

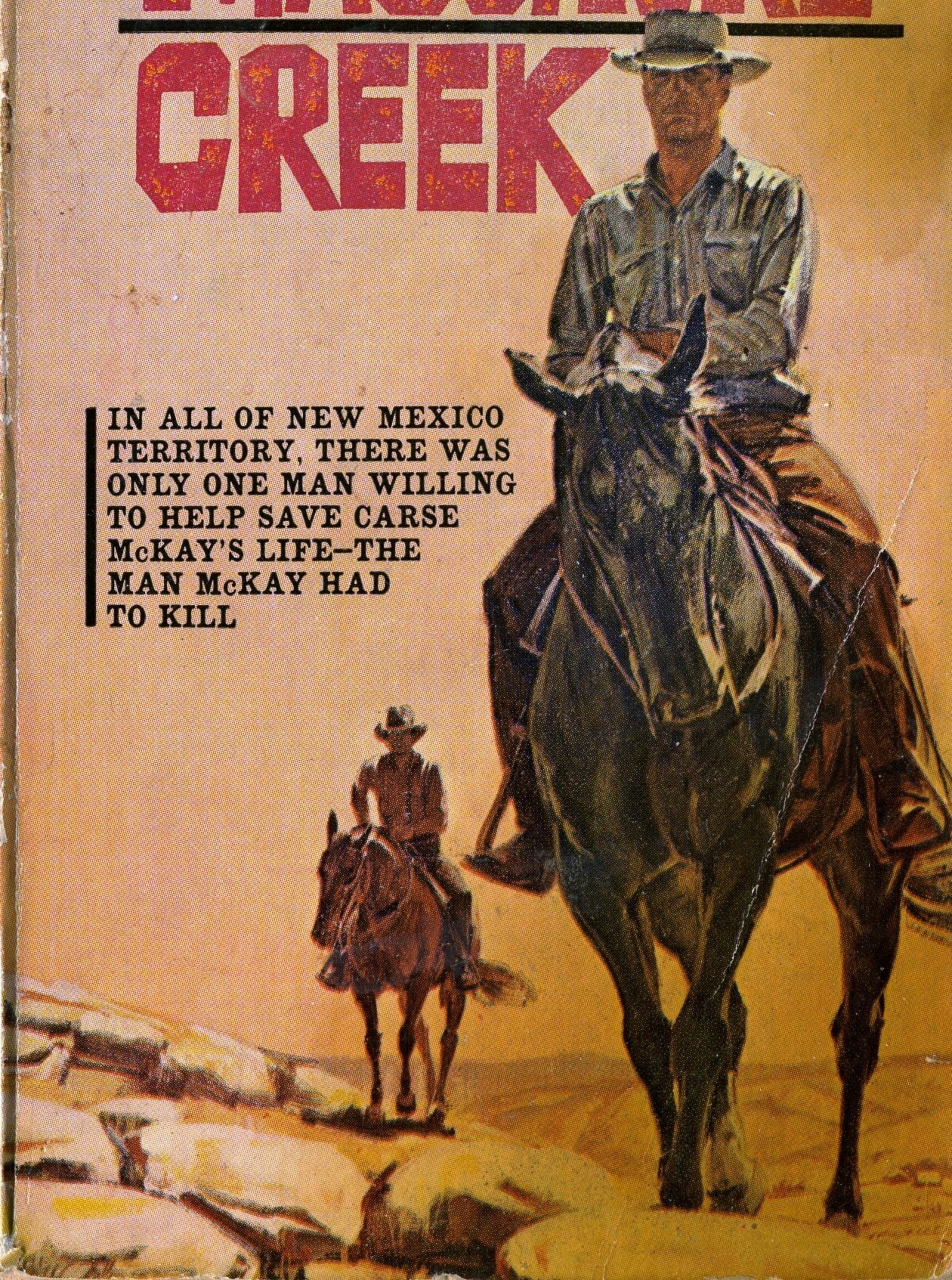


HAL G. EVARTS

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MASSACRE CREEK

IN ALL OF NEW MEXICO
TERRITORY, THERE WAS
ONLY ONE MAN WILLING
TO HELP SAVE CARSE
McKAY'S LIFE—THE
MAN McKAY HAD
TO KILL



After they'd suckered him into making a break for it, and caught him at it, McKay had nothing to lose by lunging at the man with the gun. McKay crashed into Crip, grabbing for the gun, but Crip slashed down with the barrel. They fell heavily, Crip giving an agonized yell for his partner and stabbing his fingers downward for McKay's eyes. His nails raked one cheek and McKay rolled him over and smashed an elbow into his face and heard the brittle snap of bone.

They thrashed on the sand until McKay felt something cool press on the back of his neck with a feather touch, a feather with the bite of steel.

"Don't move," the partner's voice said. "Do and I'll slit your throat."

McKay froze.

"Now get up. Slow and easy."

McKay stumbled to his feet. He was sick and dizzy and the bitterness burned like bile in his throat.

Crip also got up, shaking his head from side to side like some tormented animal, and swiped a sleeve across his battered face. He spat out a piece of tooth and looked at McKay with fiery eyes. "The bastard busted my nose," he said thickly. "Go on, cut him. Let's see what he bleeds."

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MASSACRE CREEK

by Hal G. Evarts

An Original Gold Medal Book

GOLD MEDAL BOOKS

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MASSACRE CREEK

W

HEN CARSE Mc-

Kay rode down out of the hills the afternoon of July first it was nearly a year since he'd last come to town, and still longer since any rain had fallen. The country was parched; dust devils spiraled across the flats with every faint furnace puff of wind. Carse kept his eyes squinted tight against the sun's glare. At the San Luis ford he stopped long enough to water his horse, grateful for the shade of the cottonwoods, then splashed on through the shallows into the first outlying scatter of dobes. He crossed the railroad tracks, passed the depot and two blocks farther along reined up in front of the Valley Union Bank.

The Valley Union, the only bank in Rincon, stood on the northeast corner of the principal intersection in town. An ugly one-story building constructed of local sandstone, it faced the Congress Hotel directly across Main Street, and, diagonally, the Rincon County Court House. The Liberty Mercantile occupied the fourth corner.

The massive double doors of the bank were flanked by thick plate-glass windows, which recently had been shipped by rail from San Francisco and installed at considerable expense. Bold gilt capitals proclaimed the bank's name on the right-hand window. Below this in more modest letters was the legend: CAPITALIZATION \$250,000.00. S. STEWART, PRESIDENT. HOURS 9 TO 5. A white placard attached to the glass announced in neat hand printing that: WE WILL BE CLOSED FOR BUSINESS JULY FOURTH.

Easing one foot in the stirrup, Carse read the notice and tried to peer inside, but the light refraction was such that he could see only his own reflection. With wry amusement he took tally of the image that stared back at him. Under the coating of alkali, from the crown of his battered sweat-stained hat to his cracked boots, he looked in his opinion

like a saddle tramp. No other description fitted. Saddle tramp.

Ordinarily a man who cared little about his physical appearance or the impression he made on strangers, he knew it mattered now. It was vital. Not only to himself, but to a dozen people who were counting on him, and awareness of this responsibility hit him with a sudden jarring impact. He made a tentative motion to dismount, then noticed the sheriff watching from the courthouse doorway across the street. Automatically Carse averted his face and rode on.

For a community which still in part observed its Spanish heritage, Main Street was surprisingly active at this siesta hour. Saddle horses and teams, wagons and buckboards lined the hitching rails. Men and women in their town finery strolled along the sidewalks or clustered under the metal awnings to trade gossip and fan themselves, while packs of small boys tossed firecrackers and raced barefoot through the dust. Flags and red, white and blue bunting decked the stores fronts, and an overhead banner invited one and all to attend the annual fair, promising such attractions as fireworks, speeches, band concerts, dancing and horse racing.

Rincon County, Carse reflected, had mighty little to celebrate this year, but a visitor would never guess it.

Turning south on River Street, he entered the alley that ran behind the mercantile and got off before a barn-like structure under the sign: ACE LIVERY—HORSES AND RIGS FOR HIRE—FEED AND GRAIN. Carse was a tall spare man of thirty-one, although the Indian gravity of his expression made him appear older; only the crinkles around his mouth betrayed an underlying sense of humor. He had unusually large hands, calloused and rope-burned, a small triangular scar on his left cheek, and there was about him an air which men who live alone sometimes acquire, an air of coiled wariness.

"Boise," he called. "You in there, Boise?"

He listened for a minute but heard only the sound of horses chomping and moving around in their stalls, then called again and stepped through the archway into the familiar ammoniac aura of stable smells. Mounds of day-old manure, a tangle of bridles and hackamores fallen from their pegs, a puddle of spilled oats—all attested to neglect. A boot squeaked behind him and he whirled, one hand dropping to his gun butt.

A dumpy man in a dirty checkered vest stepped out from

behind a pile of feed bags, grinning broadly. "Kinda jumpy, ain't you?"

Carse let the .45 fall back and said dryly, "Fellow I knew once got himself shot doing that."

"Thought you were a bill collector," the hostler cackled and screwed up his rheumy, near-sighted eyes, and Carse caught a whiff of whisky. "How are you, Carse? Been a coon's age since I seen you."

"Quite a spell," Carse said. "Big doings in town, looks like."

"Big nothings, you ask me. All the flag-wavin' and speech-makin', and ev'ry mother's son in this hellhole flat busted, or will be come fall."

"Not that bad, is it?"

"Worse. Town's fulla gamblers an' grafters. Trash. They'll get what money's left. Watch your britches, boy, 'specially at the fairground."

Boise, Carse suspected, was an incorrigible gossip, and he hated to be obligated in any slight degree, but Boise Brown happened to be the only person in Rincon he knew well enough to ask even this homely favor. "All right if I change my duds here and clean up a bit?"

"How long you in town for?"

He hoped to be on his way that night, and disliked to admit that he was trying to scrimp the price of a hotel room, having less than five dollars cash money in his jeans. For that matter he could have changed in the brush outside town, but a man had some pride left. "Can't tell yet."

"Well, reckon so," Boise gave his grudging assent. "Boss wouldn't like it much, but seein's you're an old friend—"

Carse hardly considered Boise a friend, but he nodded his thanks and led his horse in from the alley. Untying his carpetbag from the saddle, he filled a water bucket at the trough, got out his mirror, razor, and sliver of soap and shaved with painstaking care. Peeled down to his drawers, he washed and put on a white shirt and shook the wrinkles out of his old black suit, which Mary Halloran had pressed and folded for him only yesterday. His boots were beyond help, but he got a brush and rubbed up the nap on his hat, then squirmed into his coat, which seemed to have shrunk since he'd worn it last.

He examined himself critically in the glass and allowed there was some improvement. Some, but not enough. A wagon-

load of soap wouldn't scrub off the worry lines, that hungry, hard-times look. Still, he had to pull this off somehow. Purely had to. He couldn't go back empty-handed.

"Better not pack that there on the street," Boise said. "Land in jail."

"Jail?"

"Sheriff's order. No guns in town this week. Too many drunks shootin' at the moon."

"Oh." There had been a time when he would have laughed at such an order and worn his gun regardless, for the sheer ornery hell of it. Now he unbuckled the shell belt and holstered .45 and stuffed them in his bag. "*Gracias*. Buy you a drink when I get back."

"By jibbies, a man works up an awful thirst in this heat. Why don't we grab us a snort now?"

Carse shook his head. He could use one to limber up his nerve, but this was no time to be smelling like a saloon. "Later."

"Well, I'm willin' and able, any time. Watcha hear from home, Carse?"

"Nothing. I burnt my bridges a long while back."

"Yeah, figured you did. But you can trust old Boise. He don't talk out of turn."

The voice had grown ingratiating, hinting at an unspoken conspiracy between them, a sly reminder that Boise Brown had not forgotten the past, that Carse had better not forget either. The tone of it brought color surging into his face, but he bit down on his temper. "*Hasta*," he said.

Outside he walked back slowly to the corner and began to sweat at once. In his mind he had rehearsed what he planned to say, and in his pocket he had the letter of intent, but all the persuasive arguments sounded lame and unconvincing now. They wouldn't bring him a dime if the word was out. Carse McKay, jailbird. Sooner or later the word always did get out.

In the doorway opposite he caught sight of the sheriff again and stopped to mop his face, wondering if Ortega knew. Sheriff Ortega, so the story went, had a memory like a magnet. He had never spoken to the man, never been inside *his* jail, but it was the sheriff's job to know such things. Carse drew a deep breath, plunged through the crowd and turned into the bank.

After the harsh light of the street the interior seemed

dim and cool and church-like in its hush. He removed his hat and stepped uncertainly toward a railing which extended from the front of the building to a partition in the back. There were four people behind the railing: two shirtsleeved men perched on high stools entering figures in ledgers; a young man in a coat behind a wicket marked "Cashier"; a woman at a desk with her back to the door. A fifth man, an elderly Negro, was sweeping out at the rear.

For a town the size of Rincon he had expected something fancier, but the Valley Union Bank had no frills. Bare pine floors, scarred benches for the customers, three spittoons, and on the other side the most utilitarian of furniture. Ben Franklin's maxim on thrift, framed under glass, adorned one otherwise barren wall. It was like some austere temple consecrated to an ancient cult.

Carse edged closer and cleared his throat. The young man finished stacking some coins, jotted a notation on his pad and looked up with cold impersonal eyes.

"Like to see the president, Mr. Stewart, I guess."

The eyes made their appraisal and in a precise courteous tone that committed him to nothing the cashier said, "Mr. Stewart is not here today. Can I help you, sir?"

"Might, but I'd rather talk to him."

"I'm afraid that will be impossible. If you care to leave a message—"

"Who runs the place when he's away?"

"As a matter of fact, I am in charge." A slight frown began to stitch across the high pale forehead. "I don't believe that you are one of our regular depositors."

"Never been here before," Carse said, feeling the warmth crawl up his cheeks.

"Did you wish to open an account, sir?"

"You're in charge of loaning money, are you?"

At the word "loan" the young man's expression underwent a change. He allowed himself a faint well-bred smile and his eyes puckered warily. "Ah yes, a loan." The smile said that he knew this type, yes indeed. Probably a ranch hand out of work, wanting to borrow a few dollars on his saddle or some worthless horse for a spree over the Glorious Fourth. "And how much do you require?"

Carse swallowed. No use holding back now. Might as well go whole hog. "One thousand dollars."

He hadn't meant to speak so loudly, nor with such

belligerence. One of the bookkeepers put down his pen and peered over the tops of his glasses. The cashier, mouth open, stared at him.

"Here." Carse fumbled inside his coat and fished out the envelope. "Read that."

The young man, his aplomb already recovered, touched a finger to the flap and said silkily, "That is rather a large sum, sir. The Valley Union Bank—"

"Huntley." The woman Carse had noticed earlier turned and rose from her chair. "I'll see the gentleman," she said in a pleasant light-timbered voice.

"But Amy, he—he—"

"I heard him. A thousand dollars." Smiling, she came forward and unlatched a hinged gate in the railing. "Come in, Mr. —"

"McKay. Carson McKay."

"Amy Stewart." She thrust out a firm brown hand and shook, manlike. "Frankly, I'm curious."

Uneasily he balanced on the edge of a chair facing her across the desk, conscious of Huntley's disapproving frown. She was older than he had first assumed, in her mid-twenties, a slender auburn-haired woman with remarkable blue-green eyes that reminded him of turquoise. She looked rather severe, almost prim, in her starched shirtwaist, like the decor of the bank itself, but there was something altogether feminine about her full, sensuous lips and tiny white ear lobes. On her left hand she wore what he took to be a gold wedding ring.

