming hard as the animal carried him out of Sutler's Springs on the run.

II

BENEATH HIS THIGHS, he could feel the sorrel's flanks pumping like bellows as the animal fought to crest the ridge with the last of its flagging strength. Its breath was a piteous whistle through distended nostrils; its heartbeat jarred its whole body. The sorrel was dead-beat, finished, after two fiercely cruel days of flight through the heat-blasted nightmare of the low border country with the posse always just

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a little behind. And because his mount was finished, Clell Yates knew now that he was finished too.

Jacoby had meant what he'd said. Within a half hour, he'd put an army of mounted men on Yates' trail. Enough men so that they could come on in relays, not always fast, but inexorable, like a team of coyotes exhausting an antelope, never giving their quarry a chance to stop moving. Because they were not duly constituted law, they hadn't stopped at the Texas-New Mexico boundary, either. They just kept coming, with all the fresh horses, all the cool water, and all the men and guns it would take to run Clell Yates to earth like a lobo wolf.

Now the sorrel, with no chance to graze and damned little to drink for forty-eight hours, was using its last iota of strength to make the ridge-top—and Yates knew that the time had come to stop running. A quick glance behind him showed the posse's dust cloud on the flat below, scarcely a mile away and coming hard. Hollow-eyed, crack-lipped, gaunt as the sorrel, Yates cursed and with desperate, helpless cruelty rammed the animal with spurs.

The sorrel grunted and scrabbled on. The ridge crest was a hundred yards away. Barren except for a litter of boulders and a few feathery fingers of ocotillo, it would have to be his fort. He had held his fire until now, hoping, by running, to avoid having to kill men he had never met in his life. That chance was gone, though; and now, since they'd chased him like a wolf, they'd see how much wolf he could be.

The sorrel faltered. Yates quirted it. The animal tried to give more, but there was nothing left to give. Yates felt its heart beating at crescendo; its body was too dehydrated even to raise lather. He was just about to swing from the saddle when the horse sighed loudly and fell on its right side.

Yates saw dry, rocky ground slamming up toward him. He tried to pull his right foot clear, as he went sprawling

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out of the saddle, but there was no time. The sorrel came down on Yates' foot, bending it at the ankle, pinching it between saddle and stone.

Nerve-wrenching agony seared through Clell Yates' leg, and he howled. There was a clocktick when pain blurred everything crazily; then the world swam back into focus. Cursing savagely, he pulled—pure torture—but he knew he had to drag his foot from the pinioned boot before the ruined ankle swelled.

After an eternity, it slipped loose; but he could not move from the cost of the effort. Drenched with sweat that was ice-cold despite the merciless sun at zenith above, he lay for a moment helplessly gasping.

After seconds crowded with enough agony for hours, he managed to sit up. With a deliberate effort of will, he focused his attention on the posse. Their dust cloud was not more than a quarter of a mile from the base of the ridge. Instinctively, his eyes and hand turned toward the sorrel. He reached for his saddle-gun, but it too was pinned under the horse, probably smashed and bent.

Yates rasped something deep in his throat. Without the rifle, he was cold meat. But there was no time or chance to get it. He reassured himself that his Colt still rode in holster, and his other hand checked his left pants pocket for the extra box of six-gun cartridges. It was still there.

He scrambled to his feet, trying to ignore the pain. The sorrel lay flat, with flanks heaving. It made a soft, piteous sound in its nostrils. Its left eye, turned upward to the sun, already looked baked.

Yates dragged his gun. There was no time for sentiment, no time for regrets. He thumbed the hammer and pulled the trigger. The report shattered the desert quiet obscenely.

Yates whirled toward the ridge crest. A nest of boulders, a natural redoubt, loomed there against the skyline. He began to hobble desperately up the steeply pitched ground. Each

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time his right foot came down, he cursed with agony. Yet, somehow, he managed to cover ground.

Then, as if the shot with which he'd finished the sorrel were a signal, the posse began to use its guns for the first time in the whole long pursuit. All at once the air around Clell Yates was a swarm of hornets. Lead puffed into the ground and screamed and whistled off rock. Somebody down there was an expert with a Winchester.

But Yates did not falter, slow, or return the fire. He had to make the crest—thirty feet now, and seemingly the longest distance he'd ever had to travel. Each step jarred him with agony; he was certain that he'd black out before he made the top. But he didn't. He clawed and scratched and scrabbled and cursed and panted and the nest of boulders was nearer, only six feet away now, and the lead was still coming all around him, but in a minute there'd be rocks between himself and the lead and . . .

Something kicked him in the left shoulder with a tremendous impact that sent him sprawling face-forward. His whole left side was numb for seconds; then it flared into agonizing pain. He felt his shirt sopping with quick blood from the entry hole of the slug that had got him.

Earth and sky and dazzling sun went round and round for a moment in shimmering, vaporous confusion. He heard himself screaming and bellowing in frustration, as if he were listening with odd detachment to a man he didn't know, had never met. Then his consciousness settled back into him, and he knew he was badly wounded, probably killed, and that the thing to do was lie where he was and let them take him.

But he was not made that way. Something inside him, fierce, indomitable, unwilling to abandon control of his own fate, forced him to begin to crawl. The clutter or rocks that he had sought was a scant yard now. Somehow, after interminable labor, he made it and pulled himself into its lee.

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Panting and gasping and blinded with pain and weakness, he sank his head into the shadow of a boulder for a moment, as a man might immerse himself in water.

Then, pulling his senses together and fighting down the pain that racked both his right and left sides, he lifted himself up. His Colt was in his hand. There were five rounds left in the cylinder; he'd been riding fully loaded since Sutler's Springs and had used only the one cartridge on the sorrel. But, he realized, those five rounds had to be used to better effect than any cartridges he had ever spent before. Because his left arm was useless, and when the gun was empty, he would somehow have to eject the spent shells and reload with only one hand—and that could easily take minutes. And during those minutes he would be helpless, defenseless, and the posse would know it.

They were coming up the slope now. The ridge flared out halfway down its length into a comparatively gentle swell, its upper rise sharp and cruelly rocky. The posse—at least fifteen men—were still on the gentle lower slope. He watched them dismount and take cover, while two men led the horses back down.

Now, he thought grimly. Fifteen men rushing toward him through rock and gully. Fifteen men armed with six-guns and Winchesters, and all wanting him dead. And he had five rounds with which to prove to them that the game wasn't worth the effort.

There would be time. It would take them a spell to get within range. He sank down behind the boulder. The blood was still trickling from his wound. It had soaked his shirt and he could feel it beginning to stain his pants as it dribbled down his flank beneath his belt. There was no way, either, that he could reach it to plug it. Not with his right hand, and the left one was cold meat.

So he made himself forget the wound. He made himself concentrate on yanking six cartridges out of his shell belt.

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There were probably six more left in loops that he could reach. He tried to get his right hand around and into his left pants pocket for the extra box of ammunition, but the wrench he gave his body made the sky reel again and he knew he'd come within an ace of blacking out. So he wouldn't try that again.

He lined the six cartridges up on a flat rock. Their fat, brass cases winked at him dully in the sun-glitter. Then, slowly, carefully, he lifted his head and looked over the edge of the boulder to see where the posse was now and what it was doing.

Heat waves rippling on the slope below made it hard to tell. His hat had been lost on the fall, and the sun was a merciless hammer, falling on his head without letup. He licked lips that were puffed and cracked and raw with a tongue that felt like boot leather. He wished that he had the half pint of tepid water that had been all that was left in his canteen.

Then he quit thinking about the thirst and tried to watch the posse.

Some of them, on the lower slope, were throwing lead as covering fire for those crawling up the steep and rocky upper lift of the ridge. They were clearly visible, the men who shot at him, but they were out of six-gun range.

So he forgot them. And watched the upper slope keenly. After a while, he saw one of the men. Almost, but not quite within range of a Colt, the fellow, long, stringy, and sun-dried, was hunkered behind an outcrop of ground, obviously sure that he was hidden from Clell Yates and out of his line of fire. As Yates watched, the lanky man gathered himself for a rush.

Yates felt himself grin. There was no mirth in it; it was a wolf's grin, when the trapper finally appears defiant and deadly. He poised the Colt.

Bullets were screaming off the rocks. He kept his head

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down, except for enough eyeroom to watch the man. Yates saw him tense, then spring from cover and come zigzagging up the slope, bound for another position.

The hammer on Yates's six-gun was already eared back in anticipation. Now he risked raising his head enough to track the man with the gun barrel, aiming carefully, like a man about to down a flying bird.

The instant the man came into gun range, Yates squeezed the trigger.

The gun kicked back against his palm. At the same instant, the man gave an agonized howl and fell, clutching at a thigh. Yates cursed. He had been shooting for the body. He watched the man roll down the slope, frantically trying to get out of range again, holding a leg that was pouring blood.

The hit had brought heads up to see what had happened. Yates saw a black hat and a face beneath it and the upper third of a body lift out of the defilade where the ground swelled. Sheer curiosity, like a squirrel poised and waiting to be barked, and Yates grinned at the man's stupidity and lack of self control, and fired again.

Another yell and the instant disappearance of the hat, head and shoulders told him that he had scored. His eyes searched the terrain, but he saw no more targets. The bullet-whine about the rocks had lessened a bit.

Two hits in two shots. That should impress the bastards, Yates thought. That should make them stop and wonder a little bit. Savagely, he began to curse the possemen. He cursed them not for penning him up here like this, but for putting him in a position where he had to kill them to survive. He knew none of them and they did not know him. It was a farce, a farce that would cost him his life, because those stupid bastards out there would do what Jacoby told them to do, hunt down and kill a stranger who had only shot in self-defense. Goddam them, Yates thought, they almost deserve to die.

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Then he saw another target: Jacoby, evidently trying to summon flagging morale. Standing up and beckoning men onward for a charge, like a general taking a hill. Jacoby was big and apparently fearless and a perfect, fine, and easy target.

And Jacoby was also the man who had hunted him down like a lobo for doing what he'd had to do to save his own life.

Even so, Yates did not want to kill Jacoby. But he saw no way out. The man was inviting it. And dropping him might take the starch out of the posse. If not altogether, at least long enough to buy time to reload. . . .

All this went through Yate's mind in the instant that Jacoby made a target. It took perhaps a second between the time Jacoby exposed himself and Yates squeezed the trigger.

Jacoby spun around, clutching at a bullet-shattered arm. It was not the hit Yates had meant to make, but it turned out to be enough. He knew a bone-shot when he saw it, and by the way Jacoby's arm flapped and then dangled, he knew that his slug had crushed bone above the elbow.

That would take care of Jacoby for a long time.

It did. It took care of Jacoby and it impressed the rest of the posse, too. As Jacoby ran screaming down the slope, they all cleared out of range at the same time, suddenly popping out of their hiding places like startled prairie dogs and scuttling down the hill. Yates saw them huddle together at the bottom and obviously ready to try new tactics.

He saw Jacoby's arm being bandaged; he saw a sort of hospital being set up in the shade of a Joshua tree. And he saw men go to their horses and fan out.

Yates looked blearily to the right and left. The ridge he was on connected with two lower ones. He scrabbled around and stared down the reverse slope for the first time. It

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dropped away steeply, and beyond it was a tumbled mass of lava and boulders and raw, desolate, eroded earth.

It was like being penned up on the moon. They could easily encircle him, and, up here on the top of this shadeless, waterless, sun-blasted outcropping, it could not possibly take him more than a day to die.

Since they had been after him this long, they could wait a day longer.

He was fenced in. Fenced in and finished, and the thing to do would be to raise his hands in surrender and hope that they would bandage him and give him water and take him back to Sutler's Springs to hang. At least that way, he could buy a few hours more life.

As if they were reading his mind, somebody bellowed from down the slope. The sound was clearly audible in the quiet noon air.

"Yates! Throw your gun down here and stand up and surrender. You're a dead man if you don't!"

Yates sucked in a long breath that made his shoulder throb. He looked up at the merciless glaring ball of the sun overhead. He licked his ruined lips and yearned for water.

Then he summoned all his strength. His voice was a croak, and he didn't know whether they could hear it that far or not, but he didn't much care.

"You go to hell," he yelled as loud as he could.

They all waited.

The possemen waited, ranged in a circle around the height of ground that Clell Yates held.

And Yates waited.

Only the sun did not wait. It poured out merciless heat, angling itself so that no shade at all fell from the rocks which surrounded Yates. There was not even a small puddle of blackness in which to put his unshielded head.

The vultures did not wait, either. It had not taken them

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long to find the horse, and presently the high, arching blue glaring bowl of the sky was specked with circling black. They wheeled and rose and glided and somehow managed to drop lower with each orbit of the sky that they made.

Yates cursed them. He cursed the vultures and Marshal Whipple and Jacoby and all the others and the woman who was Whipple's sister and Jacoby's wife and such a shrew that blood had to be shed to keep her quiet. But most of all, he cursed the man who had killed old John Wheless years ago in the Big Thicket country and who was, more than anyone else, responsible for Yates's being here now. Who, by making it necessary for Yates to kill him, had started Yates on the trail which had led him to this hilltop.

He cursed because this was not what he had wanted. This was not what he had wanted at all.

At first, he had wanted merely to take over the Rocking R from old John and build it up into a fine, big spread. And someday he would go to Santone or Dallas or Houston or New Orleans and find himself a girl who was a real lady and he would marry her and raise a bunch of tough, hardnosed boy-kids who could handle the spread after he was gone. But all that had vanished when John had been shot from ambush. . . .

Even when he knew it was gone forever, though, he had built his substitute dream. He had wanted to see the ocean and be able to walk about without his gun and try to accumulate some money and put it in land and cows near the ocean and, if not build an empire as he had dreamed at first, at least make a home. It seemed a modest enough dream, and one that a man should be allowed to fulfill, but apparently it was too much, apparently it was more than he was entitled to. . . . Maybe he had gone about things the wrong way, maybe he had been too quick and proud with a gun, and maybe this was what he had coming to him after all. . . .

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To die up here in the sun, like a scotched sidewinder. . . .

His shoulder had stopped bleeding now. That, at least, was good. His back was on fire, and it was one vast cake of scabbed and crusted blood, and every movement cost him agony, but apparently he would not bleed to death. Instead, he would bake and die of thirst.

The afternoon reeled on interminably. His foot was swollen, his ankle as thick as his calf now. It, too, throbbed and ached; but he was fairly sure it was not broken.

Along about three o'clock, it must have been, he began to have the fantasies. He knew they came from heat and thirst and weakness, but they seemed very real. Sometimes he was a kid again, back on the Rocking R, riding stirrup to stirrup with the man who had taken him in after Comanches had killed his own parents when he was too young to remember, chousing mossy-horned cattle out of the brush, riding hard and working hard and feeling good.

Again he was surrounded by gunfighting ghosts—men he had killed. Now out for vengeance, meancing, deadly, and he himself helpless before them. The four men he had shot in the vengeance he had taken for old John; the two in Tacosa; three more in the scattered water-fights in which he had hired out, and Whipple, with his ten-gauge gun. . . .

They closed in on him, and he knew he was screaming at them, but no sound came from his lips.

They vanished though, only to return later, and then he thought he was standing on the shore of the ocean he had never seen. It was immensely blue and cool-looking. All that water. . . . Desperately thirsty, he threw himself into it, mouth open, gulping, swallowing. . . . And the water was bitter salt and instead of quenching the dryness, his thirst flared higher. . . .

He waited thus, his gun reloaded, the sun baking him into insanity, and the afternoon dragged on. The buzzards came down and began to rip at the dead sorrel. He saw,

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through a chink in the rocks, two of them fighting over the exposed eye, another tearing the tongue loose from the open mouth. They would not have far to go for another meal, he thought wryly, when that one was done. . . .

His mouth was a painful, swollen dryness. Again he dreamed of water.

Sometimes he roused himself, forced himself back to sanity, and looked around. He could see the possemen waiting, at ease, out of six-gun range, smoking, settled in the shade, drinking when they needed it, not even bothering to plug at him with their rifles. Patient. Certain.

Once, he caught himself praying. He was surprised. He could not remember ever having prayed before. What he prayed surprised him even more. Let me out of this, he prayed. Let me out of it and I'll never pull a trigger again.

He made himself stop praying, a little ashamed. But when he looked at the gun in his hand, it was with a hatred of it that was new to him. Always before, the gun had been his friend and his ally and his comforter. Now he saw that it was not that at all. It was his worst enemy. It was something that eventually killed the man who used it, just as it killed the man in front of it.

He cursed the gun. He cursed it with a savage, ugly vigor, in a voice that was a ludicrous croak. Once he almost threw it away from him. But something within him restrained him from that just in time.

The sun heeled its way down the sky.

Puddles of shadow grew at the base of the rocks again.

Very weakly, Clell Yates soaked his head in the shadow. It did not help much.

Then, with almost eerie disbelief, he found that he had lived through the afternoon. It was growing cooler. The desert night was settling in fast, shadows long and purple and expanding. Possemen were building fires.

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Clell Yates sat up, rubbing his face.

As the heat diminished, he felt a faint reserve of strength growing in him, felt himself beginning to revive a bit.

It was cool now and he was still alive.

He opened his mouth and sucked the cool air into it. It did not help his need for water, but it revived him further nevertheless. His mind began to clear; things came into sharper focus.

It was going to be dark until the moon came up.

Experimentally, shielded by darkness, Clell Yates put his swollen right foot on the ground and loaded it with weight. It screamed a protest of pain, but it did not buckle.

He waggled his left shoulder. It throbbed and burned, but it did not start to bleed again.

Yates began to try to think rationally. It was not easy, but he forced himself to do so, nurturing a flare of hope that came from the fact that he had lived this long.

The possemen, he thought, had seen him hobble his way up the slope and knew that the fall had crippled him. They had seen, too, the bullet send him sprawling and they must know he was wounded. It was fairly sure that they would be convinced that he was just about gone by now—and even he did not know where the last reserve of strength had come from that had supported him this long.

At any rate, he would be ripe for the plucking now, they would figure. Probably a few of them would try to move in on him in the darkness.

So, the thing to do, was to move out before they moved in. It was simple as that.

He almost laughed aloud in bitter irony. Sure, with a sprained ankle and a bullet-plugged shoulder, move out. Move out where? Into that hell of lava behind the ridge? Why? So he could fort up again out there? So they could run him down again and take him in the open before he had

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the chance? Why trade the devil for his witch? Why not stay here?

But he knew he could not face another sun-searing day on this ridge crest. To remain here would be to seal his own death warrant, even if the posse did not move in on him tonight. No, if he had any chance at all, he had to get going. Now, while it was still moonless dark. . . .

He took the spur off his one remaining boot. He checked the Colt again to make sure it was fully loaded. He dropped spare cartridges into a shirt pocket where he could get at them easily and ripped the bandana off his neck and stuffed it in on top of them so they wouldn't click together.

Then he bared his teeth in a wolfish snarl that was really a twist of fear, and he left his nest of rocks and began to work his way down the backward slope of the ridge.

III

CLELL YATES measured his progress down the slope in inches. It had to be that way. He did not dare a misstep that might loosen a rock and sent it tumbling; he did not dare to put too much weight on his ankle too suddenly and have it throw him sprawling and clattering.

He barely breathed as he hunkered along, his gun poised. His eyes strained against the darkness until red lights began to dance and glitter in front of them. He could not have made over a hundred yards in thirty minutes.

Then he saw the posseman in front of him.

At first he thought it was a rock. It was a crouched shape, darker than the surrounding darkness, a scant thirty feet ahead. A spitting noise and then a splash was what halted him and made him stare at it harder. That was the sound of a tobacco-chewer.

As he squinted, then, the black shape took definite form. It was a man sitting with his back against a small boulder,

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his front angled slightly away from Clell. Again Yates heard the spit and splash of tobacco juice.

Even while Yates watched, the man got slowly to his feet. He was big and rangy, and he held a rifle alertly. As if he had sensed something wrong, he turned his head.

Yates crouched lower, shielding the gun with his arm so that it would not glimmer. The possemen's eyes swept across him and did not stop. Then the posseman made a sound of self-mockery in his throat, amused with himself for being disturbed, and sat down again. This time he sat on top of the rock.

Slowly, Yates moved forward, holding his breath. The posseman was still angled away from him, but not very far.

It took Yates ten minutes to cover twenty-five of the thirty feet that separated him from the posseman.

Then his boot ticked against a rock in the darkness.

It was the faintest rasp of sound, but it brought the man up again. "Who's there?" he grunted, lifting the rifle. He swung his head to the side, and Yates, forgetting the pain in his ankle and shoulder, covered that last five feet like a wraith.

The posseman sensed him and whirled around, but a fraction too late. Before he could cry out, Yates slugged downward with the barrel of his gun.

The shock of the blow rippled all through him. If the man wasn't dead, it would only be because of the cushion of his beaver-skin Stetson. As it was, the posseman sank to earth with only the faintest of muffled impact, and before he had landed, Yates caught the dropping Winchester on his left leg and pinned it with his right elbow so it wouldn't clatter on the rocks.

Something stirred two hundred feet to the right. "Jethro?" a soft voice called. "Jethro, you all right?"

"Sho," Yates rasped.

"Thought I heard something."

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"Uh-uh . . ." Yates grunted that and waited, his heart pounding.

"Okay," the voice said from the right. "Jest checkin'. It's spooky out here."

Gently, Yates removed the fallen man's hat and put it on his own head. It fit all right. Holstering his Colt, he cradled the rifle in his arm and stood erect.

"Git down," the voice from the right called in a whisper. "That damn hat skylines you that way. You want your head blowed off?"

Yates sank lower. He waited. After a moment, he moved along.

He took less trouble this time. A man's noises were expected over here.

"Jethro," he heard the voice call behind him. "Jethro, where you goin'?"

Yates did not answer. "Jethro? You goin' back to camp?"

Yates felt the ridge belly out, its slope less steep. He hurried on, his bare foot rasped by lava.

"Jethro . . . Goddammit." Above him he heard a man scraping across the slope. "Jethro, where are you?" Then he heard a grunt of surprise. "Who—?"

Yates went into a painful parody of a run. "Hey!" he heard the man bawl. "Hey! Somethin's happened to Jethro!"

Yates was at the foot of the slope now. The ground leveled out. He hobbled awkwardly across knife-sharp rock. His back and his right leg seemed to be made of flame. He tripped suddenly and rolled into a brushy little *barranca*, and he tried hard not to scream with the agony that went through him.

But he was comparatively safe now, he knew. They would not come after him in the darkness. Not with Jacoby wounded and no longer leading them. Not with the exhibition of marksmanship he had given them earlier still fresh in their minds.

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He hoisted himself out of the little gully, briars clawing and raking him and shredding his shirt. He gained level ground again and hobbled on through the night, blindly, spending the last shreds of his strength to put as much distance between him and them before he finally, inevitably gave out. . . .

The night turned into a nightmare of pain and exhaustion. Somehow he kept his legs moving under him, but each step was a grievous effort. The wound in his back had opened again, and there was once more a warm trickle of blood oozing down from his shoulder and saturating his tattered shirt.

But he plowed on, through boulders and over lava beds. Once he blundered into a prickly pear bed, and it almost finished him. He circled it as best he could, barely able to walk.

After a while, the fresh surge of energy that his escape had given him dwindled away entirely. He moved on, but he no longer knew why he moved. He threw away the rifle; its weight seemed tremendous. Finally there came a time when he could force his legs to go no longer, and he threw himself down somewhere in the darkness and sobbed with exhaustion and pain. Then he felt the world moving away from around him. . . .

Hot sun on his back awakened him.

He started to roll over, then gagged sickly with the pain it cost him. Finally he managed to sit up. It was daylight. The sun was already a scalding dazzle overhead.

He could not remember when he had last drunk water. It seemed years ago. With no remembrance of the posse, no awareness of anything but overwhelming thirst, he scrabbled to his feet.

He was in a brushy, rock-strewn wilderness, as dry and barren as an outpost of hell. He had no idea where he was,

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how far he had come, or where to go. All he knew, all he was possessed by, was the need for water. Somewhere ahead of him there must be some. If he only walked far enough, long enough, sooner or later he would find it—great pools of it, enough for him to soak in, loll in, swallow. . . . Somewhere there must be an ocean of water. . . . He had to go on until he came to it.

He plunged through brush. He scrabbled over rock. Whenever he had a choice between uphill and downhill, he went downhill, for he had no strength left with which to climb. Once he heard somebody laughing eerily, insanely, and it was only after the laughing had gone on for a long time that he realized it was himself.

His tortuous progress led him to the mouth of a small canyon; its walls began to loom above him. In here the brush was not quite so bad; the floor of the canyon was level. He plunged into the shade of the canyon wall and lay panting for a moment. Then he pushed himself up again, giggling crazily. He was giggling because he knew that surely here in the canyon there would be water.

He blundered along the floor of the canyon for a long time. When it ended in a blind wall of rock, he did not even realize it. He kept hurling himself against that wall, clawing at it with his fingers, as if he would force it to move out of his way and let him through to the water that he knew must be beyond it.

But of course it did not move, and after a while the earth and the sky began to whirl, and he felt himself slipping downward and, with a vague burst of rational thought, he told himself: *This is all*. He landed on his back, his eyes staring upward, completely unaware of his wounded shoulder now, sky and earth tilting crazily. There was a moment when he would have sworn that he saw, silhouetted darkly against the dazzling sky, a horse and rider on the canyon rim, the rider sitting motionless, looking down at him. But

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he knew it was only heat playing tricks and he whimpered to himself and watched the sky dwindle out and darkness move in. . . .

Only these things was he aware of for a long time:

Coolness on his lips and in his throat.

Jarring agony in his back.

A moment's consciousness and the sight of ground moving past him at the rate a horse traveled. Then darkness again.

Softness beneath him.

Hands on him.

Coolness all over his body, cool wetness.

And, somewhere in the most remote distance, a murmur of voices.

Those things he knew, and one more.

That he was alive.

He opened his eyes.

There was, above him, the smooth expanse of an adobe ceiling. He watched a lizard come out of a crack in it, scuttle on sucker-tipped feet across the ceiling, spear a fly, and return to the crack.

He thought about that for a while.

Then he became aware that he was lying on something so soft that it could only be a bed.

He licked his lips. They were still baked and cracked, but they were coated with tallow.

He lay quietly, waiting for all his senses to come back to him. And, over a period of minutes, they did, as water seeps into a well after a dry period.

He was in a room in a house and on a bed. That much he knew. He rolled his eyes around and turned his head weakly.

It was a bedroom, and not like any he could remember, for it had curtains on its windows.

He was surprised to find that he was not even thirsty.

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His hand went to his bullet torn shoulder. It was swathed in bandages. Slowly, he tried to sit up. It hurt, but not so terribly that it could not be borne, for the bandages braced his shoulder.

Then remembrance came back to him in a flood. The posse! Automatically his hand went to his hip, but of course there was nothing there.

Panic filled him at being unarmed. He tried to swing out of bed and search for his gun. He was at the mercy of the posse. But the effort was too much, and he slumped back, his breath a series of rasping gasps and sobs.

He lay quietly for a moment, and then, despite his determination to remain awake and alert, he drifted back into sleep.

The sound of horses awakened him.

This time when he came awake, his faculties were fully with him, and he sat up in bed quickly, oblivious of the wrench it gave his shoulder. There were at least a dozen horses outside.

Instinctive panic filled Yates. He looked around the room. There, on a chair near the wall—a holstered six-gun. His six-gun. He started to lurch off the bed.

At that moment, the door to the room flew open.

Yates gaped blankly at the girl who hurried toward him.

If she had not been so frightened, she would have been more than pretty. Her hair was the color of new gold; her eyes were wide and gray; her tanned face flecked with freckles; her lips were red and full. But she was afraid now, and her fear seemed to increase as she saw him sitting up.

"Quick," she whispered. "In here."

Then her cool hands were on him, helping him up. "Lean on me," she murmured, and he did so. She urged him toward a door across the room. "In here," she said. "Quick."

It was a tiny closet, screened by a reed matting that

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hung from a wire across its lintel. She pushed him into it, and he was immersed by the perfumed softness of woman's clothes.

Instinctively, he said, "My gun."

The girl hesitated a moment, wringing her hands. Then she moved to the chair, scooped up gun and belt and thrust them behind the reed mat. "Be quiet," she whispered. "Please be quiet."

Confused and tense, Clell Yates leaned against the wall. The butt of the gun felt good and reassuring in his hand. Through the interstices of the mat, he could see the room and he could see the girl. Weak as he was, he stiffened in surprise.

The girl was standing in the middle of the room and she was beginning to take off her clothes.

She had worn a flowered calico dress. Now she pulled that over her head and stood there in a single petticoat. Her shoulders were white and smooth. She seemed nervous, indecisive. After a moment, she stripped off the petticoat too.

Yates caught only a flash of bare, white skin before she scooped up a blanket from the bed and swathed it around her. She spread the petticoat on the bed, letting the lacy edge of it hang down.

Then he was aware of the voices from outside.

"... killed the marshal over in Sutler's Springs in Texas. We chased him into the badlands, finally cornered him on a ridge. But the son of a buck winged me and two of my men and he got away from us in the dark. That was two days ago. We been scourin' the country between here and there ever since. Finally picked up some horse tracks comin' out of the rough. Half-breed we got ridin' with us says the horse was carryin' double. Lost the tracks aways back, but they were pointed here. He's bound to be around here somewhere."

A man's voice outside said, "I ain't seed nothin' of him."

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Sho, you seed horse tracks comin' in. I made 'em. I was out combin' the brakes for strays for a herd we're tryin' to put together and I run across a dogie, yearlin'-sized, that had been most hamstrung by coyotes. I butchered him and packed the meat in ahead of me on the saddle. That's how come you seen deep horse tracks."

Yates recognized the other voice now: Jacoby. Jacoby said, "Sure. That would account for it. Just the same, you mind if my men take a look around your place?"

"Mister," the man who was lying for Yates said coldly, "are you doubtin' my word?"

"No," said Jacoby. "But this Yates is a mankiller. I'm not takin' any chance of him gettin' away. Not any chance at all." There was a short pause. "We'll search your house," Jacoby said at last.

There was a longer silence. Then the man who was lying said, "All right. Reckon I couldn't stop all fifteen of you or whatever. But you be careful. My sister's in there in her bedroom. I don't want anybody bargin' in on her and scarin' the wits out of her."

"We'll be careful," said Jacoby. "Joe. Charlie. Lum. Take the house. Ranse, you and Tom search that barn. Keep your eyes open now; I don't want nobody else gettin' shot but Yates."

Yates tensed. He heard footsteps and doors opening and shutting. Swathed in the blanket, the girl stood rigidly in the center of the room, her face pale.

Then Yates heard the room door open. As it did so, the girl dropped the blanket and screamed piercingly.

A startled voice said, "My God, lady, I'm sure sorry!" The door slammed shut again.

Quickly, the girl bent and retrieved the blanket. There was more clumping around in adjoining rooms. The girl's brother said angrily, "Goddammit, I told you people not to go bargin' in there." Yates heard a muttered apology.

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There was a long time during which he leaned against the wall and fought to keep his knees from buckling under him with weakness.

"All right!" the girl's brother snapped at last from the porch. "You nosy so-and-so's satisfied?"

He heard Jacoby. "Charlie, you find anything?"

There was a grunted negative. "Ranse, what about you and Tom?"

"Clean as a whistle, boss."

"All except that girl's bedroom, huh," said Jacoby speculatively. "You mind askin' your sister to get dressed and come out so we can look in there?"

"Listen," the girl's brother said angrily, "You tryin' to claim my sister's hidin' a man in her room?"

"No, I—" Jacoby's voice went lame. Then he said sternly, "You give me your word he's not here?"

"Goddamit, how many times I got to tell you?"

"All right," said Jacoby at last. "Well, if he's not here, the damn brush wolves and buzzards will get him out there in the brakes. But if he should show up here, you let me know. Arnold Jacoby, Sutler's Springs, Texas. You let me know, because I'm puttin' a five hundred dollar reward on the bastard's head. I'll see him pay for this busted wing of mine if it takes forever. You hold him if he shows up, you hear?"

The girl's brother gave a short, wry laugh. "Listen, mister, I've heard of Clell Yates. You see me holdin' *him*, you let me know, will you?"

Jacoby grunted something. "Well, we've wasted long enough on this wildgoose chase. Come on, boys. The bastard'll die out there in the *malapais* if he ain't already dead. Let's water up and start back."

It was hot in the closet. The room, as seen through the interstices of the mat, seemed trying to expand and contract like the bellows of an accordion. Yates's vision went fuzzy.

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He did not know how much time had passed before the reed mat whipped aside, and the girl, fully dressed again, whispered, "Come on, we've got to get you back to bed."

It took him a long time after he got back in bed to get up strength enough to talk. The girl bent over him, and he saw that she was indeed beautiful now that her fright had passed. Her big, gray eyes showed concerned, and she laid a hand against his temple. "You're feverish," she said. There was a washstand next to the bed, and she dipped a towel in a basin and laid it on his forehead.

It felt good. Yates asked slowly, and with effort, "Why?"

The girl straightened up and stared at him. "Why what?"

"Why . . . why did you take me in? And hide me?"

Color came into the girl's cheeks. She sat down in a chair next to the bed. "Well, first off, we didn't know who you were. My brother Josh was out hunting cows and he found you spraddled out on the ground in a canyon. He thought maybe you'd run into a bunch of bronco Apaches. Anyhow, he brought you home. After we got you put to bed and fixed up, we found some papers in your clothes and that was when we learned who you were."

Yates closed his eyes. "What's your name?"

"Nancy. Nancy Carter."

He liked the sound of it. He said, "Still you haven't said why you hid me. Even—I saw what you did to keep the possemen out of this room."

"Oh," she said. "That. Don't worry about that now."

"I want to know," he said.

"Well . . ." Her voice was hesitant, uncertain. "Well, you were somebody we took in. A guest, kind of. Let's leave it at that."

"No," said Yates. "No, let's don't. They told you—I killed the marshal in Sutler's Springs. Didn't that bother you?"

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"Not particularly," a man's voice said. "I was in Sutler's Springs one time and I ran into that bird Whipple. He was askin' for it then. I reckon if you hadn't accommodated him, somebody else would have."

Yates opened his eyes. Josh Carter was big, broad-shouldered, and blond as his sister. He had an open face that Yates liked immediately, and his blue eyes were honest and straightforward. It was not until he reached for his tobacco with his left hand that Yates saw that Carter's right hand was missing from the wrist down, a rounded, awkward stump protruding from the sleeve of Carter's faded shirt.

Carter saw where Yates' gaze had landed. He grinned wryly and waved the stump. "Got tangled in a lass rope one time. There was nine hundred pounds of longhorn bull on t'other end. Always dally, Yates, never tie down. If I'd been a dally man, I'd still have my hand. Way it was, one end tied to the saddle, other end on the bull, I got sawed in two." He paused a moment. "How you feel?"

"Better," said Yates. He struggled to sit up. "You loan or sell me a horse, I'll be bound out. Those people might come back."

"You're not riding anywhere," Nancy Carter said quickly. "Not in the shape you're in." She pressed him back down on the pillow, her hand gentle but firm.

"No," said Josh Carter. "You ain't riding yet. Time comes, I guess we can scrape up a horse. But don't worry—those *tejanos* ain't coming back. Three of 'em notched up and in slings, looked to me like they had a bellyful of you and the badlands both." He rolled a cigarette with his left hand with amazing dexterity. "Besides, they ain't the law. There wasn't a lawman in that outfit. Looked to me like a bunch of vigilantes out to do a man in without a fair trial."

"He was trying to build a rep," said Yates. "Whipple, I mean. He braced me for a bill of sale for my personal horse

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and then he tried to blow my head off with his riot gun. I had to kill him."

"Sho," Carter said. "I figgered somethin' like that."

"How did you run across me out there in that mess?" Yates asked. "I'm obliged to you."

Carter's eyes clouded. "I was huntin' cows. Nancy and I are tryin' to scrape up a beef gather to shove on over to Fort Apache. Now that most of the Injuns are reservated, the government's offering mighty good contracts for beef for agency issue." He flipped his cigarette through the open window. "Looks like our beef's running kinda thin, though."

Nancy Carter said fiercely, "It's not running thin. It's all running over to the Liver and Lights."

"Liver and Lights?"

"Bart Roman's spread," Josh Carter said. "Brands with a big oval and two little circles. Calls it Liver an' Lights. I've got no proof Roman's been helping himself to our beef, but if he ain't I don't know where else it's gone. Roman's greedy. There's two things he'd like to have—the all-year spring we got on this place here and that agency beef contract. I've got a deadline to deliver on, and he's already gatherin' his own herd. One way or another, he seems damned sure I'm goin' to default and he can sell his own drive there. Way it looks, no more cows than I'm finding on my range, he may be right." Looking down at the stump of his arm, his pleasant face suddenly went bitter. "I'm in no shape to call him on it, though. Just like me and Nancy can't cover the whole spread by ourselves well enough to keep him from just walkin' in and takin' whatever beef they want."

Yates blinked. He was getting tired, but he was also interested. "Don't you have any riders?"

"Not any. Soon as a man hits this country, Roman either hires him for his own spread or scares him off. This is good cow country, Yates. But it's hemmed in by brakes and badlands all around. Bart Roman wants to spread out, but

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he's using all the graze and water he's got already. So he wants ours, too, there being nowhere else for him to go. Bit by bit, he's been pinching us off. First he scared away our riders and kept us from hiring more. Soon as the coast was clear, he's started rustling our beef. He knows if we don't get this agency contract, we're finished—and I've combed this ranch backwards and forwards and I can't find enough critters to make up a good drive."

"I see." Yates closed his eyes. "And I reckon I'm beginning to see why you chased those riders away without letting them catch me, too."

"I did that for the reason I said. I don't expect nothing from you, Yates. When you well up, I'll sell you a horse and you can be long gone."

"No," Yates said, and now he was full of apprehension. He wondered if this were what he was always doomed to do. He had run right from a killing into a range fight. Was there no place he could go that gun trouble wouldn't follow him?

"No," he said again. "I owe you somethin', Carter. I owe you a hell of a lot." His voice turned harsh. "I'll help you make up your beef gather, soon as I'm able to ride. I'll help you get it to the Fort."

"You don't have to do that," Josh Carter snapped. "I don't take pay for savin' a man's life."

"You will for this one," Yates said slowly. Anger at the trap of obligation in which he found himself warred with the gratitude he knew he owed these people. He thought about the ocean again, wondered if he would ever live to see it. "You needed a rider, Carter. Well, when I can fork a saddle, you got one. I'll take your orders and ride just like any other cowhand until we get your gather to the agency. But there's one thing. You're hiring a cowhand, not a gunhand—you understand what I mean?"

Carter looked at him without answering.

"I'm through," Yates said bitterly. "If I can't make a living

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with a saddle and a lass rope, I'm through. Because I'm not making one with a gun any more."