"Well, Mr. McKay, have you sized me up yet?"

"Isn't that what I'm supposed to ask you, Mrs. Stewart?"

When she laughed her whole face came alight. "Most men are curious about me when they walk in here the first time. They resent women in a bank. It's a man's world, Mr. McKay. But the world is changing. So I warn them I'm as tough as any male when it comes to money."

"Tougher, I'll bet," he said truthfully. "My ma was."

"Guardian of the sugar bowl," Amy Stewart said. "That's our traditional role. Valley Union's my sugar bowl temporarily. I'm acting for my father-in-law, who's been ill."

"Your husband, he's a banker too?"

"He's dead. Now, Mr. McKay, my cards are on the table. Tell me why this bank should loan you one thousand dollars."

She folded her hands on the desk top, regarding him attentively. He crossed his legs and settled deeper in the chair. The facts and figures had seemed so simple when he'd gone over them before, the need so obvious, but could he make this woman understand? A woman who, by the look of her, had never known the meanness of want, the day-in day-out fight against drought and dirt and loneliness; never known how it was to cook over mesquite roots or feed a kid on doughbelly and lard for three months running; never worn a dress of flour sacking till it fell apart in rags. How to explain all that to a lady like Amy Stewart?

"Have you ever been to Massacre Basin?"

"No. North of here, isn't it? In the mountains?"

He nodded and kneaded his big-boned knuckles. "Water. We need water for crops."

"Crops?" An eyebrow lifted. "Are you a farmer? I shouldn't have thought so."

"I raise horses, whatever you call that. Tim Halloran, he raises pigs. Larsen, my other neighbor, grows wheat, or tries to. We're all close to burnt out."

"So is most of Rincon County, Mr. McKay. We hold notes on half the cattle ranches in this part of the territory. Where do you propose to find this water?"

"Massacre Crick. Year 'round flow. The job is how to move it." He handed her the letter, which he had so laboriously composed in the hope that it might express what he in words never could; he studied her face as she read. Head-strong, he thought, set in her ways. Used to men dancing at her beck and call. A woman banker! Next thing they'd be taking over the barber shops and saloons. At least this one was a looker, which made him wonder about her late husband. What kind of a man would she pick—one she could ride roughshod over? Surely not a two-bit mustang roper.

"To the Head Banker, Rincon City," he had written. "Sir: The undersigned has the honor to represent the citizens of Massacre Basin, to the number of twelve, including four adults (two female) and eight kids. This is a coming country. We have good soil, plenty of room to grow in and it's only forty miles to town, so we're not cut off from civilization like some folks might think.

"In the old days the Apaches had a camp up here, which shows what kind of a place it is to live because they knew a good thing. They sure fought hard to keep it. That's

where the massacre part comes in. The basin is tamed down now and someday we figure to build a wagon road in and maybe put up a school, if the population keeps booming. There's no church yet but we have two strong faiths. (Roman Catholic and Reformed Lutheran), and family services are held every Sunday.

"The trouble is, Your Honor, the springs dried up for the first time since the oldest Indian can remember. We now have to haul water two miles from the creek. But if we built a rock dam in the canyon and a flume-ditch down to the flats we'd all have water aplenty, and this basin could be the paradise God intended. You ought to see the stand of timothy we cut last fall.

"The labor would be done by Basin folks under the lead of Swede Larsen, who used to be a carpenter back in Minnesota. He knows his business. This is a big job and we need cash money to buy some blasting powder, cut lumber, a fresno and work team and quite a few tools. The list might be pared a little but not much, because we want to do this right and build it solid to last.

"We don't like to toot our horn too loud, but we're honest people and not afraid to work, having put in three years apiece on this land. If you see fit to loan us the money you'll get paid back every penny. If you don't, and if the rains don't come, Massacre Basin is going to blow away in the next big wind, and us with it.

Yr. Humble Servant, Carson McKay

"Witness: Tim Halloran

"Knute Larsen"

Amy Stewart started to fold the letter into the envelope, then read it again. "What's your religious faith, Mr. McKay—Scots-Presbyterian?"

Startled, he said, "Backslid Mormon, if anything. My folks were Saints."

"Let's see if I have this straight," she said. "There are two families with children living in this valley. And yourself, a bachelor, I take it. Thirteen people in all."

"That's right. Scattered though. Not right next door."

"And your neighbors have authorized you to act in their behalf, to negotiate with the bank, sign papers, contract debts in their name, so on?"

He nodded.

"They must think well of you. But the question is, what kind of security can the three of you put up for such a loan?"

"Land. We all own clear. Three sections of the best—"

"Land won't do, Mr. McKay. It's a drug on today's market. This bank is overloaded with land. But maybe you have some other collateral. Livestock, for instance. Or equipment."

Carse felt the weight of her eyes on him, those green-blue eyes that looked as deep and cool as mountain lakes. There'd be no honey-talking this woman. She could read a man as quick as a balance sheet, tote up his haves against his someday-maybes. Sweet and soft she might be from the skin out, a luscious armful at a dance, but a catamount to tangle with. "Not much," he told her. "Few head of unbroke mustangs, a couple of brood sows, a Jersey milker, some chickens. Pretty piddling when you come to sum it up, I reckon."

She asked him a string of questions, quick and probing, about improvements, riparian rights, gravity flow, homestead entries and the like. All of which supported his first estimate. She had a business brain under that red-brown hair. She knew land, not just in terms of dollars, but the feel and shape and use of it. And she held the future, the very life, of the Basin in one small palm.

"I think I have the main facts now," she said. "Except one. Namely, you, Mr. McKay."

"Me?"

"Believe it or not, banking is mostly people. Not silver in a vault. Oh, we're in business to make money. But I've made loans to men without a dime because I had faith in them. People like your neighbors, dirt farmers in a raw new country, I can understand. But you, Mr. McKay, puzzle me."

"How so?"

"I don't know. Call it a woman's intuition, and laugh if you want. But I have a feeling all *your* cards aren't on the table."

"There's nothing else I can tell you."

"Can you give me any character references, the names of any friends to vouch for your reliability?"

Somehow he doubted that acquaintance with Boise Brown would count much in his favor. "Not a one," he said.

"Then I'm afraid—" Her glance strayed to the letter and she began to skim it again.

He sat rigid in the chair, hat on his lap, hands gripping the arms, and waited for the axe to fall. He wouldn't beg. Not that he was too proud. But begging would earn him nothing but contempt from Amy Stewart. Well, he'd warned Tim and Swede not to expect the moon. They'd take this hard, and so would their women. For them all it was the end of a big shiny dream.

The accumulation of tiny muted sounds began to twang at his nerves: the ticking of a wall clock, pens scratching over paper, the swish of the Negro's broom. Two customers had come and gone and Huntley, still at his cashier's window, went on stacking a seemingly endless supply of coins. How much longer would this woman take?

In his mind he pictured the Basin as he first had seen it three years ago, a green pocket under the red sandstone bluffs. Not too high to get deep winter snow, but well above the desert lowlands. The springs had seemed inexhaustible then. Up there under the mountain sky he'd found isolation and a sense of peace that was like balm to old unhealed wounds. Up there he was plain Carse McKay, and no questions asked.

"Mr. McKay?"

"Ma'am?"

"I'd like more time to think this over. Don't hold too much hope, but the circumstances are somewhat—unusual. Could you come in tomorrow morning?"

He got to his feet and tried to read her eyes. Distrust? Suspicion? Pity? But her face told him nothing. He nodded and said curtly, "Thanks for your time, Mrs. Stewart."

Outside on the walk he stood unmoving, oblivious to the crowds and the heat and dust. *Don't hold too much hope.* What had she meant by that? A crumb of consolation? Was she too soft-hearted, after all, to give him a hard flat turndown? Was that why she'd left him dangling? He glanced at the sheriff's office. If Ortega knew about him, so did Amy Stewart, or she'd find out in a hurry. Carse McKay, outlaw. Once you had that particular can tied to your tail you couldn't run fast or far enough.

Oh, she'd made it sound like pretty-please-with-sugar-on, but the answer tomorrow would be *No*. And that dude cashier had stacked enough coins in ten minutes to feed the Halloran kids the next three years. Money, money, everywhere, Carse thought, but not a cent for me. Viciously he smacked a fist in-

to his palm. This time I won't cut and run. I'll get that money, never mind how. By God in Heaven, I'll get it!

He crossed to the mercantile, spent some time making a purchase, emerged and turned west on Main with a long, determined stride. He had one other last-ditch prospect, one as feeble as a sinner's prayer, and it was a measure of his desperation that he thought of it at all.

Before the Palace he paused and peered over the slatted doors, then squared his shoulders and pushed inside. From faro layouts and poker tables up front to the long bar in back the saloon was jammed, and a clamorous surf of voices and clinking glassware and piano music beat at his eardrums as he pushed his way toward the stairs. Smoke clung to the ceiling in gauzy blue-gray streamers, and the reek of sour mash thickened the air. The thought of a cold beer brought saliva to his mouth but he climbed on steadily to the balcony and knocked at an unmarked door.

A woman's laughter trilled from the room beyond and he had to rap a third time before a red-faced young man finally poked his head out and said, "You got a ham fist, friend. Where's the fire?"

This sally brought another squeal from the unseen woman, and Carse said apologetically, "Sorry. I'm looking for Tom Judd."

"A lot of people are. Who're you?"

Carse told him.

"What you want Judd for?"

"Personal."

"Personal, hey? You in trouble at the tables downstairs?"

"No. I sold him some horses two years ago. He'll remember."

"Look, come back some other time. I'm busy."

"How about Judd?" Carse said. "Is he busy?"

"Christ, I dunno. He's out of town."

Unconsciously Carse rubbed the scar on his cheek. *A friend to vouch for your reliability.* Well, Tom Judd wasn't exactly a friend. But he had money. Not to loan at banker's rates, most likely, but his would buy powder and lumber and tools as quick as Amy Stewart's. And when you needed money badly enough you went wherever money was, never mind the cost. You went with your hat in your hand, because money was power that most men respected and some few worshipped. Money could buy you a beer or build you two miles of flume, so you did

what you had to. "Can you tell me when he'll be back? It's important."

"To you, maybe." The young man shrugged. "Not to him, friend."

Carse's left hand shot out. He grabbed a fistful of shirt front and lifted the man six inches off the floor. Very gently he shook him. "Friend," he said, "it's important to *you*. So think real hard."

The man struggled and kicked at Carse's kneecap. Carse shoved him back against the wall. "Harder, friend."

The man gasped and said through chattering teeth, "T-t-try tomorrow. M-m-maybe he'll be in then."

Carse pushed him away and tramped back down the stairs. Tomorrow, he thought bitterly. He didn't have any tomorrows left. Somehow he'd get that money.

* * *

Two miles west of Rincon the train whistled for a crossing and began to slacken speed. There were only three passengers in the coach behind the express car—a man dozing with a newspaper spread over his face and a well dressed couple sitting across the aisle several rows farther back. The man by the window leaned forward on the hard plush seat and peered out. At first he could barely make out the town through the soot-streaked glass; then a sprawl of buildings materialized from out of the heat haze so suddenly they gave the illusion of rushing forth to meet him.

The town lay exactly as he remembered, dun-gray and ugly under the summer sun, as though all its life juices had evaporated. Only the greenery of the river bottoms, which here made a great serpentine loop, relieved the harsh monotony of the desert. Drawing closer to the outskirts, he could see an eruption of some half-dozen tents, the skeleton of a grandstand and a row of flags which marked a race course. That much was new since his visit the month before, and the man smiled as he turned back to his companion.

His name was Frankie Spain and he looked like a successful drummer or a land speculator. The conservative broadcloth suit, the spotless linen and highly polished shoes gave to the casual observer an impression of substance and respectability. He was floridly handsome, bold featured, with a mat of thick curly black hair, and he smiled easily and often. Breezy good

humor almost obliterated the hint of coarseness in his face, the cynicism of his eyes, and the sly cruelty of his mouth. Most men found him hearty and likeable enough, while women were more likely to reserve judgment.

"Here we are," he said cheerfully.

The woman looked pale and tired as she fussed nervously with her gloves, but she managed a smile in reply.

The rumbling of the wheels slowed and with a final clank of couplings the train shuddered to a halt, and the stink of coal smoke and hot metal from the panting engine flowed into the coach. The conductor opened the vestibule door and called, "Rincon! Rincon! End of the line."

Frankie Spain tugged at the chain across his shirt front and hauled out a watch. "Right on time," he announced.

"Yes, sir," the conductor said. "We do our best." He didn't get many passengers like these two on this branch line. High tone, he thought. The gent, a free and easy spender, the lady soft spoken and no put-on airs. But he'd bet a gold-plated ticket punch they weren't married. That was one thing about a man and woman he could spot right off. "Hope you folks enjoy the celebration."

"We sure will, won't we, Verna?" Frankie laughed and slipped a dollar in the conductor's hand. "A bangup Fourth."

"That's right, hon."

Frankie rose, stretched his big, powerfully muscled body, and glanced incuriously at the other passenger who sauntered past with a newspaper rolled under one arm. With easy grace Frankie swung down the two valises from the overhead rack. A third piece of luggage, a new traveling case of heavy pigskin stamped with the gilt initials *J. L.*, lay on the opposite seat. "Give you a hand," the conductor offered. He reached, lifted and made his standard joke. "Say, that's heavy. What you got in there—lead?"

"Lead, you guessed it." Frankie winked. "That's my sample case. I'm in the gold brick business."

The conductor laughed dutifully and carried the bag up the aisle. In a low strained voice, the woman said, "Frankie, stop it." She was blonde and pretty and a little plump, although her tightly corseted figure was still striking. Her delft blue eyes were wide now and tiny droplets of perspiration glistened on her upper lip. "Don't act so crazy!"

"Crazy?" He grinned. "What's wrong? You scared already?"

"I—I can't help it, Frankie."

He gave her arm a squeeze, hard enough to make her wince. "Don't call me that in public. Remember. Let's go now."

In the vestibule he paused while Verna descended the steps to the crowded depot platform, holding her skirts above her shoe-tops. She'd give those clodhoppers a thrill, he thought; every one ogling her ankles. Yes, he'd been smart to bring her along. Nobody in this nowhere tail end of creation would be looking for Frankie Spain with a woman.

A firecracker exploded nearby. Verna gave a start, and the crowd laughed. Frankie's mouth twisted. Laugh, you stupid bastards, he thought. Laugh your heads off. But wait a few more days. Then we'll see what's funny.

But he wasn't really angry, only contemptuous. He was too full of a rising excitement to resent a bunch of town wits. He felt the tension building in his chest, that pleasurable tingling awareness of what he wanted and how to get it, now that he was so close. Frankie Spain had devoted most of his thirty-five years to gratifying his immediate wants, often by violence, but he could be patient and self-controlled when circumstances demanded. He joined in the laughter and called, "Thanks for the welcome, boys."

The hotel hack deposited them at the Congress a few minutes later and their entry into the lobby created a flurry of interest. Men broke off their conversation and turned to glance at Verna, and their wives darted critical glances at her costume. These people would be curious about strangers, Frankie knew, like people anywhere. He and Verna would give them something to talk about besides the weather and county politics. This drawing of attention to himself was not vanity alone; it had a purpose, deliberate and calculated.