Nancy Carter said angrily, "Listen, Mr. Yates, we're not asking anything and not expecting anything."

"I'm sorry," Yates said. "I didn't mean to sound like I thought you was. But it's got to stop somewhere, and it might as well stop now. That's all I meant. I—" Yates hesitated. "I never said thanks."

The girl's face softened. "You don't have to thank us."

"Yes, I do. I'm obliged."

"All right," the girl said. "We'll talk about all the rest later, after you're well. Right now, you're tired." She changed the towel on his forehead. "You go ahead and sleep and we'll talk about who owes who what a long time from now."

Yates started to protest, but he was suddenly tired, very tired. He closed his eyes.

The last thing of which he was aware, just before he drifted into unconsciousness, was the voice of Josh Carter, seemingly a long way off, barely audible. It sounded excited. "It would at least give us a chance, Nancy. At least a fightin' chance."

Then Yates slept.

IV

SOMEHOW, DURING the time of his unconsciousness, the Carters had fished the rifle slug out of his shoulder; even so, it was three weeks before Clell Yates felt like a whole man once more.

But they were the best three weeks he had ever spent in his life, he told himself. His longest stretch of quiet, ordinary day-to-day living since his first gun-trouble years before. He had almost forgotten what it was like to sleep in a bed night after night, to eat meals prepared by someone else at a table every day, to wear clean, ironed clothes—and

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most of all, to have someone concerned for his welfare. With every day that passed, his admiration and affection for Josh Carter and his sister grew stronger. They could not have given him better care if they were his own blood kin, and he could not help being deeply touched by their unselfish care of him in the face of their own troubles.

At last he was able to be up and about, though he was stiff and a bit awkward. He limbered up by beginning to do light repair work around the place. The Carter ranch he saw, was truly a poverty-stricken outfit. Its rickety fences and run-down outbuildings would have meant shiftlessness anywhere else—but a man with only one hand could do just so much and no more. Besides, Carter had that one hand full trying to make a beef gather with no one to help him. Yates felt guilty about not being out combing the brakes with Josh, but Nancy insisted that he was not to ride until all his strength had returned and Josh backed her up. So he passed the time fixing fence and nailing boards—and in one other activity. Despite the fact that he was sickened by the thought of having to use a gun again, he was nagged and haunted by the knowledge that he was bound to have slowed up. Something inside him, habit too long fostered to be broken now, forced him into making sure he still had his skill with a Colt.

"You won't object to a little racket around here, will you?" he asked Nancy one morning.

She took her hands out of the dishpan and brushed a lock of that gold-colored hair back into place. Even washing dishes, he thought, she was the best-looking woman he had ever seen. "What kind of racket?" she asked.

Yates felt a little abashed. "I thought—well, I reckon it would be a good idea if I limber up my gun hand. Get in a little target practice."

She smiled. "No, go ahead. Gunfire doesn't make me nervous. Not as long as it's only target practice." Her smile

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faded; her eyes were wise and serious. "Go ahead, Clell; I know you don't dare get rusty."

He found some cans and set them on fence-rails, propped against the posts—just about chest-high on a man. Nancy had given him an extra box of cartridges from Josh's supplies, and he had the box that had been in his pocket during the fight. Standing in the bright sunlight of midmorning, he backed away from the balanced cans about thirty paces and, experimentally, tried a fast draw.

It was better than he had expected it to be, but not good enough. He practiced it a dozen times, and slowly but surely the old, perfect co-ordination came back to his movements. On the thirteenth try, his hand swooped down, the gun came up smoothly and without a hitch, hammer back as it cleared the holster, and he pointed his whole body and fired. One of the cans went flying back into the corral behind the fence. He reholstered the gun and tried again and sent the second one after the first.

As the sound of the gun died echoing, a voice behind him said, "I see that everything they say about Clell Yates is true."

Instinctively Clell whirled. Josh Carter jumped in the saddle lifting his one hand. "Whoa, I'm peaceable."

A little sheepishly, Yates slid the gun back into leather. "Sorry. It makes me jumpy, something unexpected behind me." There was a knot of coldness in him. He could easily have shot Josh Carter by accident; the big, blond man would never know what a thin line had separated him from eternity. Clell sucked in a long breath. If I had done that . . . he thought sickly.

Carter slid down and dropped the horse's reins. "I used to be a pretty fair hand with an iron myself before I lost this right grubhook. I never have been able to do much with the left. You want a laugh? Let me try a shot."

"Sure," said Clell, stepping back. He saw that Carter wore

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his gun on the right, the butt reversed and forward for a cross-draw with the left. "Go ahead."

"It feels awkward as hell trying to use my left," Carter said. He spraddled his legs. His left hand whipped across his body, but his draw was a pitiful, fumbling thing. Instead of drawing and shooting in one smooth motion, he had to hold the gun out and point it; Clell saw it trembling slightly. It seemed to take forever before Carter fired. When he did, he missed his target clean.

"Damn it," Carter grunted, and he emptied the sixgun at the can. Every shot missed. Carter squatted and awkwardly began to reload the gun. "I guess I'd be better off not carryin' this thing at all," he muttered, "but with Bart Roman crowding me so hard, I'd feel kind of naked without somethin'." He fumbled the gun back into its holster. "Reckon I've wasted enough ammunition for one time."

"How's the beef situation looking? You finding any more critters out there?"

He saw Josh's usually good-natured face go grim. "They're scarce as hen's teeth. It looks like I'm gonna be hard pushed to make up enough herd to fill that contract at the Fort. And, of course, if I default on it, the Liver and Lights will be right there with their own herd and that'll do it. They'll have the business and I won't get a sniff of it any more. Damn it, if my herd's had any increase at all, those brakes out there oughta be crawlin' with cow-critters. You can't tell me that somebody hasn't been thievin' 'em." His eyes were bitter as he looked at the stump of his right hand. "I'd put a stop to it quick if it wasn't for this blamed nub . . ."

"I'll be ridin' in a few days," Yates said. "Maybe the two of us together can find some beeves you're overlooked."

"I hope—" Carter began, and he broke off, turning quickly. There were hoofbeats on the wagon track leading into the ranch, and as Yates followed Carter's eyes he saw two riders

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coming in at a lope. One was wide-shouldered and bulky, the other slat-lean and wearing a high-crowned hat.

Josh Carter made a sound in his throat. "Roman," he said harshly. "Bart Roman. And that skinny one with the big hat—that'll be Jack Younger."

"Younger?" Clell said the word softly, his eyes narrowing.

"Roman calls him foreman. What he really is, is chief gunhand."

Yates nodded. He recognized the thin man now. He had known Younger before; they had been on the same side in another fight, had ridden together for several weeks. If Roman had hired Jack Younger, he was not playing around. Clell remembered Younger as a hard, deadly, no-nonsense gunhand—and every bit as swift with a Colt as himself.

As the two riders pulled up before them, Yates saw that Younger had recognized him, too. There was, at first, faint surprise in Younger's slate-colored eyes, set close together in a thin, predatory face. Then Younger grinned and touched the arm of the big man beside him.

"Bart," he said. "That's Clell Yates standin' beside Carter. You've heard of him."

Bart Roman was a muscular bull of a man in his mid-forties. His face could have been whacked out of a block of granite with a dull chisel. His eyes, coal black and intense, were, however, totally alive.

He looked at Yates briefly but missed nothing. Then he nodded without speaking and turned his gaze to Carter.

"Hello, Clell," Younger said. Though Roman sat where he was, Younger stepped down. Yates knew, with the instinct of their trade, that Younger had not wanted to be caught at the disadvantage of being on a skittish horse if there were any fireworks.

"Jack," said Yates. "It's been a long time."

Before Younger could answer, Josh Carter spoke. "Roman, you got somethin' on your mind?"

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Roman's voice was deep, thick; speaking seemed hard for him as if he had to wrench each word loose. "Yeah," he said. "You better listen to it." His horse sidled; he reined in around with a rough hand.

"I've been pushed all I aim to be pushed, Carter. It's bad enough to have a water-hog for a neighbor, a man that's got a spring he don't use a tenth of and won't share. That's bad enough, but rustlin's worse. We been makin' our gather to take a herd to Fort Apache and we're comin' up short. I think I know what's happened to our critters. I ain't sayin' now that you've got 'em—and I ain't sayin' what I intend to do about it. But I'm tellin' you this, and you better listen. I've made you a fair offer for this place. I'm givin' you one more chance to take it. If you're smart, you will. If you ain't smart, you're liable to wind up with your neck in a noose. Because I won't stand still for any more missin' cattle, and I'm through playin' around, Carter—I'm through playin' around."

Clell's eyes shifted momentarily from Younger to Josh. He saw Josh's left hand was clenched, and Clell prayed that Josh would not do anything foolish. Then Josh's hand relaxed.

"Did you ride over here just to hand me that hogwash, Roman?" Carter's voice crackled. "I'm the one that's fed up. I got that beef contract at the Fort fair and square. And you've done everything you can to make sure I don't fill it, so you can move in when I default. *You* talked about missin' cattle! I've combed my own range backwards and forwards, and either a lot of my critters have sprouted wings and flown off or somebody around here has got a powerful long loop." His voice turned ugly, defiant. "Don't you come at me about rustlin', Roman. That ain't nothing but a cock-and-bull story you cooked up to give you some reason to justify squeezin' me out. Well, you know what you can do, Roman? You can take your offer for this place and you can go

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straight to hell with it. You ain't scared me so far and you ain't scarin' me now. And one way or the other, I'm goin' to make that drive and fill that contract and it'll take more than Bart Roman and the Liver an' Lights to stop me!"

Roman stared down at him, his face stony. "Big talk," he grunted. "All right, you been warned. That's all I had to say." He jerked the horse around. "Come on, Jack."

Younger said, "In a minute." He looked at Clell Yates. His voice was soft. "You hired on here, Clell?" He kept his hands high, holding his horse's reins. "If you did, you've done picked the wrong side. Every which way."

Yates kept his hands high, too. "I've hired out, Jack. But not with a gun. I've hired on as a cowhand."

Younger nodded. "If you're smart, you'll play it that way. Cowhand, not gunhand."

Yates drew in a long breath. "I figure to." His eyes met those of Younger. "Only thing is, a cowhand that won't fight for his brand don't amount to much, does he?"

Younger's eyes did not waver. "No," he said. "But he stays alive." Then he turned away from Yates and put his foot in the stirrup. As he mounted, Yates relaxed slightly. There had been a moment there when he had read Younger's mind. The other gunman had been itching to try him out, driven by a compulsion to prove that he was faster than Yates. Now, mounted, Younger looked down at him, and Yates saw that compulsion still in his eyes.

"I'll be seeing you around, Clell," said Younger softly.

"That you will, Jack," murmured Yates. "That you will."

"Sho," said Younger, and he wheeled his horse and galloped after Roman, who was already loping out of the yard. Josh and Clell stood tensely until the two men were out of sight.

As their hoofbeats faded, Nancy came out of the house, nervously drying her hands on her apron. Her yellow

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hair glinted in the sunlight, her face was pale, the dusting of freckles across her cheeks standing out in startling relief. Her voice was shaky. "Josh, what was that about."

Her brother was still staring after the departed Liver and Lights men. "Roman," he grunted. "Come to try to pressure me into taking that piddlin' offer of his."

Yates saw that Nancy's lips were trembling. "Josh," she said, almost timidly, "maybe . . . maybe we ought to do it. Maybe we should take his offer and go somewhere else. Start up where there isn't any Bart Roman."

Carter's face was a stony mask. "Hell, no. Run from him? Let him buy this spread for a tenth of what it's worth? I'll be damned if I will. Not for a dozen Bart Romans!" He turned slowly to Clell. "I heard what you'd told Younger," he said. "About hiring out. About fighting for your brand. You forget that stuff. This isn't your war. You don't owe us anything. If you're smart, you'll go ahead now and ride on out—there's no sense in you gettin' mixed up in this too."

Yates waited a moment before he answered. He was sickened by the pressures that were closing in on him. He wanted more than anything else in the world to do just what Josh Carter was suggesting—to ride clear of this before it blew up. Otherwise, it would be the same old pattern. If he stayed, there wasn't a prayer of his not having to use his gun.

And yet . . . these people had saved his life. A man didn't shrug off an obligation like that, high-tail it out when things got rough, with just a thank-you and no more. At least Clell Yates didn't. He paid his debts, and he owed the Carters a whopping one, and he had no coin in which to pay except the cartridges in his belt.

"No," he heard himself say. "No, I never was particularly smart. If you'll feed me, I think I'll stick around a while. Maybe I can be of a little bit of help, anyhow."

His eyes met those of Carter's and they each understood

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the other now. Carter nodded. "Suit yourself. If you'll stay, you know we want you. But I don't want you to feel like you got to do it."

"It don't matter why I do it," Yates said slowly, and he looked at Nancy and saw some of the fear leaving her face, relief washing over it, even hope. All at once he knew that there had never been any chance of his making any other decision. He would have stayed because of Nancy even if he'd owed the Carters nothing. He had never met a woman like her before, but there had been times when he had dreamed of such a woman. Now that he had found her, he couldn't ride off and leave her to the mercies of men like Bart Roman and Jack Younger with only a one-handed brother to stand as her protection.

"It don't matter why I do it," he said again. "But I'll be here as long as you need me."

V

YATES PUT the line-backed dun that Josh Carter had given him down the side of the brushy draw. Clell let it pick its own speed along the draw's bottom to where it widened into a box canyon that Josh Carter had turned into a holding pen. The dun was tired, and so was Yates. He and Josh had spent two brutal, exhausting, discouraging days combing the rough country for cattle, with practically no results. The holding pen—which was where the main spring, the best water, on Carter's Diamond J rose clear and cool from the ground—held barely two thirds of the cattle needed to fulfill the beef contract. And, Yates had to admit, it looked as if that were all the cattle they were going to get. The rough country seemed combed clean.

As the draw widened, he saw that Josh had got to the mouth of the canyon ahead of him and was sitting his

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horse before the pole fence that sealed it off. Yates giggled the dun and loped up to rein in beside Carter. "Any luck?"

Carter shook his head. "Two dry cows and a lame steer, that's all." He sighed. "I reckon that's about it, too."

"How much more of your range we got to work?"

"This is about it. There's a stretch over on the other side of that hogback, but cattle hardly ever drift into it. It's rough and mean and hell on horses to work, real badlands."

"We'll work it," Clell said.

"We won't work anywhere until we get some supplies. I been putting off going into town too long now. Let's slope on back to the house. I got to harness up a wagon and head into Wagontrack and I don't like to leave Nancy there by herself any more than I can help."

"You don't think Roman'd hurt a woman?"

"I don't know what that bugger might do," Josh grunted.

But when they reached the ranch house, Nancy was perfectly all right. As they rode up, she was in the back yard, feeding the few scrawny Mexican chickens that were mostly feathers, bones and spurs. Her eyes questioned them as they swung down.

Carter shook his head. "Dry run," he said. "Didn't find enough beef to feed one Apache, let alone a whole reservation." He seemed to be trying hard to keep the weariness out of his voice, to sound encouraging. "Maybe we'll do better tomorrow. Right now, make up your grub list. I'm going into Wagontrack. Clell will stay here with you."

Her eyes widened. "You're not going into town by yourself?"

"Don't know anybody to go with me. Clell's got to look after you."

Her face was taut with worry as she looked at Clell. "Please don't let him go in alone. I'll be all right here. Nobody at Liver and Lights would dare to hurt me. But

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they'd love a chance to get Josh all by himself. . . ." She turned back to Josh and seized his left arm. "Please take Clell with you. If you don't, I'll worry myself sick. . . ."

Clell turned to Josh. "I think she's right. If Jack Younger's ramrod of Liver and Lights, he's not going to let anybody hurt a woman alone. I know him too well to think that. But he won't be picky about working you over—and until you get a hell of a lot better with an iron than you are, you'll be better off having me to side you."

He saw that Josh still wanted to protest, but he did not give him time. He touched Nancy's arm. "I'll go with this hardhead," he said. "Don't worry. I'll bring him back safe."

Her eyes met his for a moment, and a wild excitement stirred within him. He could not remember when a woman had looked at him quite like that. But all she said was simply, "Thank you, Clell."

Yates turned away quickly, with the certainty that what he felt was written foolishly on his face for everyone to read. His voice was unnecessarily gruff when he said to Josh, "Come on. Let's get harnessed up and on the road."

Wagontrack was bigger than he had guessed it would be. It was at the junction of two roads and it provided ranchers and cowhands for miles around with supplies, liquor, gambling and relaxation. There was even some talk, Josh Carter said, that a railroad spur line might run in here some day. There was a town constable, but he didn't amount to much, and the U. S. marshal only touched in here occasionally, so there was no need for Yates to worry about the law, even if Jacoby had managed to get a warrant issued for him in Sutler's Springs.

The town looked good to Yates. His throat was dry for a cold beer. His hand searched his pocket, found the three double-eagles that constituted all his wealth in the world. "Come on," he grinned at Josh as Carter tied the wagon

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team to the hitchrack before the general store. "You can't buy grub with a mouth full of dust. I'll stand treat." He led the way toward what seemed to be the town's largest saloon, the Oasis.

It was dim and fairly cool in the saloon, and the place though cavernous, was nearly deserted. Yates and Josh went to the bar and Yates ordered two beers. They were hot, but they tasted good. He was on his second when a woman's voice called from behind him: "Clell Yates!"

He spun, frowning, quickly transferring the beer mug to his left hand.

The girl had just come down some stairs at the far side of the room. She was standing there with one hand on the rail, her body tense. She wore the short, ruffled skirt of the kind of woman who worked in a place like this, and Yates frowned. Then he recognized her and swore softly as she ran toward him.

"Clell, it is you, isn't it?" He knew she was going to throw her arms about him, and he did not want that to happen in front of Josh and be reported to Nancy. He sidestepped, grinning slightly, and took her hand instead.

"Hello, Sharon," he said.

Sharon Coe . . . Yates's mind flicked back five years, back to two months spent in Dallas. He had been young then, not dry behind the ears—young enough and green enough to fall head over heels in love with a girl like Sharon Coe, a girl who worked the dance halls and saloons for a percentage on each drink. He hadn't been bothered by the way she had lived then. He had been convinced that he could take her away from that, make an honest woman of her—but, of course, it hadn't worked out. He could see now that there had never been any chance of its working out. She had liked the way she lived and had no intention of trading it for a ranch's humdrum life—and then he had got in that gun trouble. . . . And that had been the end of it. Looking

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at her now, like a ghost materializing from a past long dead, he felt a strange pang of regret; he did know whether it was for old love or for his own lost youth and innocence.

She had changed. She was still lovely, but it was a different kind of loveliness now. The features, the big, violet eyes, the straight, cleanly-chiseled nose, the wide, wise, lush mouth—all surmounted by high-piled hair black as Mexican midnight—these were just the same. But a light seemed to have gone out from behind them; and he realized now that the light was what had made the difference. Though her face was the same, whatever it was inside her that had illuminated her until no man could meet her without wanting her—whatever that light was, it had been used up, died out. She looked tired.

"Clell," she said, and there was pleasure in her voice. "You of all people here in Wagontrack. God, it's a small world!" Her hand tightened on his. "Come on, we've got to have a drink and talk old times."

Yates nodded. "Sharon, this is Josh Carter."

"I know who he is," she said, nodding, and then she led him across the room to a table far from the bar and sat down. Obviously she was excluding Josh. Yates motioned; the bartender came with two beers and set them down.

"You ain't any more surprised to see me here than I am to see you," Clell said.

She looked down into her beer. "Yeah, it's been a long time, hasn't it. Well . . . you move here, you move there, no telling where you wind up. For me, it's Wagontrack for a while. Not a bad town, quiet in the week, busy on Saturday." She raised her head and lowered her husky, deep-throated voice. "Maybe we should have taken what we had when we could get it, Clell. But a young girl never does have much sense."

"Well, that's gone," he said.

"Yeah. And now . . ." Her eyes, the lids and lashes

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painted, narrowed. "And you, I hear tell, are siding with this Carter outfit. Don't you know Bart Roman's down on them?"

"I have heard tell it," he said dryly.

"Well, don't you know you're on the wrong side of the fence? Liver and Lights isn't to be fooled with, Clell. I know Roman. He's tough as they come. But that's not the point. I know you never let the odds scare you."

He leaned back in the chair. In this light he could see now that there were little fans of wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Her mouth was edged by a pair of hard little lines at each end. The powder did not quite conceal the erosion of her complexion, not much yet, but it had started.

"All right," he said. "What's the point, then?"

"The point is," and now her voice was very low, "the point is that you're getting tarred with a rustler's pitch. That's not like you."

He felt a flare of anger at her. "Who says they're rustlers?"

"Roman says it."

"Roman can go to hell. I know these people. It's his smokescreen, his excuse to justify pushing them out."

She spread her hands on the table, her rings glittering. "All right, have it your way. Whichever way it is, you can't win. Neither can they. And . . . be on your lookout today. Roman's somewhere in town right now, him and Younger and Prinzip."

"Prinzip? Who's he?"

"An ox. Younger is Roman's gun. Prinzip is his fist. It's a bad combination, Clell. If you won't clear out altogether, why don't you at least get out of town now, come back another time."

Yates shook his head slowly. "Sharon, I think you for the warnin'. But I'm not runnin'. Not out of town. Not anywhere from Roman and Younger. I can't run. There are reasons why I can't."

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"Reasons." Her voice was suddenly furious. "I bet I know your reasons. They wear petticoats and have blonde hair and walk around looking like butter wouldn't melt in their mouth. I may not be much, Clell, but I can read other women like a book, and if it's that mealy-mouthed Nancy Carter you're after, you're—"

Anger flared higher in him. His voice sliced through hers, low but with an edge. "That'll be enough, Sharon."

She stared at him, and suddenly her mouth went hard and set, and she jumped up from the table. "All right," she rasped, "be a damned fool. I only tried—" She whirled away from the table and ran upstairs. Yates followed her with his eyes until she disappeared, drained his beer at a gulp, and shoved back his chair furiously. He strode to the bar, reading curiosity in Josh Carter's eyes. "A girl I used to know," he said harshly. "Come on, let's get our business done with. I understand Roman and Younger are in town and somebody named Prinzip's with 'em."

He saw the concern on Carter's face. Josh straightened up. "All right. I don't want any trouble if it can be helped. Come on, we'll buy our stuff and clear out."

The general store smelled good. It smelled of ground coffee and new jeans and leather and iron. The storekeeper, a man named Friday, a powerful man in his day, but now, in his sixties, bald and weak-eyed and running to paunch, greeted Josh Carter cordially enough. "Glad to see you, Josh. How's things out on the Diamond JP?"

"Pickin's are a little slim," Carter said. He took the written list Nancy had given him from his vest and handed it to Friday. "This is some stuff I'll need. And I'll have to ask you to carry me for a spell longer, until I can get my beef to Fort Apache."

Friday opened the list and read it over, leaning against the counter and rubbing his chin. Something in his manner

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perturbed Yates, and he saw that Carter felt it too. Then Friday folded the list again.

"Be glad to git this up for you, Josh. Only thing is, I'm afraid it'll have to be cash on the barrel head. Tell you the truth, I just can't carry your account on the cuff any longer."

Carter looked stunned for a second, and then his mouth twisted with anger. For a moment Yates thought he was going to grab Friday with his one good hand. His voice shook with anger and embarrassment. "What do you mean you can't carry me any longer? I've never deadbeat on you yet. You know damn good and well after I make my drive to the Fort I can pay you in army gold!"

Friday's face was carefully expressionless. "There's talk going around, Josh, that you ain't going to be able to get up enough cattle to fill that contract. If that happens, you'll be high and dry and I can't afford to be high and dry with you. After all, I got my own interests to protect."

"Your interests!" Carter's voice was like a whiplash. "You mean *Roman's* interests! He's the bastard that passed the word to you to do this, ain't he? Just one more thing I owe him."

"What's one more thing you owe me, Carter?" Roman's voice said from the doorway of the store. Josh and Clell whirled to see Roman silhouetted in the wide entrance. Behind him on the left was Younger, on the right, a gorilla of a man, with sloping shoulders each an axehandle wide, a neckless bullet head, and long, powerful arms that hung almost to the knees of his chapclad legs.

Roman took a step forward, thumbs hooked in his belt. "What's one more thing you owe me?" he said again, needling Carter with his tone.

"Listen, Roman," Josh yelled, and Clell could see the one-handed man was almost insane with anger. "I've seen a

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lot of cowardly, belly-crawlin' polecats in my day, but you're—"

Roman made an almost imperceptible motion with his left hand. The wide, squat Prinzip stepped forward. "God, you talk a lot," Prinzip said in a surprisingly high, thin voice, and before Carter could duck, his giant hand flashed out, palm open, and the clout sent Carter flying across the store to slam into the counter.

Clell Yates took a long stride forward, his whole body seeming to swell with the rage within him. "Damn you," he snapped, facing Prinzip, "how'd you like to try that on a man with two good hands?"

Prinzip's little black eyes glinted. He grinned, revealing yellow teeth mossy with stains. "Awright," he said, and the hand slashed through the air again.

Yates had been expecting it, and he blocked it with his own upthrown arm. Simultaneously he kicked out with a booted foot that caught Prinzip's barrel chest and sent the man flying backwards. Prinzip hit the sidewalk outside the store, skidding half into the dusty gutter, and Yates went after him.

He had already sized Prinzip up. Prinzip could pulverize him in any sort of stand-up-and-slug match, even if he were not still weak from his long convalescence. Prinzip had the reach. By the same token, if Prinzip could get him close up and hug him with those tree-trunk arms, that would be fatal, too. The only way to win was never to let Prinzip get on balance.

Prinzip came up out of the gutter with surprising speed, though, and he was almost to his feet when Yates hit him. It was like hitting a boulder with his bare fist; probably it hurt him worse than Prinzip. But it did knock the big man off balance again and sent him staggering back into the middle of the dusty street. Yates knew he did not dare wait

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to follow up. He bored in, staying loose and ready to dodge and hit Prinzip in the belly.

Not without cost. Prinzip's huge right slammed at him, but without the aim of proper purchase, and it caught him on the shoulder instead of in the face. It shook him and turned him around and gave Prinzip time to get his feet planted. Now it was going to be a slugging match whether Yates wanted it or not.

By that time Yates was so caught in the fury of battle that he no longer cared. He bored in, but Prinzip blocked his blows, grinning evilly, with forearms hard as logs. Then Prinzip hit him, and it was like being kicked by a mule. He went sailing backwards, landed in the dust, his ears ringing, and he saw Prinzip headed for him, laughing. Yates's head was gonging so he could not think, and he acted instinctively. As Prinzip's thick body landed half on him, half off, Yates hammered Prinzip in the kidneys. Prinzip fought to straddle Yates, to block that hammering arm, to pulp Yates's face with his mallet-sized fist. Yates bucked so that he could not quite do it. Prinzip was breathing hard; he raised his big hand and slammed it down at Yates's head and Yates managed to get his shoulder in the way enough to keep it from killing him, though it felt as if it tore his ear off. He brought up his knee in Prinzip's back, very hard, hit Prinzip in the kidneys again, and arched his body. Prinzip's weight shifted; he'd got the man shaken off balance once more. Yates bucked harder and, instead of hitting Prinzip, he pushed his face with both hands and rolled. Prinzip reached to grab his wrists, missed, and then, unseated, fell off. He was scrambling up in an instant, but Clell Yates was quicker. As Prinzip was about to shove himself erect, Yates was already on his feet and his knee came up under Prinzip's chin with all the strength of a saddle-hardened leg. Prinzip's head rocked back and he grunted, blood flowing from a bitten tongue. Yates hit him full in the face, then, directly

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between the eyes, and then with an uppercut under the jaw. The three blows in succession were too much for even that bone-armored head. Prinzip's shoulders slumped, he sagged to one side, and fell to his knees in the dust. Yates hit him again and again, and then Prinzip went down like a dying buffalo bull, sprawling full length.

Yates stood over him, gasping for breath, blood flowing from a knuckle slash on his cheek. Then he remembered Jack Younger and he raised his head. Younger was facing him across the body of Prinzip. Not now, Clell prayed. His arms felt leaden; he could not have lifted the weight of a sixgun. He saw the glitter in Younger's eyes, and Younger moved, but only to turn to Roman behind him.

"I always said the trouble with Prinzip was that he's too slow," said Younger wryly. "What'll we do with 'im?"

So he would not have to fight Younger too. . . . Yates gasped relief and staggered to a watering trough and splashed himself.

"Let him lay," he heard Roman say behind him. "Maybe it'll teach him to be quicker." Then the two of them were striding away.

Josh Carter's good arm went around Clell, supporting him. "Man," Carter whispered, "that was a fight and a half! Clell, I was scared to death you'd—"

"So was I," Yates muttered, mopping his battered face with a bandana. He straightened up, feeling better now. Prinzip still had not moved. Yates rammed the bandana in his hip pocket. "I got a little money. Come on, let's git the stuff on Nancy's list and git the hell outa here."

"I can't let you use your money." Carter protested, still steadying him as they walked toward the store.

"Don't argue with me," Yates said. He stumbled as he climbed the sidewalk. "Dammit, I don't want to have to hit you, too."

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Carter's voice was warm. "All right, Clell. But I'll see that you're more than paid back when we make the drive to Apache."

VI

"LOOKS LIKE I can't seem to help gettin' myself hashed up one way or another," Yates muttered. "Seems like you're always havin' to patch me up."

Nancy Carter's hands were gentle, but deft, as she washed away the dried blood crusted around the cut on his face. "I guess that's what women are for," she said. "To patch up you men after you've gone out and fought each other like so many bulls in a pasture. But can't you find some other way of settling your disputes?"

"Not with Roman," Carter said harshly. "He don't understand live and let live. He's willin' for Bart Roman to live, but he don't want anybody else to. Now, don't you go fussin' at Clell. It was our fight he was fightin'."

"I know," she said. "I didn't mean to be fussing at him. I'm grateful to him. I . . . just hate that he got himself hurt on our account."

"I wish you two would skip it," Clell said, shifting uneasily on the kitchen stool.

"How can we skip it when you fight our fight and buy our supplies?" Nancy said. "We can't repay you right now; won't you at least let us thank you?"

"You don't owe me any thanks," Clell said. "If it wasn't for y'all, I'd be buzzard bait out there in the *malapais* right now, or hangin' from a tree where Jacoby had strung me up. I'm still in your debt. I don't reckon I'll ever be out of it. Now let's forget the whole business."

"All right," Josh Carter said cheerfully. "I'm forgittin' it. Because it's time to think about the chores right now."

"I'll be along in a minute," Clell said.

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"Take your time," Josh replied. "You've had your exercise for the day." The kitchen door banged behind him as he went out.

Nancy pressed a piece of court plaster in place on Clell's cheek. "There," she said. "I think that about does it."

He smiled at her. To himself, he admitted that the fight had been more than worth it. The concern on Nancy's face when she had seen his battered countenance had been deep and genuine, and he had been touched and warmed by it. Now, as she went about the business of putting away the first-aid things, he watched her, admiring the lithe, full-breasted shape of her figure under the old dress, the graceful, sure movements of her body, the way the slanting evening sun through the window brought glints of dazzling lights shining from her hair. For some reason, a picture of Sharon Coe came into his mind. Mentally, he compared her to Nancy, and he shook his head slightly. Even at Sharon's best, she could never have stacked up alongside Nancy. It was a difference in inner qualities—what would you call it? Self-respect? Maybe that was it. Nancy valued herself, and Sharon never had. Now, though the two women must be about the same age, Nancy remained fresh, while Sharon was only a shell of a woman. . . .

Yates stood up. "Well, I guess I'd better go help Josh."

"No," she said. "He can manage all right. Drink a cup of coffee before you go. You need something to pick you up."

"I'm all right," Yates said, but she was already pouring it, and he dropped to the stool again as she shoved the cup across the table. It was scalding hot, but the first swallow of it tasted good, and only then did he realize how much the fight with Prinzip really had taken out of him. He said softly, "You take mighty good care of me."

When she blushed, it was becoming. She came around the table and stood close to him. "I have to," she said. "You're important to us."

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Clell raised his head and met her eyes. "To us?" he heard himself repeating softly. "Just to us?"

She did not miss his meaning, and her eyes dropped away. She was silent for a long moment. Then she said, "No. Not just to us. To me."

Clell let out pent-up breath. He got to his feet. He was aware that his heart was hammering more swiftly inside him than it had when he had braced Prinzip. He put his hand on her arm and turned her around. "That's better, Nancy," he said.

She was facing him, very close to him, and his hand was on her arm, and then she moved even closer, her face upturned. "Clell," she whispered.

He pulled her to him and kissed her. He kissed her hard and greedily and with a determination to express all the pent-up feelings that would not break through his inarticulateness. He held her tightly, and her arms went about him and she returned the kiss just as fiercely. It lasted for a long time. When he released her, they were both breathing hard.

She took a step backwards, brushing at her hair, her eyes shining. She said nothing, just looked at him as if she could not get enough of looking at him.

Yates whispered, "Nancy, I—" He fumbled for words.

She shook her head. "It's all right, Clell, you don't have to say anything."

"I was bound for California," he said. "I thought maybe out there I could shuck this . . . this blasted gun. I had me a motion I wanted to see what the ocean was like, I've never seen it. But I don't care anything about California now. What I want is—"

She turned away. "No, Clell. No, don't make any plans."

"Why not?"

"Because . . . I don't want you staying here on my account. I . . . I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you

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because of me. All this trouble . . . I don't know if it will ever be settled, and . . ."

He went to her and put his arm around her. "It'll be settled," he said harshly. "Don't worry."

She turned to him and laid her head against his chest. He saw that her eyes were closed, and he held her tightly. "I don't see how it can ever be settled," she whispered. "Not unless we take Roman's offer and run. Clell, we've run so much already, Josh and I. Trying to get a start here, a start there, and always somebody pushing us out. This was our last chance, and now it's gone too, and everything we've got. We either go, or somebody gets hurt and I couldn't bear for it to be you, Clell. Not on our account. . . ."

"You're not going anywhere." He let go of her and stepped back a pace. "You listen to me and get that through your head. You're not going anywhere. Not, at least, until this ranch is back on its feet and built up again. Not until this trouble's wound up once and for all. Nobody's going to make you run any more; I promise you that." He could not bear to see her afraid and despairing. "Josh and I are going to make that drive and collect the money for it and—"

"Make the drive?" Her voice was almost sardonic. "How *can* you make the drive when we don't have cattle enough to do it? Josh says he's combed the range clean, all except those badlands where he doesn't expect to find anything. He says that if there are any more cattle, they're on Roman's range and there's no way to get them back." Her lips pressed together firmly. "No, we're whipped here, and if we keep on fighting, somebody will just get hurt and—" She broke off, then started again, with determination. "I'm going to talk to Josh tonight. Beg him to take what Roman offers us. Maybe somehow we can get a fresh start somewhere else. Anything is better than you or Josh getting hurt or killed."

"You'll do no such thing. You leave Josh alone." His voice

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was firm. "If you've got cattle on Roman's range, we'll get 'em back. *I'll* get 'em back." He saw now, clearly, what he had to do.

She looked at him wide-eyed. "You'll get them back? How? You can't just ride in and—"

Yates's voice was sharp. "Can't I? Roman's rounding up a herd, too. It's range custom one outfit can send a rep to another outfit's roundup and cut its herd for its own stock. All right. I'm going to be Diamond J's rep. If Roman's holding any of Josh's cattle, I'm going to cut 'em out and drive 'em back."

"But they won't let you," Nancy almost wailed. "You can't go in there by yourself."

Yate's face was grim. His hand brushed his holster instinctively. "I'm not going to push any trouble on anybody. But the Diamond J's entitled to rep Liver and Lights's roundup and protect its own interests. They know who I am over there, Nancy. They'll think a long time before they try to stop me."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he silenced her by pulling her to him again. He had no illusions about what he was getting himself into. It was not going to be anywhere near that simple—particularly with Younger obviously itching for a chance to try him out. But he could see nothing else to do. He had the future all laid out in his mind now. His future, Nancy's. But it was not anything that would be handed him on a silver platter. It was something he would have to earn. And even if he had to earn it the way he hated worst to, with a sixgun, it would be worth it, this one last time. He would be playing for the biggest stakes of his entire life, Nancy, and no matter what he had to do, she was worth it.

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VII

YATES CRESTED the ridge above the Liver and Lights round-up camp, but he did not pause there: instinctive caution would not let him stay skylined. He put the dun over the top and did not rein him up until he was well down the forward slope.

Below him, he could see the holding ground where Roman was putting together his herd. The canvas of the chuck-wagon and the hoodlum wagon made two immense snowflakes against the background of green and brown that was the spread of the dusty flats where the herd had been gathered. Josh needed six hundred cattle; Yates saw that Roman already had well over that in his gather and his hands were bringing in more. A few punchers rode circle around the scattered out, grazing herd, and the cook was bent over a smoking fire while his helper dragged in wood at the end of a lass' rope. It was a typical round-up scene; it took Yates back in memory to the early days on John Wheless's spread, before all the trouble had started, and he felt a moment of nostalgia and regret. Then he lifted rein and tickled the dun with the spurs and started down the slope.

He rode in at a lope, sitting straight, wanting everybody to see him coming, and he kept his hand away from the Colt cinched high around his waist for riding comfort. But nobody seemed to pay any attention to him, and he was in the middle of camp before the cook looked up from his pot, surprise spreading across his gnarled face. The cook straightened up and put his hands on his back as if his kidneys hurt. "Howdy, stranger."

"Hi, coosie. Who's ramrodding the outfit?"

The cook had spotted the Diamond J on the dun's rump. His eyes lost their welcoming glint and went veiled and cautious. "Jack Younger's roundup boss."

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"Where'll I find him?"

The cook's pursy mouth twisted, and he spat tobacco juice, barely missing his own stew. "You won't hafta look far. Here he comes now."

Yates reined the dun round. He recognized the rider with the tall-crowned hat galloping toward him from the far side of the herd. "Yeah," he said, and he dismounted. There was time to tie the dun to the wagon wheel before Younger came up, and to loosen the gun belt so that the Colt dropped lower on his thigh.

Younger slowed the horse down fifty yards away and came toward the fire at a trot. Yates saw that Younger sat tensely in the saddle. He reined the horse to a stop and swung it so he could dismount with the animal between himself and Yates. Then he came the last fifty feet on foot, a tall slat of a man who moved with easy grace.

He stoppeded across the fire from Yates, and the cook eased quickly to one side. His voice was soft. "Clell. I thought I recognized it as being you."

"Howdy, Jack."

Younger's slaty eyes probed at him. "What brings you in?"

"Neighborly visit," Yates said evenly. "Since you're rounding up, I came over to represent my brand. You're welcome to send a man over to our herd in exchange."