The clerk behind the counter remembered him well from his previous visit. It was a rare guest at the Congress who handed out two-dollar tips. Yes indeed, the clerk assured him, he had the gentleman's reservation, the same room, Number Seven, the best in the house. Everything was ready. He smiled deferential, Frankie smiled back and with a flourish signed the register: *Mr. & Mrs. John T. Leonard, San Francisco.*

"Anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable, Mr. Leonard—"

"I'll let you know," he said and took Verna by the arm.

Number Seven was on the northwest corner of the second floor with windows overlooking both Main and River Streets.

It was a large room, carpeted and furnished with some pretension, and at the moment, a prison of close stale air superheated by the midafternoon sun. The porter set down their bags, and went through the ritual of rolling up the blinds and opening a window. "Cools off some after dark," he said.

Frankie tossed him two bits and locked the door. Verna collapsed on the bed with a groan. "Lordy, it's like an oven."

He stepped to the front window and peered out at the Valley Union Bank across the street. A Negro was washing down the plate-glass windows with a long-handled mop, every now and then squeezing it out into a bucket. Frankie watched the rhythmic strokes with a kind of fascination, and his broad chest rose and fell slowly. A man entered the bank, a woman and child came out. The gilt figures, \$250,000.00, which he could not read at this distance but knew by heart, glinted in the sunlight.

"I've got a splitting head," Verna said. "Fix me a drink, will you."

Ignoring her, he crossed to the other window and stood off to one side so that he would not be too conspicuous from the street below. From this angle he had a view of the east end of the courthouse, a squat sandstone monstrosity like the bank. It housed the circuit court and jail and various county offices, including that of the sheriff, which occupied the nearest ground floor corner. For some while he watched the man standing motionless in the doorway. Occasionally the man touched a finger to his hat brim when a woman passed, or nodded briefly or shifted the matchstick in his mouth, and then froze back into lizard-like immobility.

"Just one, Frankie. A little one."

Reluctantly he turned toward the bed. The years were beginning to show on Verna Gale—the slight flabbiness under the chin, the fine engraving around her eyes. There had been a time when she wouldn't have tolerated the likes of Frankie Spain, when the posters had billed her as the "Toast of the Barbary Coast." A long time ago, that was, before whisky roughened her voice and the slow erosion set in, before the main chance had trickled away like sand in an hour glass. But he needed her now and the urgency of that need triggered a sudden anger.

"Listen to me. You don't touch a drop while we're here. Act like a lady, or try to. You're Mrs. John Leonard, my wife."

"Frankie, all I said—"

"Damn your headache. You know what you have to do. We've been over it a hundred times. So change into that other dress, wash the goop off your face and don't douse on any more perfume. You smell like a madam now."

"You don't have to talk so rough. I'll do my part."

"You bet you will. I spent months planning this and setting up the works. Nothing's going to spoil it."

"But coming in the way we did, like a brass band. What if somebody recognizes you?"

"Who? I never been within a thousand miles of this town till last month. That's why I picked it. I'm just a name down here. They don't have a thing on me."

"I'll be all right in a minute, honey. Guess I got the shakes." She caught at his hand and rubbed it against her cheek.

"Sure, sure," he said, partly mollified, "quit stewing, will you. I've done jobs like this before. I've ridden with the best. Cassidy, Sundance Kid, the Logan boys. Me, Frankie Spain, I've ridden with 'em all. I had my own bunch, up in the Hole. And money, you never saw so much, money stickin' out my ears. We had some high old times, I'll tell you."

"Whatever happened to it all?" She knew, she had heard the story before, but she let him run on because she knew it pleased him.

"The money? Lawyers got it mostly. I shot a man, a man who needed shooting. And this lawyer took on to defend me. He took my money and framed me with a crooked judge. Between 'em they fixed me. Sent me to jail for six years. Six lousy years! They thought I was finished." He made an abrupt dismissing chop with his free hand. "Well, they were wrong. I'm back in business."

She tugged at his arm, trying to pull him down to the bed, but he jerked away and walked to the washstand. Leaning close to the mirror, he saw a single gray hair over his temple and yanked it out. He worried about his hair and the telltale gray roots, a legacy from his prison years. Ever since he'd carried a bottle of black dye. But hell, he told himself, he didn't look old. He was as good as ever. Better than ever. They'd be hearing from Frankie Spain again. Soon.

"Frankie, you mean it, don't you? About South America?"

"You think I'd lie to you?"

"A lot of men 've tried, hon. But somehow I kinda be-

lieve you." The springs creaked under her ripe heavy body and her voice grew dreamy. "Rio. Argentina, all those places. Sounds like heaven."

"Yeah. Butch is down there now, and Harry. They'll roll out the carpet for us."

"Imagine, little Verna, off to see the world with a trunkful of clothes. It's a laugh, Frankie, but I've never been south of South Frisco before in my life."

He grinned at himself in the mirror, his volatile good humor restored once more. "Come on. We got work to do."

While Verna was changing he returned to the front window. The Negro handyman had finished washing the bank windows across the street and was wringing out his mop. A man in shirtsleeves, obviously an employee, stepped outside and leaned against the wall, puffing on a pipe. Frankie listened absently to Verna's chatter, aware that she expected no response, and studied the crowds that eddied back and forth along the sidewalk. Presently he consulted his watch and pulled down one of the blinds halfway and settled back in the room's only chair to wait.

A few minutes later a tap sounded on the door. He motioned to Verna, who swung around from the mirror and called, "Who is it?"

"Pike."

He unlocked the door to admit a tall gaunt man with a bony face and pale deep-set eyes that gave him the mien of a mournful hound. Except for a new yellow kerchief around his neck, his clothes were shabby and nondescript and he moved with a slow heavy tread, as though his corns hurt. "How are you, Verna?" he said in a sleepy, indifferent tone, and nodded to Frankie. "Have a good trip?"

"All right." Frankie knew Pike Lary too well to be taken in by the man's outward lethargy. An old hand at this business, Pike wasted no energy on nonessentials, but Frankie asked as a matter of habit, "Anybody see you come in the hotel?"

"I used the outside stairs."

"After this," Frankie said, "keep away. I'll come to you. It's safer. Is everything set?"

"Uh-huh. Me and Crip got in yesterday. We met your man Reese and camped up the river. Looked over the town last night."

"How are the horses?"

"Good shape. Two days rest they'll be rarin' to go."

"Fine," Frankie said. "You know where to leave 'em."

Pike fingered the egg-yolk folds of his neckerchief and sidled over to the front window, where he readjusted the blind. With a faint, sad clown's grin he said, "Nice view you have."

Frankie laughed. "Scenic. Lots of fresh air too."

"I hear the sheriff hired three special deputies for the week," Pike went on. "Local cowhands. They'll work the fairground mostly."

"How do you size up the sheriff?"

"Same as you did. A tough old coot. He *lives* in that jail."

"Well, we figured on that. How about the horse races?"

"They posted the entry lists this morning. Trial heats start four o'clock Friday afternoon, run through seven or later. Everyone in Rincon'll be there."

"Too bad we have to miss it," Frankie said. He could imagine Pike slouching from bar to bar, listening to scraps of talk and asking a question or two, hiding his cold ferocity behind that weepy hangdog face. But Pike was a worrier too, a chronic show-me doubter who saw the dark side of every coin. And something worried him now. "What else you pick up?"

Pike slid his neckerchief around and examined the material. "Genuine China silk, the clerk said. Set me back a dollar in the store."

"Spit it out, Pike. What's on your mind?"

Pike turned his back to the window and glanced pointedly at Verna, who was brushing her hair with furious strokes. "We gotta have a private talk."

"Verna's a big girl now. You won't offend her maidenly ears."

"Here it is then," Pike said slowly. "This fellow Reese."

"Pony Reese? What about him?"

"I dunno, Frankie. I got a funny feel about him. He don't smell right somehow."

"I'm the one who brought him into this deal. He smells right to me."

"You and Crip and me, we've worked together before," Pike said. "But Reese is an outsider. He talks too loud, asks too many questions, don't like this, don't like that, alla time belly-achin'."

Frankie snorted. Granted, Pony Reese was an unknown,

untested quantity. But he came recommended by mutual friends and had the right connections. Anyway, it was too late to make a switch, even if he could find a replacement. Reese had become the key man in his plans. "You worry too much. Nobody ever claimed Reese was a choir boy."

"He's trouble, Frankie. I'm tellin' ya."

"Where is he now?"

"Holed up at that shack with Crip. You better come back with me and straighten him out."

"Don't tell me what to do. I'll run this my way."

"Sure, sure. But where are we if he goes sour? We ain't got a pot to sit on in this country?"

"You get back there and handle your job. I'll handle mine. Come on now, get going."

"Don't wait too long, Frankie. That Reese, I don't trust him."

After Pike Lary had gone his lugubrious way, Frankie put on a fresh shirt and carefully combed his hair, but the sour mood had returned. Damn Pike anyway, he thought, for nagging me with details. Nothing could go wrong. Three days from now they'd all be safe in Mexico. He'd laid it out as clean and simple as a blueprint. So why was he so wringy? Why? Because, Frankie admitted, he didn't trust Reese either. And he didn't know the why of that.

Irritably he picked up the pigskin bag and hefted its weight. "Aren't you ready yet?"

"Just a sec, hon."

Verna had changed into a plain dark dress that made her look slimmer and more subdued. Inspecting her critically, he noticed the bright pink spot in either cheek that no layer of powder could quite conceal. In two strides he reached her, seized her arm and sniffed at her breath. Brandy. Somehow when his back was turned she'd been nipping at his flask, as sly as any chicken thief. In sudden fury he backhanded her across the face and knocked her sprawling on the bed.

She stared up at him, wide-eyed with shock, then a tear trembled on her lashes.

"Get up!"

"Frankie, don't—"

He yanked her to her feet. "Fifty thousand dollars and you got to slop down booze! I oughta break your—"

"Honest," she sniffled, "I'm so scared—"

"You got some cloves." He gave her a shove. "Chew up

a handful. And when we get there keep your mouth shut. I'll do the talking."

Ten minutes later a pale and dry-eyed Verna gathered up her purse and followed him out the door. The crowd in the lobby had thinned out, most of the men having adjourned to the bar annex. With a show of solicitude Frankie escorted her out to the street and steered her across through traffic. At five minutes to five they entered the bank.

It was almost closing time. The janitor was carrying a wastebasket through the doorway in the rear partition. The bookkeeper had closed his ledger and was cleaning his pens. The cashier, young Huntley Raymond, had finished checking his cash drawer. A fourth employee had put on his coat. Amy Stewart sat at her desk poring over some papers. All this Frankie observed in one searching glance as he halted just inside, then propelled Verna forward to the railing.

Every bank followed a more or less set routine, he knew, and the Valley Union was no exception. At this hour of the day people were tired, anxious to get away, careless of small detail, and the routine became automatic and unthinking. His gaze took in the massive iron safe in the corner and shifted back to the cashier. The young man looked up with a self-important smile, caught sight of Verna and straightened his tie. Before he could speak Frankie said, "Tell Mrs. Stewart John Leonard wants to see her. She'll remember."

At the sound of his firm voice Amy Stewart turned with a slight frown and got to her feet. Then her brow smoothed and she came forward with hand extended. "Yes indeed, Mr. Leonard. So you decided to pay us another visit."

"More than visit this time, I hope," Frankie said. "May I present my wife. Verna, honey, meet the best looking banker in the territory."

Amy's cheeks colored faintly and she smiled at Verna. "I'm not used to such outrageous compliments," she said, "but I like them. Won't you please come in, Mrs. Leonard."

Verna murmured something inaudible and then they were seated at Amy's desk, under the maxim on thrift, while Amy made casual small talk to put Verna at ease. Frankie smiled from one to the other, now and then adding a comment, and kept one eye on the wall clock. "How's your father-in-law, Mrs. Stewart?" he said presently. "I'd like to meet him sometime."

"Better, thank you," Amy said. "He has his ups and downs." She made a little deprecatory gesture. "I'm not a very good substitute, but someone had to help out till he gets back on his feet."

"Do you like it?" Verna ventured.

Amy's quick warm smile came again as she brushed a strand of reddish hair back from her forehead. "It's not exactly a woman's work, Mrs. Leonard. But I find it—exciting. It's in my blood, I guess. My father was a banker too."

Promptly at five o'clock the janitor reappeared from the rear of the building, closed and locked the big double front doors, and pulled down the roller blinds. Now Frankie watched him draw thick sun-faded curtains across the windows, screening the bank's interior from the street, so that only a green aqueous light filtered into the room. "Those dreadful curtains," Amy said with a rueful laugh. "But Dad Stewart won't let me change a thing."

"Didn't mean to get here so late," Frankie said. "We can come back tomorrow if it's more convenient."

"We're here to suit our customers' convenience, Mr. Leonard." In that moment her manner underwent a subtle change. She was still a gracious young woman but Frankie felt the impact of her curiously blue-green oriental eyes. The social hour was over. "Now," she said, "what can I do for you?"

"I'd like to open a small drawing account." Frankie plucked several bills from his wallet. "Say two hundred dollars. Mainly for my wife. She wants to do some shopping."

"Certainly." She counted the money and gave Verna another smile, as though a two-hundred-dollar depositor were an everyday occurrence. "I'll need your signature, Mrs. Leonard."

"And can you keep these papers for me in your safe?" Frankie unlocked the case beside his chair, drew out a fat sealed envelope and laid it on the desk. "They're too valuable to leave in a hotel room."

He had to repress a grin when Amy called the cashier over. "Huntley," she said, "give Mr. Leonard a receipt for his papers and lock the safe when you close up tonight."

The young man made a stiff little bow and carried the envelope back to his counter as if it were a packet of diamonds. "Don't suppose you have to worry about holdups here, Mrs. Stewart," Frankie said. "Not with a sheriff right across the street."

"We worry more about the average mean rainfall. Rincon is a pretty law-abiding town nowadays."

He ought to drop it, he knew, but the woman's composure nettled him. There she sat, pampered and protected, high and mighty, bossing men around, with the power to turn the flow of money off and on like you'd twist a faucet, all because she'd married a rich man's son. Her story about banker's blood didn't fool Frankie Spain. He'd known her kind, the kind who bought their way up with their bodies, bed by bed. And he wondered how soft her flesh would feel, how it would be to strip away that cool proper shell and make her whimper in pain and ecstasy. "Nowadays?" he said. "You mean you've had trouble before."

"Long before I came to Rincon as a bride, or so my husband used to tell me, Sheriff Ortega shot down three outlaws on the street one day in the space of ten seconds. Even for this country that's something of a record. I think your funds will be safe, Mr. Leonard." He sensed her withdrawal from him and something stronger—possibly dislike—as she turned to Verna again. "If you're still here after the holiday, may I come to call?"

"Uh—that's real sweet but—"

"We'll be here," he cut back in. "I'm interested in buying up property. Mining property." He nudged a toe against the bag at his feet. "Always carry me ore samples. Maybe you'd like to see some highgrade silver."

"Some other time, thank you." Suddenly she seemed weary. "It's rather late."

It was twenty-five-after-five, he noticed, a half-hour since he'd entered the bank. And now Verna had the shakes again. The color had seeped from her face. "Sure," he said, "we'll be seeing you again." He held Amy's hand a bit longer than was necessary, smiling down at her, pleased at her discomfiture. "A pleasure to do business with you any time, Mrs. Stewart."