Younger's thin lips quirked. "You're wastin' your time. We've got no Diamond J beef in our gather."

"Range law says I can check that for myself."

"We're workin' against time. You messing around here would only slow us up. Just take my word for it, Clell, and save yourself some trouble. Mount up and head back to Diamond J and tell your one-handed boss the Liver and Lights herd's clean."

Yates shook his head. He could almost read Younger's mind. There were men like that. Younger would never have crowded a slow man with a gun. But he knew Yates's speed

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and knew his deadliness. And there was in Younger that itch, that fatal curiosity, that would not be satisfied until he had proved to himself that he could beat Yates. There was not even anything personal in it—it was just that something in Younger would not let him rest until he knew, and he was willing to kill or be killed to find out.

Six months ago, a year, maybe two, Yates would have given him his chance. But not now. For the first time in what seemed centuries, he could see a future ahead of himself that made living worthwhile, too precious to be gambled in a foolish contest of six-gun skill that had no deeper meaning. Still, he had come to do a job, and he could not be run off before it had even been begun. So he kept his hands high, but he did not otherwise move.

"It won't work, Jack," he said. "Not unless you tell me that I'm going to have to kill you before I can rep your roundup. Then, if I have to, I will. But it seems kind of foolish to me."

"It shouldn't," Younger said thinly. "When we were in that other fight together, Clell, you know something? There was times when I wished we were each on opposite sides. There was times when I thought about calling you out just to find out—you know what I mean? But then it was over and we was both gone before I ever got the chance. You're the only man I ever met I thought was fast as I was. And I got to have some reason to find out—don't I?"

Yates sighed. He could see now that there was no way out. Younger was not going to let him so much as cross beyond the cookfire until he had his chance. Yates raged inwardly. Why did everything have to be complicated by his speed and skill with a gun? Why couldn't they let him alone: people like that marshal, Whipple, people like Jack Younger. All right, if it had to be . . . He did not watch Younger's hand; he watched Younger's eyes.

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A deep, harsh voice sliced unexpectedly through the tension that hung between them.

"All right," it rasped, "what's going on here?"

For the two men facing each other, the world had not existed except in the danger, the menace, of each other's person. Neither had noticed the blocky man on the bay horse. But Roman's voice brought them sharply back to reality. They still kept their eyes intently on one another, but Yates saw some of the fighting balance drain out of Younger, thrown off by the unexpected advent of Roman.

Roman swung down. "Dammit, Jack, I asked you what's going on here?"

"Yates," Younger said. "Diamond J's sent him over as a rep. I'm just fixing to send him home again."

Roman's deepset eyes shuttled to Yates. "You here to rep for Diamond J or to cause trouble?"

"I'm here to take back any Diamond J beeves you got in your herd," Yates said. He still did not take his eyes from Younger.

"We got none, herd's clean as a whistle. But if you want to look, you got that right."

Yates was startled. Now he did look at Roman.

"Without havin' to fight your ramrod here?"

Roman addressed Younger. "This is a roundup camp, not Saturday night in Wagontrack. If this man's come here to do a job of work, he can do it. If he's come here to stir up trouble, you can tend to him when the time comes."

"Let me tend to him now," Younger breathed.

"No," Roman said. He moved between Younger and Yates. "Break it up, now. Jack, they need you out at the herd."

Younger let out a sibilant breath. Then his tall, taut frame relaxed. "All right," he said. "I'll . . . see you later, Clell." And he suddenly whirled and strode to his ground-reined horse.

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Roman confronted Yates. "All right," he said sharply. "If you want to look over the herd, I'll ride with you. But you'll find no Diamond J critters, I'll promise you that."

With the help of one of Roman's punchers and with Roman watching him like a hawk, Yates put in a long, hot, dusty day threading through the bawling steers of Roman's gather. His work was made harder by the fact that though the dun was tough and sturdy, it was no cutting horse. But by working unremittingly, pausing only for an occasional drink from a tepid canteen, by twilight Yates had proved to himself that Roman was right: there was nobody's beef in the herd but Roman's own.

Yates was puzzled. All along, Josh and Nancy both had been so sure that Roman had been lifting the Diamond J's beef, but if he had, none of it was here. There was no way Josh's brand could be blotted into the sprawling, elongated oval and two circles with which Roman branded and which covered half a flank. No more than Roman could have restored the missing three inches Josh cropped off both ears as his mark; Roman's ear mark was a split left ear with the bottom half dangling. If Roman truly were the rustler Josh accused him of being, he disposed of stolen cattle in some other fashion—none were being driven to market in this herd.

"Satisfied?" Roman asked sardonically as Clell eased the weary dun out of the herd and pointed it toward the wagon, where the cook was bellowing his supper invitation. "I keep my men riding line; they've got orders to turn back all strays."

Clell tipped back his hat and sleeved a dusty arm across his sweaty forehead. "It's a clean herd, all right," he said.

"Well, you got here just in time to make sure," Roman said. "Because we aim to move out day after tomorrow and get on the trail to Apache." He rammed a cigar into his

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mouth. "When the deadline for Carter's delivery hits, my beef is going to be there waiting. If Carter fills his contract, I'm out the trouble and expense of this roundup and drive. But if he ain't there right on the dot, I aim to do some business with the army and the Indian agent. It's a gamble, but gettin' a foot in the door with the fort and the reservation's worth it."

"It's a losin' gamble," Clell said angrily. "We're going to have Josh's herd there on time, don't you worry about that."

Roman snorted. "You're gonna have to do some tall pushin' then. Time's runnin' short. He's gonna have to finish his gather and git it movin'. You can't push a herd but so fast."

"We'll git it there," Clell said doggedly.

Roman chuckled. "I'm willin' to gamble that you won't." The laugh died; his face went stony. "I don't like to crowd my neighbors," he said harshly. "But I don't like my neighbors crowdin' me, neither. I offered to pay Josh Carter for the use of his water, same arrangement I had when Ferd Eubanks owned the spread before him. He turned me down, even though he's got not half enough cows to need it all for himself. And then my own tally starts turnin' up short. I shoulda been able to put together a herd half again this big in the time it took to gather this one, but the cows ain't there. And if they ain't here, somebody took 'em. And I may not be very smart, but I can put together two and two."

Clell reined in. "Maybe you can put it together, but you're comin' up with the wrong answer. If Josh Carter won't share his water, he's got his reasons. And I'll tell you now, I've been over every inch of his spread myself and there's no more Liver and Lights cows on it than there are Diamond J cows here. I've seen people like you before, Roman. Give a dog a bad name and hang 'im. Well, you've got the weight on us, but the Diamond J ain't ready for

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hangin' yet. Josh Carter and his sister are straight as a string, and no matter how many excuses you make up, they—we—ain't gonna run."

Roman looked at him curiously. "We," he said. "So it's like that, huh? All right, you're a grown man. Suit yourself." He put his bay into a lope and rode ahead of Clell into camp, and Clell watched him go, pondering the contradictions of the man. . . .

Supper was a sonofagun stew and biscuits and coffee strong enough to dissolve an elk's tooth. It would have been good to be back in a well-run cow camp again, Clell thought, if it had not been for the hostility he could feel emanating toward him from all around the fire. The nighthawk had taken the *remuda* out; a skeleton crew was riding guard on the bedded herd; coyotes were tuning up for their moonlight serenade; and if it had not been for the hatred and resentment that he knew was directed against him, he could have, with a full belly and a chance to stretch out, been content.

But Jack Younger was not going to let him rest. Younger came back from the wreckpan where he had dropped his dishes and squatted before the fire with a final cup of coffee. Flames danced on his bleak, narrow face as he poked in the coals with a stick.

Clell, reading more trouble in the man's attitude, laid his own clean-sopped tin plate aside and gathered his haunches under him. He squatted on his spurs, apparently as casual as Younger.

"Trouble with a holdin' ground," Younger said offhandedly, to nobody in particular, "is that time you've had a herd on it a spell, it starts in to stink." He raised his head and looked directly at Yates. "Or maybe," he said, "it ain't the cows at all."

Somebody laughed nervously.

Younger straightened up. There was nothing for Clell to

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do but get to his feet too or be caught in a cramped position. So that now, the only ones standing, the two men were in clear opposition to each other across the fire.

"You know," Younger went on, still talking to the circle of cowhands at large, "I've known a lot of fast men in my time. Saddest thing in the world's to see a gunhand that's lost his nerve. You know what happens to 'em? They wind up cleanin' out spittoons and runnin' errands for the girls in some hog ranch somewhere." His eyes fastened now on Clell's. "What do you aim to do in *your* old age, Clell?"

All right, Yates thought wearily. He's not going to let up until he's got what he's been asking for. It might just as well be now as later on.

All at once, he was almost glad that Roman had ridden out to the herd. Suddenly he was eager to go against Younger and get it over with. He felt the return of an old recklessness, a winelike exultancy in his arteries and nerves and muscles; all at once he was, in a familiar way, totally alive.

"You talk an awful lot, Jack," he told Younger softly. "You keep on talking like that, your old age ain't going to be a problem to you." He paused. "Only, of course, you got a lot of back-up here, all these riders, part of your brand. I guess that makes a man feel more talkative than he would be otherwise."

"Don't worry about these boys," Younger murmured, and Yates could see the flare of pleasure in his slate-hued eyes. "You ain't got nobody to worry about but me. You fix me and you're home free." He stepped back a pace, his body still loose, his long arms dangling. "You got my promise on that."

Yates said, "All right." *Now*, he thought.

And at that instant gunfire erupted from the darkness on the flats where the herd was held. It was a wave of thunder, many guns going at once, and the startled bawling of

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cattle and the great sound of a big herd scrambling to its feet was another, separate roar. Younger and Clell stared at each other for a frozen second, and then Younger whirled and bellowed to the Liver and Lights men who were already scrambling for their night horses, "Mount up!" Ignoring Yates, he sprang for his own animal.

Yates could already hear the dull, rumbling drumsound, the vibration in the earth, of many animals running. The wham of guns and the yelling of men kept up. His hands wrestled frantically with the cinches of his saddle, his feud with Younger forgotten in this overriding emergency. Somebody had hit the herd and it was headed to sweep right through camp. Despite his haste, he took time to check his cinch knots—a loose saddle in the midst of a stampede could mean death. Then he was mounted and rode toward the sound of the shooting.

There was only a thin sickle of a moon. In its feeble light, Yates saw the dark mass of the herd lunging toward him and he had to whirl the dun to clear its flank. Then it hit camp, the weight of bodies pinching out the fire. The wagons went over with a splintering crash. Yates took time to see that much and then he was spurring the dun along the herd, unmindful of the gun flashes that split the night. He could not fight yet; there was no way in this mess to tell friend from foe, and all he could do was to attempt to stay with the herd and perhaps later turn it. It was a slim chance, with the uproar behind sending six hundred spooky long-horns careening wildly through the darkness and into the rough country beyond the flats.

The dun grunted, stretching itself, as he hammered it with blunt rowls. They were off the flats now, and the ground was tricky. Yates stayed well clear of the herd's flank; if the dun went down, he had no taste for being in front of that wave of terrified cows. Here the country folded itself into rolling draws and hummocks. The terrain split the stampede,

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changing the single driving mass into separate flowing rivers of frenzy. All hell was still breaking loose to the rear; instead of riding with the herd, the Liver and Lights men were fighting back yonder with the stampedeers, whoever they were. There must have been plenty of them. Looking over his shoulder, Yates saw the night laced with flashes of double the number of guns Roman's crew could muster. Then he had to concentrate on keeping the dun on its feet.

He had no idea how long he pounded along with the river of cattle that had swung out nearest him, but he saw that it was hopeless. They were running and they would run for a long time and no single man could turn them. Come tomorrow morning they would be scattered from hell to breakfast out there in the brakes. By degrees he checked the dun, now nearly stampeding itself, and reined it around.

Its pivoting saved his life. From close at hand there was the bright flash and dull cough of a six-gun. Yates heard the gripe of a bullet as it ripped past the back of his neck. What he did was instinctive; he yanked the dun around again and his Colt was in his hand. As the flash bloomed once more, the six-gun bucked against his palm. In that instant he saw a tall hat limned against the lesser darkness of the night. Almost as quickly it disappeared. Younger? Yates wondered, but he did not think so. A horse came racing by suddenly, not ten feet away, saddled but riderless. He thought his single shot had punched its rider to the ground, but there was no way to tell and a stream of cattle was pounding past him.

Gunfire was strung out, now, as if a running battle were being fought, the stampedeers pursuing the herd, Roman's men in hot pursuit of them. Yates followed its course, but none of it came near him. He rode more slowly after the scattering herd, found that the ground was getting rougher and more broken. The gunfire dwindled as the stampedeers

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disengaged themselves. The sound of running cattle began to diminish. A rider appeared out of the darkness and Yates tilted up the barrel of his Colt. Then he heard Roman's voice cursing steadily. Roman reined in and bellowed in a foghorn voice: "Goddammitt! Try to stop the beeves!" Yates heard him mutter: "That's what I git for lettin' a damn' gunhand boss a cow hunt. Stampederers hit and all he thinks about is fightin', the cows can go to hell." As Yates reined toward him, Roman stiffened in the saddle.

"It's Yates," Clell said loudly and Roman relaxed. He was still cursing, though, in helpless, frustrated fury. "Six hundred cattle scattered to hellangone," he grated, "and all we got to show for it a bunch of empty ca'tridge hulls!"

"I got one of 'em," Yates said. "He's out there in the dark somewhere."

"Fat lot o' good that does me!" Roman ranted. "My beef gather scattered, my drive shot. Even if those bastards don't run off half my cows tonight, it'll take me another week to get 'em back together and ready to drive, and they've already run off twenty pounds apiece."

"Well, at least you can't blame this on the Diamond J," Yates said. "Too many men out there for that."

"If it ain't them, who in the hell is it? How do I know Carter didn't git some men somewhere? Who else would wanta see my drive broken up?"

"Listen, Roman," Yates flared, "I don't know who in the hell hit your herd. But it wasn't Diamond J. There's at least one dead man out there somewhere. Maybe that'll give us some idea. But you keep your mouth off Diamond J until you got some proof!"

Roman was silent for a moment; Clell knew the man was taut-stretched, wondered if he'd explode. But all Roman did was curse some more. Finally he said, "Well, it's all gone to glory now. There's nothin' else we can do in the dark except chance shootin' each other. Dammit, dammit

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to hell . . .” He was still cursing as he turned his horse and, with Clell following him, rode back through the darkness toward what was left of camp.

VIII

WHEN THE stampede hit camp, the cook had scrambled in the wagon. In its overturning, he had broken his leg. Roman and Clell splinted it by firelight, with the uneasy knowledge that they made excellent targets. But no shots came from the dark, and slowly deadbeat Liver and Lights riders on deadbeat horses began to filter in. Roman had conquered his rage, now, and he was grimly silent, despite the fact that none of the arrivals had any good news. If the aim of the stampeders had been to thoroughly disperse the herd in the rough country beyond the flats, they had succeeded completely. Now they had four more hours of darkness, at least, to gather in whatever cattle they could and push them further away. By the time Roman’s riders had got fresh horses and could pursue, the quest would be hopeless. There was nothing to do but wait for morning, and so that was what they did, Younger sitting a little apart, his face grim, obviously smarting from having been raked over the coals by Roman. Right now he seemed to have no further taste for any showdown with Yates, and Clell left it that way gladly.

But Roman had the men up and out at the first streak of daylight, breakfastless except for coffee. Clell joined them, aiming the dun along approximately the same route he had taken the night before. He was surprised by how far he had ridden with the herd. If Younger had been more cowman and less gunfighter and had sent the Liver and Lights riders after the cattle instead of after the stampeders, it might have been possible to have turned it.

Clell crested a rise that tapered off in the bottom of a

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draw and reined in. Below him, on the packed and pounded dust, he saw a sprawled smudge of red and white. He nodded grimly; this was just about the place. Then he spurred the dun, rode to the smudge, and dismounted.

Enough of the herd had run over the body so that it was not a pretty sight. Clell grimaced as he turned the meaty mess over on its back. There was not much left of the head, but he could see that this had once been a boy of maybe nineteen or twenty, dressed in the clothes of a Mexican *vaquero*, tight pants, brush jacket and sash. A high-crowned sombrero lay pounded and flattened not far away. Clell let out a long breath and straightened up and drew his gun and fired two shots into the air. With customary caution, he replaced the spent shells before he slid the gun back into leather.

The summons brought Roman and a couple of his men. Roman raked his bay to a plunging halt and slid from the saddle. Clell pointed to what lay on the ground. "There's one of 'em, anyhow."

Roman squatted over the corpse. His face betrayed no repugnance. After a moment, he rose. "Mex," he said.

"That's right. Looks to me like a bunch of border jumpers. This is pretty high up in the territory for 'em to come, but I reckon they figured it would be worth their while if they could hit the herd and scatter it enough to git away with fifty, seventy-five head in the dark. They'll run 'em south and sell 'em in old Mexico. There ain't no reason to blame this on Diamond J."

Roman grunted something inaudible. He looked around as if scrutinizing the rugged, folded terrain. "Whoever they are," he muttered, "I reckon this jasper is all we'll ever see of 'em. I got no men to spare chasin' 'em. I got to put every hand to makin' the gather again. My cows are scattered from here to yonder. It'll be two days before I even know how many I lost."

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Something suddenly struck Yates. His belly knotted with apprehension. "Dammit, Roman, I just thought. If they hit your herd, they might of hit Josh Carter's too." He put a foot in the stirrup. "I can't stay to help you. I got to get back to Carter's spread."

Roman snorted. "We don't need your help. Go ahead." Then he pivoted his blocky body, strode to his horse, mounted and rode off.

The dun was tired, but Clell pushed it mercilessly toward the Diamond J. If there had been trouble there, if anything had happened to Josh or Nancy or their herd while he had been off on this wild goose chase to Liver and Lights—he cursed and slapped the dun with the *romal*.

It seemed to take forever before the rundown buildings of the Carter ranch came into view. But even at a distance, Clell felt something unknot within him, and he slowed the dun, as relief spread through his tense body. There were two figured out in the yard, clearly recognizable—Josh and Nancy. Josh had his good arm around his sister's shoulders and they were smiling at each other as if, far from there having been disaster, there had somehow been good fortune. Clell let out a whoop to inform them of his coming and squeezed the last strength out of the dun in a lope that brought him into the ranch yard in minutes.

Josh looked surprised. "Back already? Any luck? Or did they run you off?"

"They didn't run me off," Clell said tersely. He dismounted and tethered the dun to let it cool. After he had loosened the cinches, he told Josh and Nancy what had happened at Liver and Lights. As he described the running fight in the darkness, he saw Nancy's face pale. When he had finished, she twisted her hands together. "Oh, Clell, thank goodness you didn't get hurt."

Josh chuckled. "Well, Roman's hard luck is our good luck." He slapped Clell on the shoulder. "Our luck's changed all

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the way around, friend. We got that beef contract sewed up tighter'n a drum, now! Roman's herd's tore all to pieces—and while you were gone, Nancy rode with me and we combed those badland over behind that hogback I showed you. Hell, Clell, we choused enough steers out of there in one day to finish off the herd. I don't know how they got back in there—but that's where they were."

Clell stared at him. "You're joking."

"I ain't joking, either. You don't believe me, we'll ride out to Spring Canyon and you can see for yourself." His eyes narrowed as he judged Clell's incredulity. "If you're thinking it's a mighty pat coincidence, think another think. There ain't any of those new cattle Roman's. The brands on 'em are clean and old. But I wouldn't be surprised if Roman hadn't had a hand in drifting 'em back over into that country, figuring he could run 'em onto his own range later."

"I wasn't thinking anything," Clell said honestly. "Except that Roman'll never believe you. He loses cattle and you gain 'em."

"I don't give a damn what Roman believes," Josh Carter snapped. Then his face relaxed. "Come on, ride out with me."

Nancy stepped between them, slipping an arm around Clell. "He's not going right now. Can't you see he's tired? First he's going to rest and have some dinner."

Carter's grin was wide. "Looks like you got a new boss, Clell. I know from experience it's no use arguing with her."

"I don't aim to," Clell said. Since Nancy had put her arm around him in front of Josh, he slipped his around her. Together they walked toward the house with Josh trailing behind; and Clell savored again the knowledge that this woman cared for him, and that he loved her in a way he had never loved any other woman, not even Sharon Coe. All at once he was no longer tired—and he thought, *It's good to be home.*

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The box canyon in which the main spring rose was a large one and its grass was good, but what Josh had in it now was a good-sized herd. Clell let down some of the bars across the canyon's narrow mouth. He and Josh rode in and replaced the bars and threaded among the grazing animals.

"See?" Josh pointed. "There's a bunch of the critters I brought in yesterday right there."

Clell nodded. He reined in and looked at the knot of steers grazing in a separate little group. He frowned slightly as he sized them up. They were lean and ribby, but, of course, that could have come from poor graze in the badlands. Another thing, though—they were the pure longhorn breed, with no dilution of their bloodlines by any better stock, which, on this range, was unusual.

"Most of 'em Mexican cattle," Josh said. "When I bought this spread, they came with it. I reckon that's why they were all clumped together over in the rough country. A pure Mex cow can live where a goat would stave, and they'd rather hide in the brush than eat on the flats."

Clell nodded; that could account for the separation of one of the components of the herd from the other. The wild Mexican stock would have tended to drift toward the worst country; the other stock would have stayed where the graze was good. He was, strangely, relieved to realize that Roman had been telling the truth when he had claimed not to have rustled Josh's cows. It would make the task of reaching some sort of live-and-let-live agreement between Josh and Roman much easier. Particularly now since Roman had proof that border jumpers instead of Josh Carter had been hitting the Liver and Lights herds. Maybe there's a way out of this without shootin' after all, Clell thought, as hope began to grow in him. *If we make the drive and get paid, Josh's strain'll ease off, and if I can git him and Roman to sit down and talk. . . .*

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"You must have had a hell of a time roundin' up this much stock with nobody to help you but Nancy."

"Nan's a good hand when she decides to ride. She growed up on a cow ranch same as me."

Clell nodded. That was the kind of woman he wanted. A woman who understood a cowman's problems, his hopes, his fears and dreams. He eased his horse around to get a better look at the brands on the Mexican steers. They were all Diamond J, plain enough, all old and well-haired over. The distinctive ear crops were old, too. Clell relaxed, putting away the final lingering remnant of suspicion of this coincidence.

"Well," he said, "things are lookin' up. When do we move out?"

Josh's pleased expression faded. "When we find some riders," he said. "There's another town about thirty miles from here, Buckhook Creek, they call it. I figure to light out over there tomorrow and see if I can find some hands that'll work on credit until we git to the fort. No use tryin' Wagon-track. Roman's got that sewed up tight."

"You want me to ride with you?"

Josh shook his head. "No. You stay here and keep an eye on things. It'd be just like Roman to come bustin' in here and try to stampede our herd to even things up. I can be back in a day and a half if I push, and I hope I can bring some riders with me." He paused. "Clell."

"Yeah?"

Josh's face was a little embarrassed, but his voice was earnest. "There's somethin' I've got to say to you. If we can jest somehow make this drive and get this spread back on its feet. . . . Well, Nancy and me both would sure like for you to stay on," The words tumbled out, as if Josh had to force them past his shyness. "I know you were aimin' for California, but this ain't so bad, is it? I mean, it wouldn't be if you had an interest in this spread?"

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Clell stared at him. "You mean," he asked softly, "you're offering me part of Diamond J?"

"I am if we can bring off this drive. Otherwise, there won't be nothing to offer part of." Josh's face was serious. "I know how Nancy feels about you. I've always tried to keep a close eye on her, and she don't have to tell me for me to know. I've got a hunch maybe you feel the same way about her. If you do, don't be afraid to show it. There's nothin' that would please me more than . . . you and Nancy . . . aw, hell, you know."

Clell tipped back his hat, trying to keep his own emotions off his face. "Damn it, Josh, I don't know what to say. I . . . well, I been on my lonesome for so long, nobody givin' a damn what happened to me, whether I lived or died—and then to come here and meet you people and all of a sudden feel like I belong somewhere again. . . . A piece of this spread . . . Workin' together, couldn't we build this up into somethin', though? A real cow ranch." He broke off. "I ain't earned anything like that," he said harshly.

"Hell you haven't," Josh snapped back. "I mean it, Clell, I mean every word. About Nancy and a hunk of the spread, too. Well, what do you say?"

Clell felt a great weight seemingly lift from him. All at once it seemed to him that he could look into the future, see the Diamond J built up into what a ranch ought to be, see Nancy as his wife, see himself and Josh working together, joined later, maybe, by sons. . . . And no more running, dodging, traveling on his lonesome. All at once he realized that at last he had it in his power to put an end to that phase of his life, the wild, gunslinging part. He had been looking for a place to settle down and now he had it. If they could just get the drive to the fort, get a steady market established there. It all hinged on that. His hands closed tightly on the bridle reins.

"I say yes," he heard himself answer. "And I'll say that

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since we've come this far, Bart Roman nor hell itself is gonna stop us from going all the way."

Josh looped the reins around his stump and thrust out his left hand. "Okay, friend," he said as Clell took it. "Then that's the way it's gonna be."

IX

JOSH PULLED out for Buckhook Creek before daylight the next morning. By the first streak of dawn, Clell Yates had breakfasted and was sitting thoughtfully over his second cup of coffee, his mind on several things. With part of it he was planning the day's work, which consisted mostly of standing guard over the herd penned in the canyon. They could not keep it there much longer; the grass would not hold out. But without riders they could not move it to better grazing. Another part of his mind was lost in a rather vague dream of what the future would be like once the drive was finished. Josh and Roman could sit down as equals then and iron out their differences. And he reckoned there was a preacher somewhere in Wagontrack. . . .

"You look mighty thoughtful," Nancy said from across the table.

He raised his head and smiled at her. "I was thinking about you," he said.

She put her hand across the table and covered his with it. "Good. I like to have you think about me. I think about you, too, a whole lot." Her voice softened. "I love you, Clell."

"I love you, too," he said. He was surprised how awkward the word love sounded when he said it. It hadn't been part of his vocabulary for a long time. "I was just wonderin' if . . ."

He broke off, shoving the bench. Cocking his head, he list-

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ened for a second. "Somebody coming," he snapped. "Riders. Maybe half a dozen."

Nancy stood up. Her face was pale. "Who do you think it is?"

"Don't know," Clell grated, "but I aim to find out. You stay in here and don't come out, no matter what happens." He stepped across the kitchen and took Josh's Winchester down from its pegs on the walls. He levered a shell into the chamber and went to the window, shoving back the curtain and peering out.

There were five of the riders, coming in at a slow walk. As Clell saw the high crowns of *sombreros* etched against the lightening sky, his hand tightened on the rifle. "A bunch of Mex riders," he said tautly. "I don't like the looks of this, Nancy. Stay put." With the rifle ready, he stepped out the door into the yard.

The men were from below the border all right, and after what had happened at Roman's, Clell was in no mood to welcome such a group of drifting *vaqueros*. These could be different men or the same—there was no way of telling.

But if they came in aggression, they gave no sign. They rode with hands well away from their guns, and as they approached, the man he took to be their leader was smiling. He was a thick, rather fat man of middle age, with considerable *Indio* blood, perhaps part *Yaqui*. He had a long, drooping black mustache, and he looked as if he were used to hard work. His clothes were simple and had been much patched. He drew rein and lifted his hand in a signal to the others when he was fifty feet from Clell.

"*Buenas, dias, señor,*" he said in a pleasantly musical voice. "*Como esta usted?*"

"*Buenas dias. Muy bien, gracias.*" Clell did not relax his watchfulness as the man swung down, and he tilted the muzzle of the Winchester to keep him covered. The Mex-

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ican seemed not even to notice the gun. He tilted back his hat.

"Dispenseme usted. You are el patron?"

"No." Clell shook his head. "Boss isn't here." He saw no profit, though, in telling the Mexican that Josh was so far away there was no chance of his getting back soon."

"Ay! Que lastima! He will return soon?"

"Maybe," Clell said guardedly. "What can I do for you?"

"We have ridden a long way. In Sonora there is no work for honest men now, and so we who are herders of cattle have ridden much looking for those who will hire us. But fortune has not smiled. Perhaps here you have need of five good herders of the cows?"

Slowly Clell shook his head. As badly as they needed hands, everything in him cried out against hiring these men. "No," he said. "No, we're full up right now. I guess you'd better ride along."

"Clell!" Nancy's voice at his elbow startled him. "Clell, what are you saying? Josh needs these men."

He felt a little flare of irritation. "Nancy, he may need men. But not these . . ."

"We work very cheap," the Mexican said. "We have not eaten a good meal for a long time, and if we could be fed we would not ask much silver."

"No," Clell said again, but Nancy's hand was on his arm.

"Clell, you can't do this to Josh. We've got to have these men." She broke off. "Let me change clothes and ride after Josh. I can catch up with him if I hurry. I'll bring him back and then he can make the decision."

Clell let out a gusty breath. Still, Nancy was right. He had no authority to jeopardize the drive by turning away riders so badly needed. As Nancy had said, it was Josh's decision to make.

"All right," he grunted. "Can you catch and saddle by yourself?"

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"Of course I can. I'll be back in an hour, two—no more—with Josh."

"Okay. Get to it, Nancy." Clell lowered the Winchester. "*La señorita* is ridin' after the bossman. Tell your men to light down. It'll be a couple of hours before he gets back here."

The Mexican smiled. "*Bueno.*" He turned and barked an order to his men. They dismounted, and Clell relaxed as they sat down on the ground under a tree. Apparently most of them were going to take advantage of the wait to catch some sleep.

The leader smiled again at Clell. "My name," he said, "is Luis de Morelos. You do not need to be afraid of us, *señor*. We are only honest riders, not *ladrones*." He bowed and joined the others under the tree, taking off his huge spurs so he could get into a comfortable position.

Clell went back into the house and poured himself another cup of coffee. But he did not take the rifle off his lap, and, through the kitchen window, he kept his eyes glued on the Mexicans under the tree.

It seemed that half the morning passed before Clell heard the oncoming sound of Josh and Nancy Carter's horses. The hoofbeats roused the Mexicans, and Clell stepped outside with the Winchester still cradled in his arm.

Before he could speak to Josh, Carter pulled up. He stared at the leader of his group and, to Yates's surprise, his face broke into a wide grin. "Well, I'll be blasted!" he yelled. "Luis!" And like a man greeting an old friend he swung from the saddle and gripped the Mexican in an *em-brazo*.

The *vaquero* grinned as widely. "*Ay, Dios! Señor Josh!* I did not know it was you for whom I waited!"

"What the hell brings you this far up, Luis?"

"*Amigo, mio*, times are very hard in *Mejico*. Work very

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scarce. We are, how you say it, riding grubline until we find jobs."

With his stumped arm still around Luis, Josh whirled grinning to Clell. "You can put that gun away, Clell. This is an old friend. Dammit, Luis, you must have heard me wishin' to myself the other night you'd show up. Clell, Luis and I gathered a herd on the Espinosa layout in Sonora five years ago when I went down to buy some Mex steers for an outfit I was ramrodding up in th' Panhandle. Took us three months to chouse those *orejanos* out of the brush and make a herd. Luis, if you want a job, you got one. We got near six hundred head to drive from here to Fort Apache. You'll get your *frijoles* and I'll pay thirty a month at the end of the drive. Okay?"

"*'Sta bien!* Whatever you say, *Señor Josh.*"

Josh slapped his good hand against his chaps. He seemed beside himself with excitement. "Clell, this does it! This wraps everything up. All we got to do now is lay in whatever grub we can scrape up and move 'em out!"

"Josh," Clell said and motioned him aside. "You sure you know this hombre? Listen, it was a Mex outfit that stampered Roman's herd. There's nothin' to keep a bunch of 'em from hirin' on with us and then doin' the same to ours."

Josh frowned. "If it was anybody but Luis de Morelos, I'd say you had the right idea. But I know Luis. Hell, I saved his life once down on the Espinosa layout. He wouldn't mess me up. I'll admit it looks funny, but I can't believe Luis would do me dirt. Anyhow, it's the only chance we got, Clell. I think we'll be all right. I trust de Morelos."

"All right," said Clell. "It's your decision to make. But just the same, we'd both better keep a hawk eye on 'em. You knew this bird five years ago. A man can change a lot in five years, Josh."

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Josh nodded. "You're dead right. We'll watch 'em, always. But now we've got to get rollin'. Clell . . ." He looked embarrassed. "You got any cash left?"

"A little. Not much."

"You want to take Nancy and the wagon into town and pick up the rest of what we need for the drive? I'll take de Morelos and his men and we'll move the herd out of the canyon onto fresh grass and give 'em a day's good graze before we start."

"Sure," Clell nodded. "Right away. I'm afraid I haven't got enough to buy a hell of a lot, though."

"It'll be a hardscrabble drive," Josh said. "But it'll have a payoff at the end, and that's all that counts."

It was mid-afternoon before Clell and Nancy reached Wagontrack, but the long, slow drive had seemed all too short to Clell. Each moment spent alone with Nancy was precious to him—and there would not be many more such moments for a while. Once the drive was moved out—"I'm afraid I'll be too busy for sparkin',"—he grinned at her.

She held his hand. "But afterwards," she told him softly, "we'll have all the time in the world."

He pulled up the team before the general store and helped her down. He shelled out his last two double eagles. "That's the crop. See how far you can stretch it. I'm going to circulate a little bit and see what the news is."

She pressed his arm worriedly. "Be careful. Roman might . . ."

"Roman's ridin' himself down to a nub roundin' up cattle," Clell grinned. "It'll be a spell before he has time to come to town. But there'll be gossip about how he's faring. Wait for me at the store."

"Be careful," she said again, as he turned away.

For the price of a leisurely beer, he learned that Roman had hired extra hands to help speed the regathering of his

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scattered herd. But it don't make any difference now, Clell thought. If these Mex riders are straight as Josh thinks they are, we've got things locked up. . . . The clock in the saloon told him it was time to go back to the store for Nancy, and he stepped out again into bright sunlight. It was astonishing how different the world looked now; it seemed a finer place than he had ever imagined it could be. Even Wagontrack looked almost pleasant.

He had nearly reached the store when a voice from behind halted him.

"Clell. Have you got a minute?"

He turned. Sharon Coe must have been out shopping, he saw. She wore street clothes and there was a bundle under her arm. Though the sun's glare was not kind to her—with most of the paint scrubbed off her face—she looked younger and less used up. "Hello, Sharon."

She came up close to him and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Clell, please listen and take some good advice."

"What kind of advice, Sharon?"

"You're tied up with the wrong people. You're fighting a battle you've got no prayer of winning." She was earnest, her voice pleading with him. "You can't buck Bart Roman and get away with it. Clell, why don't you be smart, cut loose. You said you had thought about California. It's supposed to be good country out there. Why don't you go see it?"

Yates stared down at her. "You mean run."

"All right. If you want to call it that, run. It's better than being dead."

Clell shook his head. "I'm not running, Sharon. Since you and me—since we busted up—I've done a lot of running, a lot of drifting. I've had my bait of it now. I like this country and I'm staying."

Her voice took on an edge. "This country? Or that Carter floozy?"

"Sharon, so help me, if you say that . . ."

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She looked contrite. "All right, I'm sorry. But will you listen to me? Younger was in town, hiring extra men. He promised them plenty of work. And he and Roman are wild, simply wild, pawing the dirt over that stampede. They're swearing you'll never make it to the fort on time, even if they have to run off your herd the way Roman's was run."

"If he tries it . . ." Clell rapped. His hand slipped to his holster instinctively.

"All right, don't bite *my* head off." Sharon's face softened; she put a hand on Yates's arm. "Just be on the lookout, will you, Clell?" she murmured. "We used—we used to think a lot of each other. I'd still hate to see anything happen to you."

Some of the anger drained from Yates. "Thanks, Sharon. It was good of you to take the trouble, and I appreciate it." He looked squarely into her violet eyes. "You know you're stickin' your neck out givin' me this warnin', don't you?"

Her voice was bitter. "Let's just say it was my wedding present to you and let it go at that. Well, I guess—"

"Clell," said Nancy from the steps of the store behind him. Then she evidently saw Sharon, for her voice changed, and went icy. "Clell, will you help Mr. Friday with the supplies?" He turned to see Nancy's eyes fastened questioningly on Sharon Coe. He lifted a hand in a guilty, ineffectual gesture.

"Nancy," he said, "this is Miss—"

"I know who she is," said Nancy in clipped tones. "And what she is."

Yates, startled, saw a touch of red stain Sharon's cheeks beneath the dusting of powder. "Yes," Sharon said, in a tone of cold politeness. "And I know all about you, too."

There was a moment's silence as the two women looked at each other with hostility lancing between them. Then Sharon Coe said, "I've got to go now, Clell. Remember what I told you."

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"Yes," he said. "Thanks, Sharon." As she moved away, he mounted the store steps. It was in his mind to tell Nancy about Sharon's warning and thus explain her presence, but he stopped himself. It would only increase Nancy's worries—and it was obvious that she was jumpy enough already.

"That . . . saloon hussy," Nancy said in a metallic tone. "What were you doing with her?"

"I . . . We used to know each other once," Clell said heavily. "It was a long time ago. . . ."

"Everybody in this territory knows her for what she is," said Nancy bitingly. "If I were a man, I'd be ashamed to be seen with her."

Clell could not help coming to Sharon's defense. "You've got her wrong, Nancy. In her own way, she's got her good qualities."

"I don't want to hear about them," she said tersely. "Just help Mr. Friday load the wagon, will you, and we'll get on back to the ranch."

As soon as they reached the Diamond J, Yates passed along Sharon's warning to Josh. Josh nodded. "It wouldn't surprise me none," he said. "We'll have to keep a good watch. But these boys of Luis's are fighters. If Roman tackles us, he'll think he's rammed his head in a hornet's nest."

He strode toward the corral. "I've got 'em out with the herd now. I think I'll ride out and see how they're doing and tell 'em to keep heads up. Stick around here, will you?"

Clell nodded. After Josh had ridden away, he busied himself working rather morosely at the forge, putting new shoes on his dun. But he was not thinking of what he was doing as he rasped the dun's off hind hoof. He was puzzling over how strange, how contradictory, women could be.

Just seeing him with Sharon Coe had left Nancy jumpy and distant all during the ride back from Wagontrack. He

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desperately wanted to explain to her that Sharon meant absolutely nothing to him, that nobody meant anything to him but her. But he sensed that explanations would only make things worse and he kept his mouth shut. He waited hopefully now for her to come out and talk to him for a while, as she often would when he was doing chores around the place, but she did not appear.

At last he could stand it no longer. Savagely he slapped the dun's rump as he turned it into the corral and then he strode toward the house. Damn it, there was no call for Nancy to behave like that. He jerked open the door and entered the kitchen and then stopped short. From the bedroom that belonged to her there came, clearly audible in the quiet of late afternoon, the sound of a woman's crying.