The formalities of signing papers finished, they said good-bye and walked to the front door, which the Negro unlocked to let them out. The heat was still intense and a dry desert wind puffed at his coattails. He halted at the corner, once more aware if a tingling excitement in his chest, his stomach, his loins. Amy Stewart had added that extra fillip to his anticipation.

"She's nice," Verna said. "I wish you hadn't talked like that."

"Oh, she's nice. She's the queen bee around here." He laughed. "Why not, with all that money?"

Suddenly his muscles tightened. A tall ungainly man in a rumpled and too-tight black suit had turned the opposite corner and with long strides moved along the sidewalk. Frankie had only a glimpse of his profile, a flash impression of a scarred cheek, then a passing wagon cut off his view. By the time it had rattled by the man was no longer in sight, lost among the drifting crowds.

"What is it, Frankie? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he snapped at her. "Nothing's wrong." Still somewhat shaken, he returned to the hotel. What they both needed was a drink. One for Verna, maybe a couple for himself. All the way up to their room he told himself it was a trick of his nerves. He had seen a man who bore some faint resemblance to another man. Mistaken identity, happened all the time. It could not possibly be. Not here, on the main street of Rincon after all these years. Not Carse McKay.

* * *

Amy Stewart tucked the last of the papers away in her desk drawer and massaged the back of her neck. It had been a long day and she wished she were free to go straight home, soak in a cool tub and crawl into bed. Never again after these past few months would she hear the old cliché about "banker's hours" without feeling a spark of resentment. And why, she wondered, did most people think of bankers as miserly and flint-hearted? It wasn't fair.

She rose and walked back through the partition into the rear room. There were two rooms actually, one for storage of supplies and cleaning equipment, the other the living quarters of Matthew Howe, handyman and night watchman. Matthew slept and ate here, cooking his meals on the stove. Without him. Amy often thought, the Valley Union could hardly function. He stepped in from the alley, where he had been emptying trash, bolted the sheet-iron door and looked around at her with his gentle smile.

"Good night, Miz Stewart. You get some rest, now hear. You been workin' too hard."

"I will," she promised. "I wanted to tell you, Mathew, how lovely the windows look."

The new front windows Matthew considered his special

charge and on them he lavished loving care. "Got to have 'em shine for Mistuh Seelah," he said. "Mistuh Seelah, he's right particular his bank's kept clean."

Matthew fussed and fretted over her, Amy knew, because she was Seelah Stewart's kin by marriage, and to anything or anyone associated with Seelah Stewart he gave his complete devotion. "He'll be pleased, Matthew. If he's better Sunday maybe you can visit him."

Returning to the front section, she said good night to Charlie Tatum, the teller, and asked ancient Mr. Mervine about his wife's chest pains before letting them out the door. Both these men, and Matthew too, had been working in the Valley Union when she was a child and at times she still felt like one, a little girl playing games with Seelah Stewart's money. Tonight the responsibility depressed and worried her.

Not that the money really belonged to Dad Stewart. It belonged to hundreds of people, the depositors—ranchers, storekeepers, housewives, railroad workers, dry farmers, clerks—in fact almost everybody who lived in Rincon County. But Dad Stewart sat in the president's chair, made the decisions, said his yes or no. He was the bank. Or had been until a coronary had put him to bed, an attack brought on, she felt sure, by the terrible strain and pressure of this last disastrous drought year. He never would have temporized or shilly-shallied as she was doing now, unable to make up her mind.

She did not lack for expert advice. Huntley Raymond had a first-rate banking brain. And yet—

Hunt Raymond was a Philadelphian, a state of mind he had brought with him to what he called "The Far West." After a year in Rincon he still retained a certain conservatism in speech and manner which Amy found exasperating. "There," he said. He clanged shut the safe door and twirled the combination knob. "Now your Mr. Leonard can relax."

"Not my Mr. Leonard, thank goodness."

"I thought he was very frank and business-like," Hunt said. "He would be an asset to the community. Although his wife seemed rather common."

"Common?" Somehow she had felt sorry for the quiet Mrs. Leonard. Her husband had been so everbearing. More than that, he had struck Amy as flashy and insincere, the sort she associated with dubious stock promotion schemes.

"You know what I mean. Salt of the earth, but unrefined."

Amy smiled. "And how would you describe that other gentleman?"

"Certainly not a gentleman. The gall of him! A thousand dollars!"

"I wonder if his idea is so farfetched."

Huntley Raymond sniffed.

"Irrigation may be the answer in this county. Hunt. They've tried it over on the Colorado River."

"You're not serious, Amy? This McKay, a horse wrangler. What do you know about him? Nothing. Oh, I admit he had a touching hard luck story. But if we made loans on that basis we'd be bankrupt in a week."

Hunt was right, as usual. An unsecured loan to a man like Carson McKay would be poor banking practice. That was her weakness, she recognized; as a woman she tended to view the people who filed past her desk with emotionally charged reactions.

"You're too good hearted, Amy. You can't bear to see anyone go without."

Were her motives as simple as that? She doubted it. But Carson McKay had puzzled her. She wished she knew more about the man behind the man who had sat in this chair two hours ago. "Not really," she said. "I just like to be sure of my facts before I jump."

He gave her a smile he might have used to humor a charming ten-year-old and changed the subject. "You haven't forgotten the dance? We can have supper at the hotel first."

"Hunt, I'm sorry. I don't feel up to it tonight."

He said stiffly, "Of course, if you're too tired—"

Amy sighed, embarrassed by the nakedness of his feeling for her. It seemed her day to inflict unintentional little hurts and rebuffs. "Forgive me, Hunt, please. I wouldn't be very good company. Some other time."

She fled before he could overwhelm her with polite reassurances that he understood perfectly. In the two years since Bob's death several men had paid her court, but none had been as patient and persistent as Hunt. If only once he would break through that bland decorum and lose his temper. He was too—she groped for a word—too damn civilized!

Across the street Apolonio Ortega was standing in the doorway of his office like some squat idol carved of ironwood, and she hurried toward him before her resolution fal-

tered. It was this part of her job she found distasteful, the sometimes necessary prying and poking into a man's past. Her face tingled as she imagined what Carson McKay would think of her if he knew.

"Senora Stewart." Ortega spat out a mangled matchstick and spoke in the soft faint accents of his native Sonora. "It gives me great pleasure to see you again."

"Mr. Ortega, I have a favor to ask." She had always been in awe of this mild brown-skinned little man, who looked the part of a woodcutter or a sheep-herder, even thought she found it hard to believe the chill legends of his wizardry with a gun.

"Please to come in." He gestured toward the doorway. "And how passes the health of Senor Seelah today?"

"About the same." Entering the office, she glanced at the array of confiscated guns which had been neatly ticketed and hung on a wall rack, then at the sheaf of wanted posters on the sheriff's rolltop desk. "And you, Mr. Ortega?"

"One does not complain. We have grown old together here, Senor Seelah and I. Tell him, if you will be so kind, that I watch over his bank as though it were my own."

"Dad Stewart never worries when you're on the job. He says you're the best sheriff this county ever had."

Ortega inclined his head gravely, regarding her with one burning eye. The other eye was a milky moon of cataract, which reminded her of the latest gossip. Old 'Pol Ortega, the wiseacres claimed, was over the hill, played out, getting by on his reputation. "You are too gracious," he said. "And how may I assist you?"

"Probably I'm being silly, but a man came to the bank today, a stranger." She told him of her interview with McKay.

"I have no knowledge of a man of that name. Describe him please, senora." And when she had done so the sheriff's brow wrinkled and he tapped a finger to his skull. "I carry in this foolish head the pictures of many evil men, but this McKay is a stranger to me also."

"I'm glad."

"Do not yet rejoice," he said. "He may be wanted elsewhere. Did he tell you nothing of his history?"

"Nothing much. He seemed—well, almost secretive. It worried me."

"Most assuredly you were wise. I can make inquiries of

other sheriffs, but that requires time, and you are in a hurry, *si?*”

“I can’t put him off that long, Mr. Ortega.”

“You desire that I bring him to my office and question him myself?”

“No. Now you’re teasing me.”

Ortega smiled and spread his hands. “Either you trust this man or you do not, Senora Stewart. Unfortunately I am not a banker to advise you.”

She thanked him and left, feeling more like a snoop than ever. Forget this man McKay, her instinct told her. It’s not your problem. But she could not shut it neatly from her mind as she would pigeonhole some document. Two families, if she could believe him, were dependent on her decision. But the man himself—surely someone in this town must know him.

She recalled having seen him enter the mercantile after quitting the bank and she went there now herself. Emil Schlaudt, the owner, finished weighing out some sugar and greeted her with a nervous smile. Deep worry lines grooved his face and she was uncomfortably aware of the cause. The Valley Union held Emil’s note for thirteen hundred dollars.

“McKay?” Emil said. “No, he’s never run an account with me, Mrs. Stewart.”

“You’re sure you know the man I mean?”

“Tall skinny fellow with a scar on his cheek. From back in the hills somewhere.”

“Can you tell me about his neighbors—the Hallorans and the Larsens?”

“They’re not regular customers,” Emil said, “but sure, I know the Swede. And Tim Halloran, a big redhead with a raft of kids. Not a pair of shoes among ’em.”

Amy blushed as she asked her next question. “Do you know anything about Mr. McKay’s personal habits? Is he a gambler, a heavy drinker, get into fights?”

“Not that I ever heard. Tell you the truth, Mrs. Stewart, he’s a hard one to figure. Comes in once or twice a year, buys his flour and beans, never says much. But he always pays cash.” Emil chuckled feelingly. “Not many do. That’s how come I remember him.”

She bit her lip and started to leave but Emil had one more item to relate. “Today, f’rinstance. McKay comes in,

says Howdy, then spends half an hour looking over my stock. I'm hoping he'll place a big order. But that sonuv-a-gun, you'll never guess what he bought, Mrs. Stewart."

"What?" she said faintly.

"Four bits worth of candy. Jawbreakers, hoarhound, licorice chaws, gumdrops. Candy! Can you beat that?"

Later, as she walked back along Front Street, Amy found she could laugh at herself. She had come perilously close to losing her sense of humor and now she felt almost light-hearted. A bag of gumdrops might not be the key to the character of Carson McKay, but it made him seem more real, more human.

Her father-in-law's house was large and unpretentious, like Seelah Stewart himself, one of the few wooden two-story homes in Rincon. He had built it some twenty years before, among a stand of cottonwoods along the river, and it still had an atmosphere of spaciousness and old-fashioned comfort. She had passed the first weeks of her marriage under this roof, until Bob built a smaller place two blocks nearer the center of town, and Seelah, now a widower, lived on here with a nurse.

For some months after Bob died she has been sunk in apathy. It had been a good marriage but today she could look back on their life together without that awful dead-weight sense of loss. Seelah's illness and the job at the bank had turned her grief outward, given her new direction and purpose. She was needed once again—blessed, blessed thought. Some day, she supposed, she would remarry, but now Seelah Stewart and the Valley Union claimed her total energies.

She climbed to the front bedroom where Seelah, propped against three pillows in the huge brass bed, grumbled at her in mock reproof, "About time you got here, girl. No consideration for your elders."

"Not for an old grouch like you." She bent and kissed his cheek, and for one heart-stopping instant she saw in his tawny leonine head and yellow eyes the image of Bob.

"How many proposals you get today?"

Amy laughed and drew a chair up to the bedside. "Not even a proposition."

"What's wrong with this generation? Now in my day—" He grinned crookedly. "Mr. Main Line Huntley Raymond?"

"Seelah, stop it. Hunt means all right."

"You know what's paved with good intentions. Well, let's hear the worst."

For nearly a quarter of a century the Valley Union had been the focus of his life and she knew how much he looked forward to these nightly visits. He listened quietly, a rapt look on his face, while she described the minutiae of her working day. No detail was too trivial to interest him. And when she had exhausted every shred of information he nodded and said in a gentler tone, "I'm a selfish old s.o.b., Amy. Tell me about yourself."

"Early to bed, early to rise. I like the job. It—it's a challenge."

"No life for a woman like you though. We both loved Bob, the good Lord rest him. But that's past. You ought to get out more, see your friends."

"I'm happy, Seelah. Busy. I'm not the kind to run around to women's clubs and teas." She smiled wryly. "Anyway, I've become something of a social pariah. 'Nice' women, ladies that is, don't work in banks."

"Damn jealous biddies. What you need's a man and a houseful of kids. You're not married to that bank."

"Any candidates in mind, sir?"

"Put a sign in the window. 'Amy Stewart Sweepstakes, Grand Prize.' That'll fetch 'em." The feral eyes regarded her intently. "I mean it, Amy. Quit. I'll be back in harness before long. Hunt can run the shop till then."

She did not intend to burden him with the problem of Carson McKay. No excitement, the doctor had warned her, no business worries. But she could sound him out. "Seelah, you told me once that being a banker is a sacred trust."

"At six per cent interest, compounded semi-annually."

"Be serious now. You said a good banker is more than a money lender, he's like a doctor or a minister. He's here to serve. That's what frightens me sometimes. People come into the bank. Some are desperate, terrified. And because you control money, you have to sit in judgment on them. How do you know, Seelah, when you're right? How do you decide?"

A big freckled hand slid from under the sheet and closed over hers. "Prayin' helps, Amy. Sometimes you just shut your eyes and pray."

And then she was pouring out the story, reading McKay's letter aloud to him. For a long while he lay motionless

gazing up at the ceiling. Then he said, "Amy, look out that window. At the river."

Fifty yards beyond the house the San Luis glided silently over its sand bars, sinuous and olive tan in the twilight. The water was very low but she could smell its wetness and the sweetish scent of growth. Two families had camped on the far bank, with their wagons. Twin supper fires glowed through the trees and the cries of youngsters splashing in a pool floated back on the dry desert air.

"I never been anywhere much, Amy. Never seen the Nile or even the Mississippi. But that little ole San Luis is our Nile. That's our lifeblood. If we knew how to use our water right, no telling how big this country could grow."

His voice had lost its resonance and he slumped back on the pillows. "Bring this McKay around to see me in the morning. He may be a thoroughgoing scoundrel, but he's got some gumption. I want a look at him."

* * *

Carse ate his supper standing up at a back counter of the mercantile—a cold economy meal of crackers and canned tomatoes. Up front, out of sight behind a stack of saddle blankets, Emil Schlaudt was discussing the merits of various cigars with a customer. Listening idly, he heard the man say, "I'll take four of those," followed by the slap of a coin and brisk retreating footsteps. For another second or two he went on munching, then the realization struck him like a physical blow.

I know that voice. I'd know it anywhere, any time!

He moved automatically, without thought, striding forward around the obstruction to the front door. A broad-shouldered man in a dark suit was vanishing through the entrance of the hotel across Main Street. Carse stared after him, irresolute and less certain than he had been a moment before. Voices could be deceptive. One glimpse of a man's back at that distance told him nothing. Yet he had the chill feeling, irrational or not, that he was right.

"Emil," he said, "who was that?"

"Stranger to me, Mr. McKay. I never saw him before."

"What did he look like?"

"Big fellow, about your age. Black hair. He must have

money though. Bought a dollar's worth of my best Havanas."

He left his unfinished supper and crossed over to the Congress. A glance around the crowded lobby revealed no familiar face. A harassed clerk behind the desk informed him testily that he couldn't keep track of everyone who passed in and out the door. Carse slipped him one of his four remaining dollars and repeated the description, whereupon the clerk allowed it might fit a Mr. Leonard in Number Seven, a traveling gent from San Francisco.

Carse peered up the stair well and hesitated. Impossible, he told himself. Frankie Spain couldn't be in Rincon. Twelve, thirteen years had gone by since he'd last seen Frankie. A man could change a lot in that time. But a voice didn't change. So just suppose that, for some reason, Frankie *was* here, right now, upstairs. Mr. Leonard from Frisco with a taste for two-bit cigars.

If it was Frankie, he ought to back off fast and keep away. Maybe even clear out of town and lay low somewhere until Frankie drifted on. Frankie was part of that past he hoped he'd left behind for good when he came to Massacre Creek. Frankie was trouble, real trouble, always had been, and he didn't want to borrow any more. But add up Frankie and trouble and the answer might spell money.

The worn splintery pine floor squeaked under his boots as he walked along the second floor hallway to the end and halted before Number Seven. No sound came from behind the door panels, and once again he had to fight off the impulse to turn and go. Then he knocked and the voice that answered, a woman's soft throaty voice, startled him into speechlessness.

"Who is it?" she repeated.

"Name's McKay, Carson McKay."

After a long pause she said, "Yes? What do you want?"

"I'm looking for a Mr. Leonard."

A bolt rattled in its slot, the door swung inward and a youngish blue-eyed blonde poked her head out. "I'm Mrs. Leonard. My husband isn't here now."

He tried to peer into the room but her amply contoured body blocked the doorway. She seemed calm, natural, faintly curious, and Carse damned his tongue-tied uncertainty.

"I don't believe we've met before, Mr. McKay. Are you a friend of John's?"

"Uh, not exactly. I—I thought I recognized him on the street. From a long time back."

When the woman smiled her wrinkles showed and he mentally added five years to her age. "You must be mistaken," she said. "We're strangers to Rincon."

"Sorry to bother you, ma'm." He backed away in confusion. And then his nostrils caught a pungent whiff of smoke. Cigar smoke. "He'll be in later?"

"Not tonight, I'm afraid. He had to go out of town on business."

The door closed in his face and the bolt shot home. He could hear her breathing on the other side. Carse smiled thinly and tramped back downstairs. Unless the lady smoked cigars she'd been lying in her pearly teeth.

Out on the street he stared up at the windows of the corner room, but the blinds were drawn. Returning to the mercantile, he found one of Emil Schlaudt's sidewalk chairs unoccupied and settled down under the awning where he could keep an eye on both the hotel's front door and the outside stairs. Mrs. Leonard, he reasoned, could have been entertaining a gentleman friend and did not care to be interrupted. On the other hand, she'd been mighty quick with her denial.

Hat brim tilted over his eyes, he sank deeper into the chair and waited with sour impatience, while twilight deepened into dusk. Up in Number Seven a lamp blossomed into amber life but no shadows flickered at the window. After an hour or so the tempo along Main began to quicken. Men surged from saloon to saloon, two riders raced their ponies up the street and a brief drunken scuffle broke out in front of the Palace. The town band, blaring thunderously, rolled by in a tallyho bound for the fairground.

To hell with it, Carse thought. He started to rise and froze in his seat. A big man in a black suit appeared on the hotel's upper gallery, paused to peer down at the crowd and descended the stairs. He glanced over his shoulder and turned north on River Street. Carse gave him a fifteen-second lead. He'd had only a glimpse of the man's face in the half light, but there was no mistaking that swinging muscular walk.

Halfway along the second block Carse overhauled him from behind. "In a hurry, Frankie?" he said.

The big man turned, slowly and deliberately, not with any start of surprise. "Carse," he said and grinned. "Carse McKay,

you ole hound dog. I should've known you'd sniff me out."

"Small town, Frankie. Small world. Or should I call you Johnny now?"

Frankie threw back his head and laughed. "Same ole Carse. Haven't changed a bit."

Well, he thought, Frankie hadn't changed much either. Older, of course, fuller in the face, and he looked more prosperous. The eyes had the same hooded wariness, and the muscles around the mouth contracted in the lopsided boyish grin he remembered so well. There was nothing boyish about him now, though. He said, "You on the run?"

"Me? From what? I served my time. Got married and settled down. That's my wife at the hotel."

"Good for you. Does she know?"

"Sure. I told her everything. It was her idea to change my name. Clean slate and all that. She's quite a woman."

"But she doesn't like her husband's old friends turning up from nowhere? Not that I blame her."

"Ah, you know how women are, kid. Come on, buy you a drink."

"On me," Carse said. Frankie might be putting on an act. In the old days you never could be sure what went on in Frankie's mind. But maybe the years had straightened out the kinks. "It's not every day I get to treat John Leonard."

They shoved their way into the nearest saloon and up to the bar. Above the hubbub they could barely hear each other speak. While they waited he was aware of Frankie's narrow-eyed appraisal of his shabby suit, frayed shirt and run-over boots. When their whisky came Frankie hoisted his glass. "A long time," he said. "Believe it or not, I'm glad to see you."

"Is that why you ducked out the side stairs?"

"Come off it, kid. You'd have done the same. Far as I'm concerned Frankie Spain is dead and buried. I didn't want you digging up old bones."

"That I can believe."

"Tell you the truth, it gave me a turn when you knocked on that door. Like seein' a ghost." Frankie slapped him on the back. "How are you, anyway? You live here?"

"Back in the hills a few miles. I raise horses in a small way."

"A horse rancher? So this is where you dropped outta sight. I used to wonder."

I'll bet you did, Carse thought. And you're wondering now.

You've looked three times at that clock. He said, "Maybe I'm keeping you. You're wife mentioned a business deal."

"Oh, that." Frankie shrugged. "It'll wait. Some property I have to look at. Matter of fact that's why I'm in Rincon."

"You're not going to settle down here?"

"No, I travel for a land company. We buy and sell leases, mostly mineral stuff. There's some old silver claims we have our eyes on."

Carse drew a long breath. He hated this and hated himself, and the shame felt hot and furry on his tongue as he said, "There's one old bone I *am* digging up. I did you a favor once. A kind of special favor."

"I thought you'd get around to that." Frankie's mouth stretched into another rubbery grin. "Don't forget much do you?"

"Not that day I don't."

"A couple of crazy wild-hair kids. So we got caught. But that's water under the bridge."

"I need money, Frankie. A lot of it. In a hurry. How're you fixed?"

"*You* in trouble?"

"Not the kind you mean."

Frankie swirled the liquor in his glass and emptied it. Methodically he fished a cigar from his case, clipped off the tip with a pair of silver cutters, and scraped a match along the bar. He made a little ritual of inhaling, exhaling, savoring the smoke. "Not bad," he said. "Have one?"

"Can't afford to get the habit. Could you lay your hands on a thousand dollars?"

"How much? A thou—! Whaddy'a think I am, a goddam bank?"

"I already tried the bank."

"You're not trying to shake down your old boyhood pard, are you now? I wouldn't take that as friendly, kid."

Carse's hand tightened around the glass. "I asked you a simple question. Do I get an answer?"

"Money's never that simple."

"I don't care why you're here or where you get it." The din in the saloon had risen to such a pitch he had to lean closer, so close that he could smell the pomade on Frankie's hair. "I'll sign you a note on my place, payable in a year, ten per cent interest."

"You couldn't give me this whole hell-fired county." Frankie

hauled a coin from his pocket and tossed it on the bar. "I'm not too flush right now, but go on, take it."

He raised his glance from the double eagle to Frankie's face.

Frankie reached for his pocket again. "All right. Here's twenty more. That's my limit."

"You might need it for cigars."

He turned away but Frankie caught him by the arm. "Now wait, kid. Don't go off half cocked."

"Wait for what? So we can chew over the good old days. If you haven't got it, you haven't. Look me up if you ever need a good horse cheap."

"I didn't say I *couldn't* get it. How come you're in such a sweat for a thousand dollars?"

Carse told him.

"To build a flume? For irrigating crops?" Frankie shook his head. "You sure did turn into a solid citizen."

He waited, watching Frankie's eyes. Once upon a time, a long time ago, when he was ten or so to Frankie's grown-up fourteen, he'd hero-worshipped Frankie Spain. Frankie had been the kingpin in their valley; the strongest and the fastest, and the most daring, the one who always caught the biggest fish or shot the fattest buck. Fearless Frankie, they'd called him, but not to his face, because he could lick any two kids his size. And Carse McKay had trotted along in his shadow, hungry for any crumb of approval.

"Tell you what," Frankie said, "I'd like to help you. But times are tough, money's scarce."

"That's what they tell me."

"If this mine lease goes through though, maybe I can. I'll make a big commission. How soon do you need it?"

"About six months ago. But tomorrow'll do."

Frankie laughed and draped an arm across his shoulder. "That's what I like about you, kid; never say quit. Let's see, today's Wednesday. I can't close the deal before next Monday. If I do you'll get your thousand. If I don't, old Frankie will be leavin' town a plucked rooster."

"A straight loan?"

"Straight loan between two friends. No note, no interest. Pay it when you can. Come around and see me Monday."

"Sure." He could feel the sweat filming his face. Was it going to be this easy, after all? A thousand dollars by Mon-

day, five days from now. Or was Frankie giving him a fast shuffle? "Sure, I'll do that."

"Keep your fingers crossed. And kid—" Frankie winked. "Be smart. It won't help this deal if the word should get around—you know what I mean?"

Carse knew exactly what he meant. If someone passed the word that the respectable Mr. John Leonard had once served sixteen months in the Idaho State Penitentiary for armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon, there probably wouldn't be any deal. For certain there would be no loan to his great good friend McKay. Mr. McKay, therefore would keep his mouth shut.

Carse said, "One more word of wisdom. Do you remember old Boise Brown from back home?"

"Can't say as I do."

"He remembers you, though. He's hostler at the stable. Half blind and drunk most of the time. Stay away from him, unless you want your name spread all over town."

"Thanks for the tip kid. I think we understand each other."

Carse shook the arm off his shoulder. "I'm not a kid anymore, Frankie. I'll play this your way, as long as you don't lie to me, or try any tricks. But I want that money."

Frankie smiled with tolerant amusement. "Or you'll do what?"

"This time I won't turn the other cheek. G'night, Frankie."

Striding back up the street, he told himself he had done the right thing, the only possible thing. Not that he was proud of it. He had made his own cheap deal with Frankie. Frankie had bought his silence with a promise. In the past Frankie's promises often had turned out to be somewhat less than sacred, but a man could change, Carse argued, even a man like Frankie.

So give him the benefit of the doubt, McKay. You'd was as much for yourself. Give him a chance. He's your last hope to raise the money. Give him a little trust these next five days and maybe you'll reap your reward. In cash.

The corner at Main and River was quiet now, since most of the crowd had swarmed to the fairground, but Ortega's squat figure still occupied the courthouse doorway. Carse cut along the alley and turned into the livery. Boise Brown, wreathed in whisky fumes, was talking to a gaunt sad-faced man with a yellow kerchief around his neck.

They both glanced up. "Howdy, Carse boy," Boise said. "Reckon you want your horse."

"Want my blanket. Have to bed down somewhere in the brush tonight." Carse nodded to the stranger and went on to the saddle rack, where he unstrapped his bag and began changing into his jeans and work shirt. There was little sense, he'd decided, in sleeping in his only suit.

"Like I was saying," Yellow Neck went on in a nasal voice, "me and my friends are camped down on the river. Rode in this afternoon, but we can't find a room."

Boise's reply was a mumbled monotone.

"Wanta take in the dance tonight, but with all these strangers in town a man don't hardly dare leave his horse and saddle loose. How's to stable 'em with you over the Fourth?"

"Kinda crowded here, too," Boise wheezed. "But maybe I can squeeze you in. Four bits a day, six bits with grain."

Their voices drifted off down the row of stalls. By the time Carse finished dressing Yellow Neck had gone and Boise was busy unsaddling four horses. With a professional eye he looked them over—two bays, a roan and a gray. "Nice looking stuff," he said. "Wish I owned any one of those."

Boise canted an eye at him and loosened another cinch.

"Never saw that brand around before. Circle W. That a local, Boise?"

"Feller didn't say. How 'bout that drink you was offerin' a while back?"

Carse sighed. He was down to two dollars and some change which had to stretch till Monday. And then Boise slapped his thigh. "By jibbies, I 'most forgot. Some kid brought in a message for you."

"A message? Who from?"

"Dunno." Boise fumbled through the pockets of his vest and dug out a rumpled envelope. He sniffed at the paper with an owlish leer and handed it over.

Carse unsealed the flap and read the neat firm script: "Mr. McKay: I have some news that should be of interest to you. If the hour is not too late when you receive this, will you please call at my home.—Amy Stewart."

Boise was on tiptoe, trying to peer over his shoulder, and Carse quickly shoved the note in his pocket. The hostler nudged an elbow into his ribs and chortled, "Reckon you can bed down somewheres else now, hey?"

Carse looked into the sly jeering eyes, and at the crust of dirt that encircled his neck like a collar, and sudden anger

overrode his pity and disgust. In a sense he had been trying to buy Boise Brown's silent co-operation, just as Frankie Spain had bought his. And now he was sick of it all, sick of himself and of this filthy old man and his innuendoes. He said roughly, "Why don't you sober up and take a bath? You stink."

Boise blinked and the veins in his nose purpled. "Wh—what'd you say?"

"Here's a dollar. Buy yourself an eye-opener in the morning."

He stalked into the end stall and slapped his saddle on his horse. Boise hovered in the doorway mouthing shrill abuse. "There's gratitude for you! You can't talk to me like that! I know all about you, McKay. I held my tongue so far, but now I—"

"But now you'll talk. Go ahead, old man. Talk your head off." He climbed aboard and rode out past him into the alley, drawing a lungful of clean night air. A fool thing probably, to flare up like that, but he felt better, as though a rock had been rolled off his chest. Anyway it was done, and tomorrow would see the consequences. From tomorrow on people might whisper and point him out, and some few acquaintances might cut him cold, but he could live with that.

He'd lived with it before.

He stopped at the store to ask directions to Mrs. Stewart's and rode on to the northern fringe of town. It was after nine o'clock but lights still glowed in the windows of her small dobe house. Even so, he approached the door with diffidence, unable to imagine what news she had and why she would summon him at this hour.

"Mr. McKay." She smiled at him through the screen. "I'd almost given up on you."

She had changed into a short-sleeved gray dress that hugged her figure and her hair shone with a reddish glint in the lamp's soft radiance. She looked, Carse thought, more woman-like and appealing than she had this afternoon, and he found some of his resentment melting. Carse said, "How did you know where to find me?"

"I took a chance that you'd leave your horse at the stable. Frankly, I was afraid that you'd be gone back to your ranch by now."

"I planned on seeing you at the bank tomorrow, Mrs. Stewart."

"You're not a very convincing liar. You thought I was just putting you off today. You had no intention of coming near the bank again. Isn't that the truth?"

"Close enough. I figured a man would've turned me down right off."

"I see your opinion of female bankers hasn't improved much. But that's not why I sent for you."

"No?"

"No. I thought my father-in-law should decide on a loan application this large. He knows this country as well as any man, Mr. McKay. He doesn't just sit in that office of his. He gets out and sees things for himself, or did until his attack. So I took your problem to him." She paused. "Mr. Stewart is interested in your flume idea. He wants to talk to you about it tomorrow. He isn't very strong and he can't stand any strain. But if the doctor approves, and I'm sure he will, you'll have a chance to present your case."

"I—" He faltered for words, racked by a sense of shame. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Please don't try. It's a matter of business, after all."