Clell's anger melted in concern and contrition. Had he made her that unhappy? He hammered on her door. "Nancy? Nancy, sweetheart. What's the matter? Can I come in?"

Her voice was thick. "Come in."

He entered the room. She was sitting on the bed, her hands over her face, her shoulders shaking. "Nancy. Honey, what's the matter?" He sat down beside her and put his arms about her.

It was a moment before she answered. Then she raised her head, dabbing at her eyes with a tiny square of handkerchief.

"Nothing," she whispered. "Nothing's the matter."

"Don't tell me that. Something's bound to be. When you cry like this . . ."

She pulled away from him and stood up. "No, no it's nothing."

He stood up, too. "Damn it, Nancy, tell me."

She had her back to him, and he could not see her face. It was a long time before she spoke. When she did, her voice was choked and trembling.

"Josh told me what that . . . that woman told you in

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town. About Roman, about him threatening to stampede our herd. Swearing that we'd never get it to the fort." She turned, her eyes huge, her cheeks wet. "Oh, Clell, I'm so afraid. If he does anything like that, Josh will go looking for him. . . . And you know how much chance Josh would have against him. . . . He and that awful Younger, they'd kill Josh."

Clell searched for words of reassurance, but before he could find any, Nancy was beside him on the bed again. She took his hand and held it tightly. Her voice was reedy with a kind of hysteria of fear and despair.

"Oh, Clell, it's just going to go on and on and on. Isn't there any way it could be stopped now? Does it have to drag out? Couldn't you find some way to stop it?"

He stared at her. She pressed his hand against her, and now her eyes were intense. Her voice was suddenly low and urgent and husky. "If you could only . . . fix Roman so there won't be any more trouble. If he were only . . . gone, then we could live in peace, we could be happy. . . ."

It was a moment before Clell Yates realized what she meant; and when he did, something in him seemed to turn to ice. He pulled his hand loose from hers. "Nancy," he whispered, "Are you trying to say . . . ?"

She leaned toward him. "You could do it," she said fiercely. "You're a famous gunfighter. He'd kill Josh in a minute, but he wouldn't stand a chance against you. And if there was no Bart Roman, we could make our drive to the fort without worrying—we'd never have to worry again."

Clell stood up quickly. "Nancy, are you suggestin' I pick a fight with Roman and shoot him down?" His words rolled out harshly; he was numb with disbelief. "Deliberately brace 'im to have an excuse to plug 'im? You don't know what you're saying. It would be murder, me murdering Roman, because I know he wouldn't stand a chance against me. I can't do that, Nancy. I'm a lot of things, some of 'em not

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pretty, but I ain't a murderer. If Roman hits us, I'll fight him with everything I've got, and if it comes to that, I'll kill him if I have to. But just to go out and . . . and kill the man. . . . He's done nothin' to us yet but crowd us, bully us . . . but you can't kill a man for that." He drew in a long, shuddering breath. "At least, I can't. Besides, if I kill Roman or even try to, I'll have to go up against Younger, too. He's a different case. It might be me that wound up in boot-hill—would you want that? No, I—"

Suddenly she began crying again, burying her face in her hands once more. Clell stood helplessly, still touched with that inner coldness. Once he put a hand awkwardly on her shoulder and then withdrew it.

Finally she raised her head, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Don't you see?" she sobbed hysterically. "It's the only way out? Otherwise . . . I thought you loved me. If you loved me, you'd put a stop to all this now . . . You'd . . . But you're afraid, aren't you? It's either that or . . . or you've been lying to me all along. . . ."

"Nancy!" Suddenly Yates's voice was like a whiplash. "Nancy, listen to me. You're half out of your wits with all this strain—now, listen! I do love you. I wasn't lying. I love you more than I ever loved any woman before. But no matter how much I love you, I'm not going out and pick a fight with a man and deliberately gun him down. I'm sorry, I ain't built that way. If that's what I've got to do to prove . . ." He turned. His voice was bitter. "No," he said. "I've done some pretty rotten things. But not that. No." He started for the door.

"Clell, wait!"

He stopped and turned. She had risen from the bed, and she was mopping her eyes. She shook her head as if suddenly awakening from a bad dream.

"I'm sorry, Clell," she whispered, coming to him and putting her arms around him, burying her face against his

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chest. "I'm sorry. I . . . I didn't even know what I was saying. I didn't really know what I was asking. It's only that I've lived with this strain for so long. I guess it's nearly driven me crazy. I didn't really mean for you to do that to Roman. It was just that I'm so anxious for all this to end, for us all to be safe. You're right, of course. You're not built that way and I'm glad you're not. Will you forgive me, Clell?"

He felt the coldness within him thaw. His arms went about her very tightly. "Of course I'll forgive you. And don't worry, Nancy. Not Roman nor anybody else is gonna stop us from getting that herd through. I'll promise you that. Now. Now, stop that cryin' and let me kiss you."

She sniffled and somehow managed a smile. "All right," she said tremulously, and she raised her face to his.

X

SIX HUNDRED cattle. Six hundred long-legged, short-coupled, spear-horned devils with hooves, bred and born in the deep brush, not herd broken, not trail broken, not anything broken. Clell Yates, Josh Carter and the five Mexicans worked like madmen trying to hold them on grazing long enough to accustom them to being bunched and to fill their bellies before beginning the drive. For Clell Yates, time was a blur—a blur of dust and riding and roping and savage cursing at the sheer thickheaded perversity of animals that tried time and again to break from the herd and head for wild country—critters that finally had to be heeled with a riata and busted, turned tail over tincup half-a-dozen times with jarring force before they learned their lesson. Clell's rope whipped and sang constantly; Josh could no longer handle a loop, but he had learned a technique used by the Mexicans. He would pound up alongside a fleeing critter, seize its high-curved tail, spur his horse, and, with a deft

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maneuver, pull the steer head over heels. It would be a stunned and chastened animal that finally clambered to its feet and loped back to the herd. . . .

By noon all the riders were tired, dusty and sore, but a definite improvement was beginning to show in the discipline of the herd. Clell took a breather, stripping rope-burned gauntlets from his sweaty hands. Those gauntlets and the leather cuffs he wore had time and again kept his hands and wrists from being slashed to mincemeat by the spotcord rope now coiled about the saddle horn. He dragged a dusty sleeve across a face that was a mire of sweatsoaked dirt and rolled a cigarette. When it was burning, he fastened the rope in its rightful saddle loop and looked thoughtfully at the herd.

Spooky, he thought, plenty spooky, and they'll stay that way for a long time. If Roman does try to run 'em, it won't take much to scatter 'em from hell to breakfast.

His eyes searched the ridges that lay in the direction of the Liver and Lights. They were devoid of movement. All peaceful so far. . . . He hoped it would stay that way. But he could not shake off an uneasiness that kept his nerves tightstrung. It had been with him ever since Nancy's hysterical outburst last night.

That had been a blow. To realize that even she looked at him sometimes not as a man but as a mechanism for killing, just a kind of accessory to the gun he wore. There had been a moment there when he was ready, in his bitterness, to walk out and head on for California. If she hadn't snapped out of it when she had . . .

He shifted restlessly in the saddle. Well, she was upset, he told himself for the thousandth time. She didn't know what she was sayin'. . . . Don't let it ride you, Yates. She came out of it, didn't she? She said that she didn't mean it, that she knew it wasn't the kind of thing you'd do. . . . And yet—why had it come into her mind at all if she really

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believed, was really convinced, that he was a human being like anybody else and not part killer-wolf?

He told himself not to think about that part of it, to think about how loving she had been afterwards. But it nagged him and he could not shake it off. He was glad when Josh pulled up alongside him and, after swabbing his bandana across his face, grinned.

"Well, it's begninn' to look a little like a trail drive makin' up, anyhow."

"Sort of."

"I think we can pull out in the mornin'. We'll hafta shove 'em hard and fast, too. Grass is scarce between here and the fort and time's short. Anyhow, they'll be paid for by the head and not by weight, that's one thing. And the wilder they are, the better the Injuns like 'em. When they slaughter 'em, they turn 'em loose one by one and ride 'em down like buffalo."

He paused. "What do you think of Luis and his crew?"

"They're good hands," Yates said.

"I'm satisfied now we can trust 'em. If they'd wanted the herd, they've had plenty of chance to knock us both off and take out with it. Or to drive it off last night, when they were out here by themselves."

"I guess they're okay," Clell said. "Man it's hot. I'd sure like to see a few clouds to cut down on that sun." He turned in the saddle and squinted. "Not a sign of one, though."

"No," Josh said, his eyes sweeping the horizon. "Not—" His good hand shot out and gripped Clell's arm. "Clell! Look yonder! What's that?"

Clell followed the direction of the pointing stump. It aimed straight toward the Diamond J, and Clell rose in his saddle and stared incredulously at the dark, drifting curl that rose above the horizon.

Suddenly he dropped back in the saddle and yanked his dun around so hard it reared. "That's smoke!" he grated.

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"Back at the home ranch! Somethin' on fire! Come on—Nancy's there by herself!" He slammed spurs into the dun without mercy and it launched itself into a dead run. Josh came pounding after him.

They were a half hour's breakneck ride over rough country from the ranch house. As they neared it, the dun faltering, Clell cursed and spurred ruthlessly. The pall of smoke was thicker, darker, now—rising in billowing clouds against the stainless sky. Clell was cold with fear for Nancy. It looked as if the whole spread were burning down. It had been a long time since he had prayed, but he prayed now, instinctively. Let her be all right, he prayed. Please, let her be safe. . . .

Then they were topping the last crest above the ranch and Clell drew the blown dun to a spraddle-legged halt, whipping out his Colt as he stared, stunned, at the devastation below.

The house, the stables, the outbuildings, the meager hay-pile—gone, all gone. Nothing left but piles of blackened, smoking char. The spread wiped out completely, burned to the ground. And, he thought sickly, no sign of Nancy.

Savagely he hit the dun and Josh spurred alongside just as savagely and they went stretched-out down the hill. Even before they had reached the heaped, smoldering ruins, Clell was yelling at the top of his lungs. "Nancy! Nancy! Where are you? Nancy!"

Then he was yanking the horse to a halt and sliding off. The dun sagged, head down, breath rasping. Josh thumped to the ground off his own mount and they ran toward what had been the ranch house. "Nancy!" Josh bellowed. "Nancy, are you all right?"

There was no answer, and Clell and Josh looked at each other. Yates knew that his own face must be as white beneath the dust as Carter's.

Josh's voice was an infuriated croak. "Roman," he grated.

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"It had to be him. Goddam him—" The words choked off in anger. He put his hands to his mouth.

"Na-a-n-cyl!"

Still no answer. Clell stood frozen for a moment, one hand curled about the butt of a gun. If they've hurt her, he vowed, if anything's happened to her, Roman won't live to see the sun go down—not even with a dozen Youngers around him!

The he thought he heard a sound—a reedy whisper that was not the blowing of the dun nor the hatred-thickened rasp of his own breath. There was a nest of rocks, small boulders, a hundred feet from the embers of the house. Clell ran toward it. "Nancy!"

Even before he reached the rocks, he heard her crying. It was a dry, thin sobbing, as if she had cried so much she could hardly cry more. Then he saw her—lying among the rocks like a bundle thrown down there.

He said her name again, tautly, and called for Josh, and then he was kneeling beside her, lifting her, gathering her in his arms. "Nan—Are you all right?"

Her face was smudged and bruised. Her dress was ripped to shreds, hardly more than a few rags barely shielding her breasts and thighs. Her eyes were wide and stunned. Her lips moved and no words came out. Clell stroked her hair. "You're safe," he whispered. "It's me, Clell. You're safe now."

Josh sprang into the nest of boulders and dropped beside them. "Nan—is she all right, Clell?"

"I don't know," he said. "Something's happened to her."

Josh took her hand. "Nancy. Nancy, can't you talk? What happened here?"

She stared at him, her mouth opening and shutting. Then she spoke a single word. It came out as a croak.

"Roman," she said.

"Wait a minute," said Clell. He scooped her up in his arms

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and arose, holding her. She buried her face against his chest. "Git a blanket off your bedroll," he snapped at Josh. "Spread it out. Git a canteen."

Josh spread the blanket under a tree. Gently, Clell laid Nancy down on it, wet his bandana, mopped her face. "You're safe now, sweetheart," he told her gently. "Everything's all right, now."

At last she let out a long sigh and sat up, knuckling at her eyes with one hand, holding the shreds of her dress to her breasts with the other. Her hair fell about her face in dusty strings.

"Oh, Clell," she whispered. "It was—horrible."

"What happened?" Josh asked urgently.

She rubbed her face. "Roman," she said again. "He and Younger. They . . . they came while you were with the herd. They . . . they set fire to all the buildings. I tried to stop them, but Roman held me while Younger did it. And then . . ." She covered her face with her hands.

"Go on," Clell snapped, feeling a rage unlike any that had ever gripped him before. One compounded not of fire but of ice, a cold, diamond-hard anger that left his mind clear and concentrating on her words.

"He . . . he dragged me off into those rocks."

"Roman did?"

"Yes, Roman. He . . . was laughing. He tore my dress nearly off. He—" Her voice choked.

Clell stood up. His own tone was clear, almost surprisingly calm. "What did he do then?"

"I fought him. He hit me. Then he—"

There was a moment of complete silence in the dry, hot sunlight and shade of the early afternoon. Clell's eyes met those of Josh.

"Did he rape you?" Clell asked brutally.

Nancy's lips moved once without sound. Then they formed a single word.

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"Yes."

Clell Yates stood there a moment. Then he turned away.

There were a few horses still in the corral. He wondered why Roman had not turned them out and driven them off.

It had been a mistake on Roman's part. And it would cost him a part of the few scant hours he had left of life.

"Look after her, Josh," said Yates calmly and he started toward his dun to get his rope and saddle.

Josh lowered Nancy back to the blanket, then strode after Clell.

"Where do you think you're going?" He halted Clell with his good hand.

Clell looked at him for a second.

"To kill Roman," he said then, simply.

"No," Josh snapped. His eyes were glittering. "No, you're not. She is my sister. It's my job. By God, I'm going to gun him down like a snake!"

Clell shook off the arm. "Don't be a fool," he said bluntly, his voice still old. "You wouldn't stand a chance in hell. I've seen you fumble a gun with that left hand of yours. No. Roman and Younger. This is my fight. I'm going to settle with them now. Don't you get in my way. You stay here with Nancy."

"Clell, I—" There was an agony of helplessness in Carter's voice.

"I said, don't git in my way!" Clell rapped, and then he got the rope off the dun and caught one of the horses in the corral.

While Josh went back to kneel beside Nancy, Clell saddled up and mounted. Then, at a lope, he rode out of the Diamond J ranch yard, pointed toward the Liver and Lights.

He had no clear and definite plan in mind.

All he knew was that he was going to hunt down Bart Roman and kill him and that somehow he would do it no

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matter how many of Roman's gunmen he had to fight his way through.

The Liver and Lights home ranch was a big layout. There was a sprawling log ranch house, a large bunkhouse, sheds, barns, pens and corrals. Clell Yates rode straight in, his hand on his gun. His eyes searched the place with cold and careful thoroughness.

It had, he came to realize, a strange air of desertion. There were a few horses in the corrals, not many. There were no saddled mounts anywhere, no hands lounging around or engaged in home ranch chores. No sign of life at all—except the thread of smoke drifting upward out of the cookhouse chimney.

Clell pulled up in front of the ranch house and pounded on the door. There was no answer. He went back down the steps and led his horse across the yard toward the cookshack. Still no sign of life anywhere except that smoke. He walked up to the square log building, ground-reined his horse, drew his Colt, shoved open the board door, and strode in.

The roundup cook whose broken leg he had helped splint was sitting with the leg propped on one of the benches beside a table, steadily cursing a pimply-faced helper who was wrestling pots on the big iron stove. As the door flew open, the helper turned, startled, and the cook twisted his head around. Yates saw recognition write itself across his vinegary face.

The cook hoisted himself up straighter. He looked at the six-gun in Yates's hand, but he showed no fear. "Well," he said, "if it ain't the bad man from the Diamond J."

Yates jerked his head at the helper. "Git away from the stove," he said. "Sit down over there and keep outa trouble." Then he confronted the cook.

"Roman," he snapped. "Where is he?"

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The cook said waspishly and without fear, "Well, now, I don't know that that's none of your business."

Yates thrust the gun forward and eared back the hammer. "Old man, that broken leg ain't going to stop me from blowing what I want to know outa you. *Where's Roman?*"

For the first time there was a flicker of fear in the cook's eyes. He snapped his lips tight-shut, like a trap's iron jaws, and shook his head stubbornly.

"All right," Yates said, and he picked the cook up by the slack of the shirt. He held the man, broken leg and all, clear of the floor. "You want me to slam you down on that leg?" he said harshly. "I asked you—where's Bart Roman?"

He saw the line of the cook's mouth begin to break as the cook realized that he meant exactly what he said.

"W-wait a minute," the cook muttered.

Yates dropped him roughly on the bench. The cast-encased leg thudded against the floor. The cook grimaced with pain.

"Roman," he husked. "Roman's gone."

"Gone where?" Yates drew back a foot to kick the leg.

The cook saw it; his face paled. "Gone . . . Dammit, please, please don't do that. Gone to . . . to Diamond J. He took all the men. They . . . they gone to stampede that herd and put a stop to Carter's rustlin' once and for all."

Suddenly nearly insane with rage, Clell scooped the man up again. "How long?" he thundered.

"Not long . . . Not more'n twenty minutes . . . So help me God . . . Just twenty minutes."

Clell eased the man down on the bench and whirled toward the helper. "That the truth?"

The pimply-faced boy swallowed hard. "Y-y-yessir," he stuttered under the muzzle of Clell's gun.

"It better be," Clell snapped. "Or I'll come back and break that leg again for you, old man." He backed toward the door, stepped outside, and caught up his horse's reins. As he

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mounted, his face was grim; he had no illusions as to what he was riding into. There were too many of Roman's men for him to have any hope of keeping them from scattering the herd. But that was not what concerned him now. The main thing was to find Bart Roman and kill him.

He jerked the horse around and spurred it hard. It snorted and lurched into a run. Clell raked it with the spurs again. Every minute that he could shave off of Roman's lead meant that much less time that Roman would stay alive.

It was the second horse he had almost run to death that day. It was laboring as it climbed a rise of ground on Diamond J territory. Beyond that rise lay the open land where the herd was held. Once he topped it, Clell knew, he was bound to come in sight of Roman.

He had no idea of how he was going to get through all of Roman's men to kill Roman. But he would do it somehow. There was no belief in him that he himself would come out of the encounter alive, but in the cold fury that gripped him, it did not matter; he was willing to write himself off if he could only get Roman.

He could hear the bawling of the herd, now. He urged the horse with his spurs. It made a last, extended effort, its hoofs sliding in the rubble of rocks. But before he reached the crest he jerked erect in the saddle. On the far side of the hill, out there on the flats, there was the sudden drumming of hooves and then the yammering wham of many guns exploding into deadly fury. He was too late: Roman's men had struck!

Cursing, he got the horse over the crest. It stood panting for a second as he stared at the scene below him. Roman's men, only a little ahead of him, were fanning down toward the flats on the dead run firing as they went. The herd was already careening away in a stampede, stringing out into a long, frantic press of horns and hooves. From its

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edges, the Mexican riders were shooting back at Roman's men.