"It's more than that to me, Mrs. Stewart. There's something I'd better tell you first."

"Oh?" Her expression sobered and the blue-green eyes fixed on his face. "We don't have to stand out here. Won't you please come in?"

He followed inside and she excused herself to go to the kitchen. It was a cheerful uncluttered room, with comfortable chairs and shelves of books, and he wondered if she had furnished it to the taste of her husband, or to her own. She returned with two mugs of coffee and sat down beside a table covered with papers. "I try not to bring my work home," she said, "but there's so much I have to learn."

"You must hear a lot of grief in your job."

"Yes, sometimes it depresses me. But more often it's a challenge, an opportunity to help people. It—" She gave a rueful laugh. "Don't get me started on that subject. I'm a bore."

He took a sip of coffee and found it strong and good. "You're quick at sizing people up," he said. "I was holding out on you today. I have a jail record."

Amy's breath caught and the color rose in her cheeks, but she did not look away from him and after a minute he went on. "I robbed a store once, a holdup. In Idaho. Served a

year of my sentence. Does the Valley Union loan money to ex-outlaws?"

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Why? Because you were decent to me. Because you'd have found out sooner or later, and I wanted you to hear it from me."

"Is that all you want to tell me?"

"You've heard the same old story before. I was a kid—" He broke off and rubbed at his scar. "No, that sounds like an alibi. I was eighteen, old enough to know better. I ran around with a wild bunch. It looked like easy money—"

It had looked easy and exciting, because Frankie Spain had made it seem so. By that time Frankie already had a reputation of sorts, and Carse had been flattered by the invitation. Yes indeed, he was going to show the world what a big man he could be, riding with Frankie Spain. It beat the whey out of punching cows for thirty dollars a month. It looked safe, too; an isolated crossroads store and one old man behind the counter. All he had to do was hold the horses while Frankie went inside.

But Frankie had come staggering out covered with blood. The harmless old man had pulled a gun. Two hours later a posse cornered them in the brush a mile away.

"What happened to your friend?" Amy asked gravely.

"They got him to a doctor in time." Carse omitted that part. She might think it was another excuse, or just plain bragging. He could have ridden on and left Frankie to bleed to death, with a .44 slug in his chest. He could have, but he hadn't. He had stayed behind, sick with terror and remorse, a jackass for risking his skin to save the likes of Frankie Spain.

"And after that?" Amy prompted.

After that had come the years of drifting, wandering from job to job, because nobody wanted to hire a jailbird. Nobody honest, that is. He could have changed his name, but he hadn't done that either. That was how eventually he had come to Massacre Creek and to one small chunk of independence.

"Do your neighbors, the Larsens and Hallorans, know this?"

"I had to tell 'em."

"But they trust you anyway."

"They don't have much choice. We're in this crack together." He drained the last of his coffee and stood up. "Tell Mr. Stewart I appreciate his kindness."

Amy's chin lifted. "Aren't you going to see him?"

"I'm a bad risk and we both know it."

"So you're going to quit?" she said. "You think the whole world is down on you. Why don't you pile on your horse and drift off somewhere else? That's the easy way out, isn't it?"

For some reason her anger amused him and he laughed.

"Is that so funny?" she demanded.

"Do you scold all your customers like this?"

"I hate to see anybody waste himself."

"I'm not laughing at you," he said. "I was thinking what a stubborn prickly fool a man can sometimes be."

They stood facing each other and the silence stretched out between them, broken only by the faint rustling of her dress. He saw her eyes grow wide and darken with some emotion, then her gaze faltered and slid away from his, and the color flamed up in her cheeks again. With a rush of feeling, he said, "Whatever happens tomorrow, there's a dance tonight."

She made a little gesture and said weakly, "Oh, no, I can't."

"You're not a very convincing liar, Mrs. Stewart."

He watched the play of light on her face. Her lips moved and softened into a tiny smile and one hand came up to her throat. "I didn't mean that," she said. "I'd love to go."

* * *

Frankie Spain downed one more fast drink before returning to the hotel. Ordinarily he never drank on a job, but the meeting with McKay had been a shock, a stroke of bad luck he could not possibly have foreseen. After all these years he had almost forgotten the kid. Carse McKay, as Frankie remembered him, had come from folks poor even for that poor country, always underfoot, but still a loner, good for a laugh or two, like some spiritless mutt dog. Kick him and he came back for more, ready to lick your hand.

But now, tonight, he had shown some teeth and growled a little. What kind of a man had the kid become? Not much, Frankie reflected. He'd swallowed what pride he had and practically begged for money. A man who would do that, in Frankie's judgment, posed no dangerous threat. All the same, McKay had delayed him for more than an hour. He was late. And if McKay had followed him once, he might be desperate or foolish enough to try again.

When he let himself in the room Verna peered up over

the top of her magazine. "That didn't take long," she said. "You're back early."

"I haven't been there yet." He pulled the pigskin traveling case from under the bed and unlocked it.

"Frankie, what on earth—"

"McKay didn't believe your story. He waited and button-holed me on the street. That's where I've been."

"Oh, no! What did he want?"

"What I figured. He hit me up for a loan."

The bag contained a tray which held a number of papers, such as old assay reports and blank lease forms. He lifted out the tray and reached into the bottom. In this section were three .44 revolvers, a quantity of ammunition, several small sponges, a roll of tape, a coil of sash cord and one small-caliber, short-barreled belly gun which held only two shots.

"But what if he makes trouble?" Verna said. "What if he goes to the sheriff?"

"Not him. He wants money too bad." Frankie examined the belly gun thoroughly, checked its action and loaded it.

"Frankie!" Her eyes widened in alarm. "What's that for?"

He didn't answer. Dropping the little gun in the side pocket of his coat, where it made a fairly inconspicuous bulge, he replaced the contents of the bag and shoved it back under the bed.

"Hon." Verna threw down the magazine and clutched the dressing gown across her breast. "Something's wrong. What happened? Tell me."

"Nothing, I said. McKay wanted money. I promised him some by Monday." Frankie grinned. "He'll have a long wait."

"You don't fool me one bit, Frankie. You're worried, I can tell. That gun—"

"Who's worried?" He had to shut her up before she went to pieces, and he didn't have time to sweet talk her out of the shakes. Goddam woman, anyway. But he needed her. "Come over here." He took her by the shoulders and guided her to the side window. "Soon as I go you turn out the lamp. Raise the shade a little. Keep watching for me down there. I'll show you how I'm worried."

"Frankie, don't do something crazy now! Promise me."

He kissed her roughly. "Be good, sugar."

Downstairs he paused in front of the hotel and glanced over at the dark square outline of the bank. Extracting one of the Havanas from his cigar case, he stuck it in his

mouth and went through the motions of searching his pockets for a light. Then he sauntered across the street to the courthouse corner.

The squat figure in the doorway stirred at his approach. For a disconcerting moment Frankie found himself peering into a face that seemed to have only one eye. The other eye was milky, clotted. He cleared his throat and said, "Evening, sheriff."

"Good evening."

The voice was soft, courteous, with no overtones that Frankie could detect. He thought, I'll find out in a hurry if this greaser has a line on me. "You wouldn't have a match?"

Ortega spat a mangled matchstick from his mouth, fished another from his vest and scraped it on his thumbnail. Over the flare of yellow flame Frankie stared into the walnut shell face, then accepted the proffered light.

"Much obliged."

"*Nada.*"

Now get the hell away, Frankie told himself. He's had his look and nothing happened. So far McKay has kept his mouth shut. Don't ride your luck too hard. But some perverse urge made him say, "Pretty quiet tonight, but I guess you'll have your troubles before the Fourth is over."

"Trouble? A few drunks, a few fist fights. Is no trouble."

He was enjoying this now. Some day the story would get around, how Frankie Spain had joshed this cowtown sheriff to his face. Butch and the boys would get a laugh out of that. And he hoped Verna was getting an eyeful from the window. He let a mouthful of smoke trickle toward Ortega and said, "I don't see anybody wearing guns. That your idea, sheriff?"

"I will tell you a secret, *senor*. I do this for the merchants. Not for me. Guns do not bother me."

"You mean the merchants are scared?"

"Not at all." Ortega smiled and fanned the smoke away. "To give up his gun makes a cowman feel that he once might have been wicked and sinful. It is a delusion, you see, for in truth he is a tame woolly lamb. The old bad days are gone. But he dreams, and to make this dream seem real he spends more money. So—he is happy, the merchants prosper and I am content."

"Quite a philosopher."

The sheriff shrugged. "An old man has little better to do than stand here all day, to think and observe."

Frankie strolled on down Main in the direction of the fairground, trying to appear casual and leisurely, in case anybody might be on his tail. As he came abreast of the depot he stepped into its deep shadow and flattened against the wall. For some minutes he waited there and then crossed over to the far bank of the river. Crouched down in the brush, he waited still longer this time, until he was completely satisfied that no one had followed him from town.

A few families were camped along the bottoms but he gave these a wide berth as he worked his way upstream. Occasionally he stopped and looked back, comforted by the solid bulge in his pocket. It had been a long, wicked day and it wasn't over yet. He'd gotten McKay off his back. He'd handled Verna and the Stewart woman. Next he had Pony Reese to face.

Why should he feel uneasy about the man, aside from Pike Lary's complaints? He realized that he'd had some misgivings from the start. Reese was a local man. He knew the country and he knew the right people across the border, and he knew where and how to get good horses. The trouble with Reese, Frankie decided, was that he knew too much, or thought he did, and talked too much.

He bore for a clump of cottonwoods where the San Luis curved north toward the hills. Through the trees he made out the dull reflected glow of a campfire and the roofless ruins of a long-abandoned adobe. As he neared the shack, Pike Lary's gaunt form eased from the brush.

In a low voice he said, "Frankie? What took you so long?"

"Got tied up. You take care of the horses?"

"I left 'em at the livery. Just got back myself."

Frankie nodded. He recalled vaguely that McKay had mentioned some old man named Brown, a hostler, who might have known him as a kid. He'd worry about that, if ever, when the time came. Right now Pony Reese was Number One. "He in there?"

"He's there. Chompin' at the bit."

A single horse, Reese's horse, was tied outside. Frankie followed Pike through the opening as the two men squatting over the fire looked up. The pale balding man, Neil Crippen, rose from his haunches and shook hands. "Howdy, Frankie," he said. "Join the crowd."

The second man said nothing. Pony Reese was small and wiry with black close-set eyes and dark coppery skin that suggested more than a drop of Indian blood in his lineage. He looked like a jockey and he stank of horses, and of them all, he alone was wearing a gun.

Frankie said, "How goes it, Pony?"

"You tell us, Spain."

"That's what I'm here for." Frankie poured himself a cup of coffee and sipped it slowly as he studied each of the three men in turn. Pike, slow, methodical, deadly in a fight. Crip, silent, not too smart, but dependable. And Reese, still a question mark. Not the best men, maybe, not as good as the old bunch, but good enough for this job. He took his time, not to be hurried, making them feel the weight of his authority. The last job, he thought, his very last. After Friday he'd be set for life.

"Crip," he said, "anybody been nosing around here today?"

Crip shook his head. "Coupla kids fishing the river. That's all."

Frankie glanced at the blanket rolls in the corner, at the fire-blackened skillet and coffee pot. To a stranger happening by this would look like any other innocent camp. Reese had chosen the spot and he gave Reese credit for that. "Pony," he said, "your part first. We'll meet you in that coulee south of town. You be there, waiting for us at five-fifteen. Not a holy second later."

"You already told me."

"I'm telling you again. Then what? Let's see if you have it straight."

"Then I guide you south to the tanks. That's close to fifty miles. We switch horses there and go on. We cross the border near La Cruz." Pony recited the phrases in a sullen singsong. "We hit Soyopa by daybreak and hole up. Lay over there coupla days and then split."

"You have the Soyopa end all set up?"

"Sure, sure. What I'm waitin' to hear is how you got *this* end set up."

"You're the lucky one, Pony. All you have to do is dream how rich you're goin' to be while me and Pike and Crip do the work." Frankie grinned at him, watching the angry glitter of his eyes. Rub his nose in it, he thought. Make him squirm a little. "But maybe you'd rather walk in the bank with me and take your chances. How about it, Pony?"

"I can't, and you know why I can't."

"That's right. You're too well known around these parts. Fact is, you can't even stick your nose inside town. So shut up and listen." He broke off a twig, knelt down and sketched a map in the dust. "Pike, you and Crip leave here at four sharp. When you reach the depot, separate. Pike, you head for the livery. Crip, you hang around the front of the store. At ten minutes to five Verna and me leave the hotel."

He went on, detail by detail, laying it out like a timetable. You do this, you do that, you here, you there. When he finished he went over the schedule again from start to finish, until he was certain they had their assignments letter perfect. It was exact, but simple, and therein lay the beauty. The best plans were always simple, and this one allowed enough leeway for any minor, last-minute hitch that might develop.

There wouldn't be any hitch, of course. He'd covered every angle. But the smell of money, so much money, did strange things to people.

Pike asked a question about saddles. Crip wanted to know about the guns. Pony scowled into the fire.

"That's it," he said. "We'll pull this off as slick as grease. Be out and gone an hour or more before anybody knows what hit 'em. With those horses we could outrun the U.S. cavalry."

"I wish it was tomorrow," Crip said. "This waitin' wears a man down."

"Can't be any sooner," Frankie told him. "It all swings on the timing. Any more questions before I go?"

"Yeah." Pony hooked both thumbs in his gun belt. "I got one. What happens to the woman?"

"Nothing happens. She goes with us."

"Not with me, she don't. You never told me about no woman before."

"I had to change the plan some."

"You better change it some more, Spain. It's a hundred miles an' better to Soyopa. I ain't draggin' a woman through that country with a posse on my trail. Might as well wear hobbles."

"Verna can ride. She won't slow us up much."

"Ahhh!" Pony teetered back and forth on his heels as though he were about to spring into the air. "How come you brung her into the deal? Not man enough to handle it yourself?"

Frankie smiled. "That's right, Pony. I'm hiding behind a

woman's skirts. She's my front. She gets me into the bank, and out again. While that sheriff is standing there across the street picking his teeth. While you're sitting on your butt two miles away. So, like I say, she comes with us."

"You let a one-eyed old Mex push you into this?"

"Call it that. But don't you push me, Pony boy."

Pony's bow-taut body seemed to quiver. "No woman, Spain. That's flat. It's me or her."

An ember popped in the fire and scattered ash. Frankie glanced from Pike to Crisp and saw the wooden neutrality in their faces. He'd get no backing there. This was his play, his alone. The real issue, he realized, was not Verna at all. Pony Reese would have found some other excuse to defy him, that being the makeup of the man. If he knuckled down to Pony now, he was finished.

"Me or her," Pony repeated. "Take your pick."

Frankie slid his hands into his coat pockets, unostentatiously, he hoped. Firelight flickered on Pony's face and on the crumbling dobe bricks behind him. Out along the river a nightbird croaked and far across the hills a coyote sent its quavering yelp. Inside the walls it was absolutely still. "You mean you want to back out of the whole deal?" he said softly.

"I am backing out. Right now."

"Too late, Pony boy. You ride with us, or nowhere."

Pony's right hand flashed down and came up with his gun. "The great Frankie Spain! Useta ride with Cassidy and the Wild Bunch. Bull!" He laughed. "Now tell me that."

Frankie's fingers closed over the belly gun. A nerve twitched in his eyelid. He stared into the muzzle of Pony's .45 and almost choked on the scalding fury in his throat.

"I never liked the smell of this." Pony took a careful backward step toward the doorway. "But now—usin' a woman, you yellow dog! You'll never take that bank, Spain. Even old Ortega is too tough for you."

"Don't go out that door, Pony."

"Who'll stop me? You?" Pony spat. "You better crawl back on the train and drag your tail outta town, before it gets shot off."

Still smiling, Frankie said, "You just talked yourself out of a job."

"Job? Get your own horses. I've had me a bellyful."

As he backed away, Frankie fired through his pocket. A

look of almost comic surprise flitted over Pony's face. The .45 fell into the dirt and he clutched one hand to his stomach. Frankie drew out the belly gun and fired the second shot into his chest. Pony staggered back, tripping over his spurs, and fell through the doorway, clawing at the jamb for support. His horse gave a frightened snort and a hush spread across the river bottoms.

For a long minute nobody spoke. Breathing heavily, Frankie rubbed the scorched fabric of his coat, then grabbed one booted foot and dragged Pony's body back inside the walls.

"Lord a'mighty!" Crip muttered and wiped his glistening face with a sleeve. "He's deader 'n last year's beef."

Pike, ever practical, said, "They coulda heard that shooting clear in town. Better get a move on, Frankie."

Frankie peered off into the darkness. Half a mile or so down the bottoms he could just make out the pinprick of the nearest campfire. All day long, he thought, kids had been exploding firecrackers and torpedoes an go-devils. At this distance who could tell the difference? If anyone did come to investigate they could claim they'd been shooting at a rattler. "Douse that fire."

Pike kicked the coals apart while Crip smothered them with dirt. Frankie gathered up Pony's gun and hat and blanket roll. "We can't leave him lying here," Crip protested.

"Nobody knows he was hanging around Rincon," Frankie said. "His own mother won't miss that sidewinding sonof-abitch."

"Come daylight the buzzards 'll start flockin'," Pike pointed out matter-of-factly.

"Wait." Frankie stepped through the doorway. Don't panic now, he told himself. Dump the body fast. But where? Dig a hole? Down some mine shaft? In a quicksand bar? No, none of those, he hadn't time, and the river was too shallow. Groping along a cow path overgrown with arrow weed and mesquite and creosote, he broke through the underbrush into a clearing where the San Luis made its dogleg bend. Here in wetter years the river had carved out and undercut a clay bluff some ten to twelve feet high before shrinking back into its normal channel. A few yards upstream a dead cottonwood stump slanted out over the lip of the cut like some giant rotted tooth.

Frankie studied it, made his calculations and hurried back to the shack. Pike and Crip listened while he outlined what he wanted and then, grunting with the effort, they picked up Pony's body by the feet and arms and followed him.

"Drop it there, under that snag."

The next step was not so easy. Pony's horse, excited by the scent of blood, bucked and shied away when Frankie tried to mount. At length they had to blindfold it before he could climb aboard. He shook out the rope, made his first cast and missed. On his fourth try the loop settled over the stump and he dallied his end around the saddle horn.

"Now, you ornery hammerhead!"

He yanked off the blindfold and drummed his heels into the horse. The animal gave a leap, jerking the rope taut, and jumped again. The stump, roots and all, pulled loose and set off an avalanche along a ten foot stretch of bluff. When the cloud of powdery dust cleared away Pony Reese lay buried under tons of dirt.

"There, by God, they'll never find him now."

"They will if it ever rains again in this country," Pike said. "He'll float right through the middle of town."

"How you gonna bury that horse?" Crip asked.

"Turn him loose. We'll cache the saddle in the brush."

Frankie squatted down by the river and scooped a handful of water over his face. He was hot and filthy and bone tired, down to his socks. He knew the next question, but didn't know the answer. Pike asked it. "Where do we go from here, Frankie?"

He shook his head to ease the pounding throb behind his eyeballs. Without Pony the whole job fell apart. He needed a relay of fresh horses. He needed a hideout. He needed a man who knew the country. Without Pony to guide him across a hundred miles of strange waterless desert he'd never reach the border and Soyopa. He'd never stand a chance.

"Yeah," Crip echoed. "Looks like we better pull out while we can."

The idea came to Frankie in dribbles, like the drops of water trickling between his fingers. In his mind it grew to a tiny puddle, still muddy and unclear; then it was a pool with dimensions not yet visible, and then it expanded still more, into a lake, into a sea that seemed to stretch to the horizon. "They'll look for us to head south, toward Mexico," he said. "Right?"

Pike nodded.

"Suppose we head north instead, into the mountains, and hole up there?"

"Hole up where? The Grand Canyon?"

Frankie laughed. Suddenly his doubts and confusion were gone. The old Frankie Spain luck. Nobody could beat him when his luck held. "Boys," he said, "he don't know it yet, but we got us a new partner."

* * *

Every night before going to bed Huntley Raymond took a walk—his constitutional, he called it. A man of precise habits, he never varied his route. It led him on a circuit of the town and so past Amy Stewart's house and back to his lonely hotel room. He always hurried by, but from the sight of the lighted windows he drew a warm sense of intimacy. He looked forward to this moment as the high point of his day.

By Rincon standards Raymond knew that he was considered stiff and standoffish, that he lacked the easy give-and-take of his neighbors, the knack of slapping a stranger on the back and bellying up to a bar. Such familiarity he found offensive. More than once he had thought of throwing up his job and returning to the more congenial atmosphere of Philadelphia. But two factors held him. Some day he hoped to succeed Seelah Stewart as president of the Valley Union.

The other was Amy.

He could not honestly claim that she had encouraged him. Tonight, for instance, she had broken their date. He suspected that she was still devoted to the memory of her husband. But sooner or later, he reasoned, she was bound to see his merits.

As he turned into her street now, he observed a saddled horse at the hitch rail in front of her house. Consumed with curiosity, he halted in the shadow of a cottonwood. Shortly afterward Amy and a man came out. She laughed and turned her face up to him, the man took her arm and they moved off down the street. But not before Raymond recognized him—the horse wrangler, the seedy-looking Mr. McKay.

At first he was incredulous. Amy was a lady, and no lady would appear in public with a fellow of that stripe. Moreover she had told him, Huntley Raymond, that she was

too tired to go out this evening. But there she went, obviously enjoying herself, with a man whom she'd met only that afternoon. A man who had tried to cozen her out of a thousand dollars.

A searing agony twisted in his bowels. He was so shaken he had to lean against the tree. And then the pain passed, cauterized by outrage. Unemotional by nature, Raymond had never experienced such a violent passion. He took a few shaky steps, gained control of himself and set out to follow them.

Their destination soon became evident. Hanging back some distance, he saw Amy and McKay melt into the fairground throng that milled about the tents and sideshow booths. A minute later they reappeared by the dance pavilion and whirled across the floor. Raymond could not bear to watch.

The shock had worn off somewhat by the time he reached the hotel and his mind was working more rationally. His first responsibility was to the bank. For all her intelligence, Amy lacked mature judgment. This McKay had flattered her, turned her head. The man was out to take advantage of her by any means. Raymond saw his duty clearly: to protect her from any rash act that might harm the Valley Union.

A short gray-haired man was standing by a lobby window, peering up at the night sky with rapt preoccupation, as though he might be praying to the gods of rain. Struck by a sudden thought, Raymond stopped beside him. "Lovely night, Mr. Heath."

Harry Heath nodded with the bare civility Raymond had come to expect in Rincon and returned to his study of the heavens.

"Doesn't the northern end of your range adjoin Massacre Basin?"

"Does."

Raymond knew very well that it did. He knew a great deal about Heath's Anchor 4 brand and his current financial difficulties. "That basin must be a lonely place," he said. "Do you see much of your neighbors up there, Mr. Heath?"

"No."

"I understand that Mr. McKay has a nice ranch."

The cattleman grunted.

"I suppose he has discussed his irrigation plans with you."

"What're you getting at, young man? I know McKay, sure."

Raymond smiled. "All I want is a little information."

"Then get it from McKay."

"I expect you'll be coming in to see me this week," Raymond said innocently. "About the renewal on your note, Mr. Heath."

The look that Harry Heath bent on him was active with dislike. "All I can tell you about the man is that he minds his own business. He raises horses. Has no family. Told me once he came from Idaho. Now if you'll excuse me—" The rancher stomped away.

Bleakly Raymond pondered the one tiny kernel of information he had gleaned. Idaho. It was as remote to him as farthest Africa. But among his qualities he took pride in a memory for facts and figures. He rifled through his mental file and produced a single name: Boise Brown.

From time to time he rented a rig from the livery and thus had encountered the hostler. Boise Brown also came from Idaho. He had soldiered against the Indians at old Fort Boise, or so he bragged. He had the nasty inquisitiveness of a weasel and he was notoriously loose-tongued. If anyone in Rincon knew about, or could learn about, McKay, that man was Boise Brown.

It was an outside chance, Raymond realized. But a slow burning anger fortified his determination. Instead of climbing to his room and bed, he entered the bar and bought a pint of cheap whisky, which he slipped under his coat.

Five minutes later he found Boise, red-eyed and morose, sprawled in a chair in the doorway of the Ace. "Mr. Brown," he began, "I've been thinking of buying a saddle horse. Naturally I want your expert advice."

"Closed for business. Come back tomorrow."

"I'm prepared to pay you a commission, of course."

"How much?"

"Well now, between two gentlemen"—Raymond almost gagged on the word—"I'm sure we can work out a satisfactory arrangement, Mr. Brown. Would you care to, ah, cut the dust?"

Mr. Brown would, and did. After several drinks Raymond led the conversation around to his objective. "By the way," he said, "I hear that a Mr. McKay sometimes has horses for sale."

Boise blew his nose into the dirt. "Him!"

"You don't recommend McKay?"

"That highbinder!"

For some minutes Raymond listened with fascination to a spate of obscene invective, sensing that he had struck pay dirt on his first attempt. Boise paused to refresh himself from the bottle and Raymond said, "You seem to know the man personally."

"Know him? Knowed him since he was a pissant." Boise tapped him on the knee. "There's plenty I know."

"You don't mean to imply that he's dishonest?"

"Don't I! By jibbies, he's a thief, a convicted outlaw!"

Boise's aggrieved voice dropped to a whisper. "Used to ride with Frankie Spain's gang."

"Frank Spain?" Raymond said blankly. "Who's he?"

"Never 'eard tell of Frankie Spain? Go ask him, sonny. Ask McKay and watch his face."

With that Boise withdrew into a sodden silence. Raymond, puzzled but pleased with his success, said good night and left. The old man had been babbling half the time, possibly lying the other half. But if there was one grain of truth in all that drunken maundering, Raymond knew he would find a way to use it against McKay.

* * *

The morning sun was well over the cottonwoods when Carse came awake. He lay for a minute in his blanket, pleasantly occupied with memories of last night's dance, then rolled out and pulled on his boots. Another scorcher, he thought; not a cloud in sight and the air already felt close and sultry. But today promised one difference. Thanks to Amy Stewart, he had an appointment with the president of Valley Union.

If he did get his loan—a large shaky "if"—it would afford him a very special pleasure to be rid of Frankie Spain.

He washed in the river, had a leisurely shave and saddled his horse. Riding down the bottoms toward Rincon, he circled a clump of willows and came on a horse drinking out in midstream. A rangy blue roan, it tossed its mane at his approach and trotted out on a sandbar. Normally he would have considered another man's stray none of his concern, especially this close to town, but the Circle W brand on the flank caught his eye. It was not one of the four he had noticed at the Ace the night before, but presumably the roan belonged to Yellow Neck or his not too careful friends.

Still, a horse this valuable shouldn't be on the loose, Carse told himself, and damned if I'm going to backtrack it to their camp. He reined up and uncoiled his rope. When he pulled into the livery later he had the roan in tow. Sounds of heavy snoring floated from somewhere in the rear and he left the horse tied to a post, thankful he didn't have to face Boise on an empty stomach. By way of explanation he scrawled a note and spiked it on a nail: "Found the roan wandering in the brush. Hold for owner. McKay."

His spirits had revived to such an extent that he indulged himself in a fifty-cent breakfast at the Chinaman's. It was root, hog or die now. He'd leave town either with a thousand dollars or dead broke. Following Amy's directions, he rode to Seelah Stewart's home on the far edge of Rincon and dismounted promptly at nine. A buggy stood before the door and as he walked up to the porch a man carrying a small bag stepped out, gave him a preoccupied nod and drove off. The tune Carse had been whistling died on his lips when Amy came to the door.

Her face was white, pinched with fatigue, and there were purplish shadows under her eyes. "Oh, Carse!"

"What happened?"

"It's Seelah. Last night. After you brought me home from the dance." She pressed a hand to her head. "Mrs. Rabb, that's his housekeeper, heard him fall out of bed. He—he couldn't get back in. She ran to get me."

"The doctor—how bad is it?"

"A stroke. He's partly paralyzed. Dr. Baudet says its mild but—" Amy's eyes brimmed with tears.

She seemed so vulnerable and defenseless that he wanted to reach out and touch her, comfort her somehow. This was a side of her he hadn't seen, or even imagined, and he said, "What can I do to help?"

"Nothing. The doctor will look in again at noon. But for you, I'm so sorry this had to happen now!"

"Never mind me."

"You don't understand," she said. "Seelah can't see anyone; I don't think he even recognized me. He may be like this for days, or weeks. Your loan—"

"The loan can wait. You need some rest."

"Carse." She touched his arm lightly. "It can't wait. I know how much it means to you. But it has to be Seelah's

decision. Not mine. I can't take the responsibility for that much money at a time like this."

He drew a deep breath. "I know you can't. You did your best, Amy. Maybe he'll get well faster than you think."

"He has to! We're too young to remember the panic of '73. But my father lived through it."

"Panic?"

"People are like sheep sometimes," she said. "It doesn't take much to stampede them. And people here are worried, Carse, they're frightened. They're ready to believe the wildest rumors. So far, thank Heaven, they have confidence in the Valley Union."

"You're talking about a run on the bank?"

Amy nodded. "Seelah is the bank; he has been for twenty years. If news of his stroke gets spread around and distorted, anything might happen."

"Won't that doctor talk?"

"He's Seelah's oldest friend. Mrs. Rabb knows. I know. And now you. That makes four. It's hard to keep a secret in a town this size but—"

"We'll keep it." He put more heartiness into his voice than he felt. He knew what a bank run could do to a town or to an entire county. It was like a blight that spread misery and ruin. The cure was slow and painful and some towns never came back. "Things won't look so black after you've had some sleep."

"I hope you're right." She managed a wan smile. "Will I see you again?"

"Next time I'm in town I'll stop by."

"Yes, do. And thank you for listening to my troubles."

"You listened to mine," he said.

A kind of wonder touched him as he rode away, a wonder that she would trust him so readily, that she would ask him to call again. It had been kindness on her part, nothing more. Amy Stewart had a weakness for strays and cripples. Probably he would never take up her invitation. Too wide a range separated her world from his. Still, she had given his pride a boost when he needed it most, and he felt deeply in her debt.

So now he was back to Frankie Spain, back to Frankie and his deal in mining claims. He couldn't wait on the state of Seelah Stewart's heart. The old man might be laid

up for months. By then they might as well turn Massacre Basin back to the rattlers and the hogweed.

On the chance that Tom Judd had returned, he stopped at the Palace and climbed to the balcony. Braced for the belligerent young man of yesterday, he stepped back as the door opened. "Carse," Judd said. "Howdy."