Even as he watched, the Liver and Lights men closed in on the Mexicans. Clell saw the tall-crowned hat of Jack Younger, saw the lean gunman blast one of Luis de Morelos's crew out of the saddle with a single shot, rein around and drop another one.

Roman was there, too, concentrating on the herd, chasing the drags, firing into the air. His men were shooting, too, and the outnumbered Mexicans were being slaughtered. Even before Clell could spur the weary horse into motion, it was all over—a matter only of seconds. The riderless mounts of the Mexicans were galloping off; the herd was drumming across the flats, beginning to split and scatter as its leaders plunged into the rough country, and Roman's men were reining in, their work done. And Clell cursed bitterly. Roman had halted and was sitting in the saddle, immobile, gloating. He was out of six-gun range and Clell had no rifle.

So there was nothing to do but ride down to him. And the only way at all to get through his outriders, to get close enough to Roman himself to be sure of not missing, was not to charge, but to come in slow.

He forced the weary horse downhill. He held its reins high in one hand, his other hand was lifted to show that he held no gun.

It was a moment before the Liver and Lights crew spotted him. Then he saw Jack Younger point toward him and his hand come up with a gun. Roman's outflung hand knocked Younger's down. Clell grinned bitterly. That gesture might well cost Roman his life.

Even so, there were a dozen guns trained on him as he rode slowly across the flats to where Roman waited. He saw some of Roman's riders going among the dead Mexicans, turning them over to make sure no life was left in them. He

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saw one of the bodies stir, saw two of Roman's men yank it to its feet and drag it toward where Roman sat his mount. Clell recognized the chunky form of Luis de Morelos, and saw the blood pouring down the Mexican's chest from the wound in his shoulder. As the Liver and Lights men dragged Morelos up before Roman, Roman leaned down and said something to him. Then he straightened up and fastened his eyes on Clell.

Clell rode straight on into the circle of bristling guns. When he had reached its rim, he called harshly: "Roman."

"You're through, Yates," Roman rapped back. "You and your rustlin', thievin' pal Carter. And your border-jumpin' friends. You're finished, all of you."

Clell hardly heard the words. He was still in the grip of cold fury.

"I want to talk to you, Roman."

"Come and talk. But if you reach for an iron, you're a dead man."

He put the horse in motion, and, with his nerves taut-stretched and his determination to kill Roman regardless of the cost to himself still diamond-hard within him, he passed through the circle of Liver and Lights men who swung their bristle of gun-barrels to cover him. Roman waited, his hands folded across his saddle-bow, his blocky face impassive. Beside him waited, too, Jack Younger, a faint, wicked smile on his narrow face.

In the midst of all those Liver and Lights men Clell stopped the horse, facing Roman.

"I've come to kill you, Roman," he said tautly.

Roman laughed. "You'd be a fool to try it." His hand swept in a gesture that took in the men around him. "You'd go down with a dozen bullets in you."

Clell's eyes did not waver from the jet ones of Roman. "I'm askin' you to ride outside this circle with me." His voice was flat, toneless.

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"Let me," Younger said quickly.

"No," Yates said. "You second." He swung back to Roman. "Have you got the guts to do it?"

Roman shook his head slowly. "No. You're a gunfighter. If I was one, I wouldn't have needed to hire Jack. Why should I let you kill me when I hold all the cards? Feel lucky you're alive, Yates. Pass over your gun and you'll get a fair hearin' before we hang you and Carter for rustlin'. You might even be let off—I'm not sure you were in on it."

"No," Clell said evenly. "One way or the other, I'm gonna kill you for what you did to Nancy Carter."

Roman's face did not change, but he saw then the surprise that flared in Roman's eyes.

"Did to Nancy Carter? I'm not gonna do anything to the woman. I'm gonna hang the man, but I'm gonna let the woman go. What do you mean, did to Nancy Carter?"

"You and Younger," Clell said, his hatred for the man almost too much to contain. "You're big men, ain't you? Burning out a ranch with nobody but a woman to defend it. And then raping the woman."

Roman sat up straight in the saddle.

"Raping?"

Clell just looked at him. He was a little startled by how nonplused Roman seemed to be.

"What the hell are you talking about, Yates? Are you out of your mind?"

"You must have been, to think you could do it and still live. You're not much of a man, Roman. But if you're any kind of man, you'll fight me and keep your other gunhawks out of it. All right, you're no gunfighter. I'll let you get your iron clear of leather before I draw. You got the guts even for that?"

"Wait a minute, Yates. Hold up, here. I don't know what you're talkin' about. Diamond J's been burned out? Somebody abused the Carter woman? Well, it wasn't Jack or me.

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It wasn't Liver and Lights. We rode out this evenin' for one purpose, one purpose only: to wipe out these Mex border jumpers that work with Carter, to take that damn' one-handed rustler in and hang him and to put a stop to these raids. We haven't hit the Diamond J home ranch yet. But if that's where we'll find Carter, it's our next stop."

Clell was tired of all this talk; he itched to drive a bullet into Roman and stop it, but some ring in the man's voice held his hand. With deliberate effort he kept his hand high, his voice steady.

"More of your cover-up. These aren't border-jumpers. These are Mex hands Carter hired in good faith to push his herd. Damn you, Roman, you're no man at all, you're—"

Roman lifted a hand. "Hush a minute," he said harshly. He jerked his head. "Jack, bring up that Mex that's still alive."

Younger barked an order. "Just keep your hand away from your gun for a minute," Roman said to Yates. He sighed. "You listen to what this greaser has to say. After you hear it, if you still think Carter hung the moon, maybe I'll ride out a way with you. But I give you my word I've laid no hand on the Carter woman or any other today. Jack—?"

One of the Liver and Lights men, dismounted, had Luis de Morelos's good arm in a hammer lock. Younger leaned down out of the saddle.

"All right, hombre," he said in a cold and threatening voice. "Tell your story."

Morelos's eyes shuttled around the group, wide, frightened, and staring. "It's all *la falta*, the mistake," he whispered. "We are honest *vaqueros*."

Younger flicked his bridle reins. Their knotted end slapped hard across Morelos's face. "Talk," he said.

Morelos's mouth went set doggedly.

"All right," Younger said. "If you're gonna be hard to deal with. Hold your hand, Clell, I'm drawing, but not on

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you." He unsheathed his Colt, eared back the hammer and pressed the muzzle against Morelos's forehead between the eyes.

"Now," he said. "You got exactly two seconds. One—"

"*Señor!*" Morelos bellowed the word pleadingly. His knees sagged. "*Por Dios*, I talk!"

Younger pulled the gun muzzle back perhaps a half-inch. "All right. Talk."

Morelos's face was blotchy and sweat poured down it. He swung his head wildly, his lips trembling. "Very well. We . . . work with *Señor* Josh Carter the long time. Many, many months. He is our . . ." he groped for the word ". . . boss. In *Mejico* we steal the cattle, bring them to his ranch, re-brand them and he sells them. And here we also steal the cattle and run them back across the border and sell them in *Mejico* so that we have cattle going two ways all the time. *Si*, it was us who stampeded the herd of *Señor* Roman. We send it South. North we bring a bunch for *Señor* Josh to drive to the fort. We hold them til the changed brands are old and the new earmarks healed and then *Señor* Josh takes them in his herd . . ."

Clell sat rigidly, trying to comprehend, feeling an eerie sense of unreality. Yet, there could be no doubt that de Morelos was telling the truth. He had been taken in, taken in good by Josh Carter. But where—where did Nancy fit in all this?

Almost as if he had read Clell's mind, de Morelos babbled the answer to that question.

"*Señor y Señora Carter*, they halp us make much money and . . .

The words were ripped from Clell incredulously.

"*Señor y Señora Carter?*" He was out of the saddle in an instant, confronting de Morelos, yanking the man toward him by the slack of his bloodstained shirt. "Damn you, de

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Morelos, what's the truth?" His other hand clamped his six-gun butt.

The Mexican's eyes were terrified. He winced with the pain of his wound. "Si," he whispered. "*Señor* Carter and his wife, the yellow-haired woman who lives with him."

Clell Yates knew then a sickness that wrenched him inside with a pain that left him weak and gasping. His knees felt as if they were buckling under him. He released the Mexican's shirt and turned away, grabbing a stirrup leather and clinging to it.

His mind flailed, trying to make sense of this new monstrous revelation. It would not. Suddenly he whirled on de Morelos in a blind fury.

"Liar!" he howled. "You're a goddam liar!" His fist slammed de Morelos's head aside. "You're a liar!" He clawed, trying to wrench the Mexican away from the man who held him, intent on killing him with his bare hands. "I'll break your damn' neck, you lyin' greaser."

Then he was pinioned in a pair of arms. Jack Younger was dragging him away as de Morelos sobbed with the agony of his wound, bleeding again now. "All right, Clell," Younger grated. "Snap out of it. You've had the truth—what's the matter, you got no guts for it?"

The fury ebbed from Yates; he shook his head as if awaking from a nightmare. He braced his legs and let out a long, shuddering breath. All at once he felt no more pain; there was only a great emptiness in him. He knew beyond doubt now that de Morelos had spoken truly.

There was even a little pity on Roman's face as he looked down at Yates. "So she took you into camp, huh? Didn't even tell you she was married to Carter. Led you on, to keep your gun on the Diamond J side. Probably tryin' to egg you into killin' me. That way her husband would stay in the clear and have a free hand. This rape story . . . That would have done it, eh, if nothin' else would? All right,

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Yates. Well, you'll have your revenge. Before this day is over, you'll see Carter swing from the end of a rope."

Yates hardly heard him. He was mounting up.

"Yates!" Roman snapped as he reined his horse around. "Where you think you're goin'?"

"To what's left of the Diamond J," Clell heard himself say. "I got to see her, I got to hear this from her own mouth. If it's true, I'll . . ."

Roman was spurring forward. "Come on, Jack. We'll ride with him. We don't need a whole brigade to take in a one-handed man and a woman. They'll either be coming toward the shootin' or they'll be fixin' to hightail it out of the country. If they come here, the men'll pick 'em up—if they're runnin', we'll nab 'em before they can go. Let's ride!"

But though he heard them drumming behind him, Yates did not even look back. Still feeling empty inside, a man hollow, drained of everything but the need to confront Nancy, to have her say it while she looked at him, he spurred his mount unmercifully.

When they topped the rise overlooking Diamond J, they did not even pause. With Yates in the lead, they thundered down the slope toward the heaps of blackened char, still smoking, that once had been the ranch.

All Yates could think was, Why? Why would they do this to me?

His eyes searched the ruins for any sign of Josh or Nancy. Then he saw them.

Nancy was already mounted; Josh was having trouble getting into the saddle, his one-handedness hampering him as his fresh, skittish horse sidled. They heard the riders coming; Josh looked over his shoulder and as he did the horse swung and his foot came out of the stirrup, leaving him standing. Nancy's face was a white blur under the helmet

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of yellow hair. She was dressed in man's clothes, shirt and Levis, for riding.

Two minutes later, Clell thought bitterly, and they would have been long gone.

He saw Nancy crowd the horse back and Josh try to mount again. Then a rifle whanged from behind him. Carter's horse screamed and plunged; bullet-creased, it reared and broke away.

Carter threw up his one good hand helplessly, then whacked Nancy's mount on the rump. It broke into a run, almost unseating her, and then it was galloping away.

Younger and Roman hammered past Clell, Roman sheathing the saddle gun with which he had creased the horse. Clell spurred his animal, reining away after Nancy, as Younger and Roman bore down on Josh. He pushed every ounce of speed out of the animal, swinging in an arc to cut Nancy's path.

She saw him coming and reined away, lashing her mount frantically. But she was a fraction too late, and Clell's horse, stretched almost belly-flat, was gaining on her. He was only a length behind now, then a half-length. Nancy was a good rider, but the horse was cold, not limbered, and it had not reached full speed. Clell's mount closed the rest of the gap; he came alongside, and then he'd grabbed the cheekstrap of her horse's bridle and was pulling it around in a plunging circle.

Nancy dropped the reins and clung to the horn. Her eyes were wide, her face dead white. "Clell." Her voice was pleading. "Clell, if you love me, let me go. Please, darling, please. Come on, ride with me."

He jerked the bridle reins up in a short lead. "I love you," he said harshly. "That's the trouble." He let out a long breath. "Come on, Nancy, we're going back."

"Clell, please," she begged. But he was not even listening

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as he led her horse back to the ranch yard, where Roman and Younger, dismounted, were confronting Josh Carter.

"All right, Nancy," said Clell wearily. "Git down."

He dismounted.

She sat rigidly in the saddle.

He took her arm. "I said, git down."

Suddenly her face was a mask of pale hatred. "Let go of me, damn you. Let go of me."

Clell knew, now. Still, he was as gentle as possible as he dragged her from the saddle. She shook loose from his grasp and strode across the yard to stand beside Josh. Clell came up next to Roman and Younger.

None of the men had drawn guns. There was no need to. They knew that Josh Carter was as helpless with a gun as a child would have been. Roman was saying, ". . . and so that's the story, Carter. Your Mex rustlers have been wiped out, all except one that talked a blue streak. You got anything to say before you stretch hemp?"

Carter seemed unruffled. He shook his head. "You men are makin' a terrible mistake. Clell . . . For God's sake, you don't believe this cock and bull story, do you? How can you stand there and listen to this man, after what he did to Nancy this mornin'?"

"Yes!" Nancy hissed. Her whole body was trembling with a kind of feline hatred; she spat the words like an angry cat. "Yes, if you really loved me—if you were any kind of man—you'd kill him instead of standing there listening to his dirty accusations! You'd kill him and not even listen to such filth!"

Clell fastened her eyes with his.

"No," he said quietly. "I don't have any intention of killin' a man over a married woman."

She stepped backwards, as if from a blow. Then, all at

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once, she sagged, bracing herself on Josh. "You know," she whispered.

"I know," Clell said. He looked at Carter. "I know everything, Josh. Why you took me in, saved me from that posse. Why you and Nancy pretended you were brother and sister instead of man and wife. I reckon that pretense has been your policy for a long time, so if any man Nancy can work on comes along. . . . I reckon she's tried it on Roman, too, eh? Before I came?"

"It didn't work," Roman said.

"All so I'd pull your chestnuts out of the fire, do your dirty work. I was a gunfighter, a killer—sure, you figured, I wouldn't mind killin' one man more. Especially with the bait Nancy was offerin'. And after I killed Roman, it didn't matter what happened to me, did it? If Roman's men had burned me down, that would take care of everything. . . ."

Josh Carter's shoulders sagged. Beaten, he looked at the ground. "All right," he muttered. "No use pretendin'. You got the goods, all right. But if I just had my right hand where this stump was—" Suddenly he yelled, "Run, Nancy!" And then his body was whipping into action.

His lefthanded crossdraw was fast and sure, a blurred motion that took them all by surprise. The Colt whipped up and thundered in a fraction of a heartbeat and the heavy slug punched Jack Younger backward. Clell stood frozen for just that space of time, then his own hand swooped down. Carter's gun roared again, sending Roman reeling, and swung toward Clell, the hammer earing back.

The slug caught Josh Carter in the chest just as he was about to shoot. It slammed him around and his bullet went wild. Then, threshing crazily, knotting and jerking convulsively, he hit the ground.

Nancy screamed. "Josh!" Instead of running away, she ran forward, crouching over the twitching, agonized body. "Josh, don't die!" She cradled his head in her lap, while his

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heels drummed with diminishing wildness on the hard ground.

Nancy pressed her cheek against his. Then the heels were still. A shudder went through the body and that was the end of it.

Roman was clambering to his feet, his face twisted with the pain of a fleshwound, his hand pressed to the meaty part of his thigh to staunch the blood. "It's over?" he whispered.

"It's over," Yates said. He looked at the sprawled body of Jack Younger, obviously beyond help, and at Nancy rocking back and forth with Josh Carter's head in her lap. "He was a lefthanded gunslick all the time. Nothin' . . . Nothin' about him was real, nothin' true. . . ."

Suddenly Nancy raised her head, her face contorted with hysterical grief and anger. "Oh, damn you," she shrieked, "you killed him. Oh, God, how I hate you! Oh, I've hated you all along, it made me sick playing up to you! And now you've killed my husband! Why couldn't you have done what you were supposed to do? Why couldn't you have shot Roman? Then Josh would still be alive, we'd have the whole basin to ourselves, we' . . . Oh, Josh, Josh . . ." She sank crying down over the body of the dead man.

"Yes," he said again to Roman, "it's over." And then, as he heard the approaching hoofbeats of Roman's riders, he turned and walked slowly toward his horse.

XI

YATES UNCAPPED his canteen and drank long and deeply. He kept his mount close-reined and still as he took his final look at the burnt mass that had once been Diamond J.

Diamond J. He had thought he had found something here, and he had been wrong. Well . . .

Roman had made him an offer. "Jack's dead," Roman had said. "But I still like to have a gunhand on the place.

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Besides, you've got more cow savvy than he ever had. The ramrod's job is yours if you want it."

Clell had shaken his head. "No. No, when I came in here, I was bound for California. I reckon I'll ride on."

"Well, the woman's in jail at Wagontrack. We'll let the U.S. marshal decide what to do with her when he comes in."

Yates said nothing.

"I expect he'll be easy with her," Roman said softly. "After all, you can't hold a woman to blame for what her husband does. Or what he makes out of her . . ."

"No," Clell said.

"If you light somewhere, send me your address. I'll let you know how it comes out."

"All right," Clell had said.

If you light somewhere . . . Well, he was going to try it again. California. Surely, there, a man could find a place where he could live in peace, do honest work, shed his gun. . . . He thought of the ocean he had never seen breaking against a shore he had never seen. All at once he longed for it, longed to be away from this place, from the memory of evil, of rottenness. . . . And yet, he knew, it would be a long time before he would forget Nancy Carter. But he had to begin trying to now.

He was just about to rein his horse around and be on his way when he saw the rider coming across the valley below, heading toward him, pushing the horse hard.

His hand dropped instinctively to his gun. He waited, coldly prepared for anything.

The rider came up the slope. He saw that it was a woman, dressed in man's clothes: sombrero, shirt, jeans. She rode up beside him and pulled her mount to a stop. He looked at her in surprise.

"Hello, Sharon," he said.

Sharon Coe pushed back her hat. She had scrubbed the

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paint from her face; the wind had touched her pale cheeks with genuine color.

"Hello, Clell. I heard from Roman that you were leaving."

"Yes," he said. "Bound for California." He felt a small pleasure that she had remembered him and had come to say goodbye.

She nodded. "I'm sorry about everything, Clell. I tried to warn you. You got hurt, didn't you?"

"I'll git over it," he said.

Sharon Coe looked at him for a moment with something strange, and intent in her dark eyes. Then she tapped the blanket roll tied on behind the cantle of her saddle.

"I was planning to go to California myself someday," she said. "Wagontrack was wearing thin. A . . . a lot of things are wearing thin. I could use a fresh start."

"I hear it's good country," he said. He waited.

She nodded. "And I'd like to see the ocean. I've never seen it, Clell, did you know that? So . . . why don't I ride along with you?"

He shook his head. "It's a long haul, Sharon. Horseback's no way for a woman to travel. Why don't you take a stage?"

"Because I don't want to take a stage," she said. She half-smiled. "On a stage I wouldn't have anybody to talk over old times with."

Yates looked at her and she looked back steadily at him, and he felt the first faint breaking up of the coldness within him. Maybe it would not take as long to heal the hurt Nancy had made as he had thought.

From somewhere he found the makings of a smile.

"All right, Sharon," he said—and he reined his mount around and fell in at a slow walk alongside her. "All right. Come on. We'll go take a look at the ocean together."