Tom Judd was a tall ruddy-faced man with none of the obvious earmarks of a professional gambler. A speculator in horses on the side, Judd had been friendly ever since Carse had sold him a pair of mustangs off the mesa.

"How are you, Tom?" Carse said. "When did you get back?"

"Late yesterday." Judd grinned. "Hear you've been looking for me."

"I'm sorry about that," Carse said. "Lost my temper."

"That snotty pup who runs my office when I'm away?" Judd took him by the arm and drew him inside. "I'm surprised he's lived this long. Forget it."

He was a man of many interests and he talked entertainingly of horses, of the races tomorrow, of his recent trip, and for a few minutes Carse found he could relax and forget the urgency of his errand. But he found, also, that asking for money grew no easier, and it was Judd who finally said, with a smile that removed all sting from the words, "Get it off your chest. How much do you need?"

Carse told him, and why.

Judd opened a safe in the corner and dumped five coins on his desk. "Fifty dollars," he said. "A drop in the bucket, if you can use it. I'm sorry, Carse. But that's how things are with me."

"Thanks, Tom, that's mighty good of you—" He tried to keep the disappointment from his voice.

"I know. You're thinking about this building, about all the money on the tables, the furniture and the liquor stocks. Well, I don't own 'em. I own the cards and the dice, and not much else."

"Who does?"

"The bank. I'm borrowed up to the hilt. I just run the games for a percentage." Judd shook his head. "If anything happens to the Valley Union Bank this whole town'll curl up and die."

Amy had put it a different way. But the threat was no less real. He had never realized before how many different

kinds of people depended on a bank. "Maybe I ought to try my luck at faro."

"There may be harder ways to earn a dollar," Judd said, "but personally I never found one."

He recalled a story Judd once had told him about early mining days and he said, "You've knocked around here a long time, Tom. Know anything about silver claims?"

"When I was young and ignorant and full of beans I prospected every foot of this country. Ole Get-Rich-Quick Judd. I learned." He chuckled. "Why?"

"Fellow I met last night," Carse said evasively. "He's in town to buy up a bunch of leases. Says there's big money in it."

"He's a crook or a flannel-mouth liar. There's no silver around Rincon. Some copper, a bit of free gold. But silver—nah. Wherebouts are these leases?"

"I didn't ask him."

Judd's expression sobered. "None of my business, Carse. But if it was, I'd rather see you drop your money bucking the tiger downstairs. At least I run an honest layout."

"A new strike maybe?"

"I'll bet there hasn't been a mineral claim filed this year. Go check the county records at the courthouse if you don't believe me."

"I'll take your word for it, Tom. Obligated for the advice. But you keep the fifty."

Afterward he stood in front of the saloon jingling the few coins in his pocket while a slow anger rose in him. He didn't need to check the records. Frankie had lied to him. Subconsciously he'd known this all along, but he'd been afraid to admit it to himself. And if Frankie had lied about the silver claims he must have lied about the rest. A clumsy lie at that, the final seal of Frankie's contempt for him.

Forget Frankie Spain, he told himself. You never expected to get the money from him anyway. Go see him and he'll laugh in your face.

He had no prospects whatsoever now. It was senseless hanging around waiting for a miracle to happen. He might as well head back for the basin and take his beating. But the anger would not die that easily. What was Frankie after? What had brought him here to Rincon, along with a woman who might or might not be his wife? There had

to be a purpose behind this visit, one that Frankie was anxious to conceal.

It was the woman who answered his knock at Number Seven a few moments later. She was startled when she recognized him, and then sheepish. "Mr. Mac—isn't it?"

"McKay. The bad penny that keeps turning up."

She smiled anxiously and primped at her hair. "You're not going to hold one little fib against me, Mr. McKay?"

"Not if you tell me where I can find your husband."

"Right here." Frankie loomed in the doorway behind her, a towel in one hand, razor in the other. "Morning, kid. I was just going out to look for you."

Carse stepped into the room warily and glanced about. It all looked so domestic and commonplace and harmless. A man shaving. His woman puffy-eyed with sleep. Dirty clothes strewn on the floor, an unmade bed, the smell of perfume and stale cigar smoke. "How's the big silver deal this morning?" he said.

Frankie said, "Go take a walk, Verna. Get yourself some breakfast."

"But Frankie—"

"Out, I said. Go on!" He pushed her through the door and closed it. With quick sure movements he wiped the lather from his face and finished dressing. Carse watched in silence while he massaged his hair before the mirror and combed it with loving care. "You thought I was lying to you last night."

"I know you were."

"How'd you like to collect that thousand dollars today?"

"What you got now—a diamond mine?"

Frankie laughed. "I've got the sweetest setup you ever laid eyes on. Come on, I'll show you."

This was a different Frankie today, tense and hot-eyed and ready to pounce, like some big sleek cat; Frankie with his tail twitching and the claws out. He couldn't be faking that much excitement. It glowed on his face.

"How much will it cost me?" Carse asked.

"Easiest money you ever made. I been thinking about that ranch of yours. How far from town?"

"Forty miles or so. What's my ranch got to do with it?"

"Any crew there?"

"I'm the crew."

"Then we're in business. I'm giving you a break, kid."

Like you said, you did me a favor once." Frankie flexed his shoulders and slid into a coat. "You know that clump of cottonwoods beyond the depot. Get your horse and meet me there."

Carse studied him with a growing curiosity. When Frankie offered a favor it was time to duck. But go along with him, he thought. Play out the string. See what he's up to. It was something crooked, sure; as crooked as that pussy grin on Frankie's mouth. But what could he lose? "Make it half an hour," he said.

He had one last errand to perform—pick up his sack of candy at the store. As an afterthought he bought a teething ring for the latest Halloran and a mouth harp for the Larsen boy. God knew it was little enough to cushion the news he'd be bringing home. For Tim and Mary, for Knute and Ingrid, he had nothing but the report on his failure.

Frankie met him on foot in the grove at eleven o'clock and they walked from there, up a trail that paralleled the river bottoms. A long dusty mile or more beyond the farthest fringe of town Frankie turned into a dense wild tangle of brush and trees that all but obscured the ruins of a shack. Carse tied his horse in the shade and followed him inside, where two men sat playing double solitaire on a blanket.

"Boys," Frankie made the introductions, "this here is our new partner, my old sidekick McKay. Kid, meet Pike and Crip."

Pike was Yellow Neck, he of the good horses and the Circle W brand. Crip he'd never seen before. But he had seen men like him during his year in the pen. Hard-eyed men, usually without much hope or ambition or intelligence, men with a dull viciousness stamped on their faces. Hard cases, incorrigibles, the warden called them.

"McKay's gonna put us up tonight at his ranch," Frankie went on, "and get us fresh mounts tomorrow. Right?"

An iron fist-sized knot squeezed up in his belly. He should have seen this coming, should have read all the little signs and guessed the answer. But he'd been so sunk in his own worries he hadn't looked beyond his nose. "The bank?"

"Who else has any money in this country?" Frankie motioned to Crip. "Take a look outside. Don't want any interruptions."

Crip slapped a red queen on a black king, got up and stepped outside, his boots crunching in the underbrush.

"And you want me to hold the horses? Like last time."

Frankie laughed. "We got our own horse holder. You just lie around here till we get back. Then we follow you like homing pigeons. You won't even work up a sweat."

"I still say we better hold off till tomorrow," Pike put in. "Like we planned. Too many people this afternoon."

"We settled that last night." Frankie winked at Carse. "You in with us, kid?"

Carse could hear the heavy sledging of his heart. With elaborate casualness Pike rose from the blanket and leaned against the door frame and began to pare his nails with a spring knife. Frankie's right hand made a bulge in the pocket of his coat. He looked from one to the other and moistened his lips, thinking of his own gun, which lay crammed in his carpetbag on the saddle outside. Outside where Crip was prowling the brush for intruders. "Kind of sudden to throw at a man," he said.

"Tell you the truth," Frankie said, "we had us a pardner. But he tripped in a gopher hole and broke his neck. So we elected you."

"Oh." That could have been the "stray" roan he'd run across this morning. Must have been. And where was the rider now?

"You need the money. I need a place to lay over. It's a natural, kid."

Frankie took his acceptance for granted. And why not? You didn't say to a man who held a hideout gun on you, *Thanks a lot but I have other plans today*. It didn't help, either, to know that your own itch for a fast dollar had brought you here. Frankie had dangled the bait and you'd come plodding into the fold like a sheep to clover. He said, "The Valley Union 'll be tough to crack."

"How many you cracked lately?" Frankie was grinning at him again, sure of him, and the hand relaxed in his pocket. "Make yourself at home. Pike'll keep you company."

He shrugged. "All right, I'm in. But I have to ride back to town first. Man's expecting me."

It was a feeble stratagem, and drew the response it deserved. "What man?" Frankie said.

He grabbed for a name. "Boise Brown. The old fellow at the livery I was telling you about. I owe him for feed."

"I'll save you the bother. Stop by myself and pay your

bill." Frankie's grin faded and the black eyes burned into his. "You're in, you're in all the way. There's a lot more gopher holes around. Remember that, kid." He nodded at Pike. "Don't let him get lonely."

And then Frankie was gone, moving off through the brush with his swinging muscular walk. Pike snapped shut his knife and readjusted the knot on his kerchief. "Game?" he said.

"Sure." Carse squatted down on the blanket, shuffled one of the greasy decks and laid out his row. Pike sat opposite him, oblivious to the intense noonday heat, playing with melancholy absorption. Carse blinked the sweat from his eyes and tried to concentrate.

Now that Frankie had gone, what would happen if he walked out the door, climbed on his horse and rode off? Would Pike try to stop him? Or Crip? Was this some sort of a test, or did Frankie actually believe he was so downright stupid? Well, he would find out soon enough. "Known Frankie a long time?" he said.

"Uh-huh." Pike pointed. "You can play that five."

He played the five. "How soon you hitting the bank?"

Pike slapped down a four, a trey and a deuce and cleared his last ace. "Skunked you that time."

Pike won the next game and the next, both by wide margins and still Crip hadn't returned. There was no human sound outside the walls, only the shrill incessant hum of insects. A lizard scurried across the dirt floor and darted under a rock. About forty minutes had passed, Carse judged, and obviously he wasn't going to learn any more from Pike. He couldn't wait much longer. Where would Frankie be by now? He thought of the bank, trying to visualize its interior the one time he had been there, only yesterday. It seemed a year ago.

Would Amy Stewart be there, behind her desk, when Frankie walked in? Not if he could help it.

"Hot," he said. "Gonna get a drink."

Pike nodded, said "Go ahead," and gathered in his cards.

Carse stretched and got to his feet, expecting Pike to follow, but Pike went on shuffling. He paused in the doorway and eyed his horse, which stood with drooping head under the cottonwood exactly where he'd left it. But where was Crip? He idled over to the river bank, dropped to his knees and scooped a handful of the tepid water up to his mouth.

The brush was so thick on either side that he could peer into it only a few feet. He turned his head slowly, searching the bottoms for any trace of the missing man, and decided that he must have left with Frankie. Which left Pike and his knife. He could see him in the shack now, back to the doorway, bent over his cards. The soft sand deadened his footsteps as he moved to his horse, beyond Pike's line of vision. Quickly he unstrapped his bag from the saddle and plunged in his hand, groping for the gun.

In that instant he realized they had suckered him.

"This what you looking for?"

He swung around. Crip stood beside the trunk with Carse's .45 in his hand.

It was too late, much too late, to pretended surprise or indignation. All this time Crip had been waiting behind that tree, as patient and silent as a snake, to see what move he'd make.

"Maybe Frankie trusts you," Crip said. "I don't."

Carse stared into the big ugly muzzle. He'd emptied the gun before he stuffed it in his bag yesterday. Had Crip reloaded it? And if Crip had, would he fire it here and now, this close to town, with campers scattered all down the bottoms?

Crip raised his voice. "Hey, Pike." And then he made one tiny but very common mistake. For a fraction of a moment he shifted his eyes away from Carse toward the doorway. "Come out here. Looky what I caught."

Carse lunged for him.

Crip's glance flicked back. An almost comic consternation washed across his face. His mouth dropped open in a startled grunt and he fumbled frantically with the strange gun. Carse grabbed for it as he crashed into him, but Crip wrenched his wrist away and slashed down with the barrel. Carse felt a blinding flash of pain on the side of his skull, and then his impact slammed Crip back against the tree with a force that drove the air from his lungs; they both fell heavily, with Crip squirming on top.

He gave an agonized yell for Pike and stabbed his fingers downward for Carse's eyes like a fork. His nails raked one cheek and Carse rolled him over and smashed an elbow into his face and heard the brittle snap of bone. Cursing and moaning, Crip struggled wildly to hurl him off. They wrestled and thrashed back and forth across the sand

as they fought for the gun, until Carse jerked an arm free and slugged him twice more in the mouth. Crip made one last desperate heave to break loose and the .45 slipped from his grip.

As Carse snatched at it, something cool pressed down on the back of his neck with a feather touch, a feather with the bite of steel.

"Don't move," Pike's voice said. "You do an' I'll slit your throat."

Carse froze.

"Now turn loose that gun."

He could feel the tickle of the blade against his skin as the pressure increased ever so slightly. His fingers, slippery with blood and sweat, uncurled from the .45 butt.

"That's better," Pike said in the same quiet deadly tone. He bent down, scooped up the gun and cocked the hammer. As he stepped back the knife clicked shut. "You don't fight much better than you play cards, do you, sport? Get up. Slow and easy."

He stumbled to his feet. He was sick and dizzy and the bitterness burned like bile in his throat. He looked at his gun and he looked at Pike's sallow hangdog face and the silence seemed to ring in his ears.

"Come on," Pike said to Crip. "You ain't that bad hurt."

Crip dragged himself to his hands and knees, shaking his head from side to side like some tormented animal, and swiped a sleeve across his battered face. He spat out a piece of tooth and looked up at Carse with fiery wicked eyes.

"The bastard busted my nose," he said thickly. "Go on, Pike, cut him. Let's see what he bleeds."

* * *

Dr. Baudet came to the house shortly after noon and spent some time examining Seelah Stewart. Then he spoke to Amy downstairs. A blunt but kindly man, he minced no words in describing her father-in-law's condition.

"There's some improvement," he said. "Seelah is out of danger. In time the paralysis should pass. But he needs absolute rest and quiet. No business worries, no emotional upsets."

"That's a large prescription to fill," she said. "You know how Seelah is, and how he feels about the Valley Union."

"He's under sedation. I've left instructions with Mrs. Rabb.

She's a competent nurse and knows what to do. And now, my dear, I am going to prescribe for you."

Claude Baudet had attended Bob in his final illness, and while she had every confidence in his professional skill, he sometimes fussed over his patients like a broody hen. "Some of those blue pills, doctor?"

"No pills. You're too close to this thing. You've taken too much of the load on those pretty shoulders. You need a change of scene."

"I can't leave him now!"

"Why not? He couldn't be in better hands. I'll look in on him faithfully. You go out of town somewhere for a few days. Rest, and come back refreshed. Seelah's come to lean too heavily on you." The doctor shot his cuffs and picked up his bag. "Nobody's indispensable, Amy. The bank will survive without you."

"I'll think about it," she promised. "Later."

She tiptoed back upstairs, where the stout Mrs. Rabb sat in her rocker like some guardian dragon, and entered the sickroom. Seelah lay on his back, eyes closed, breathing shallowly. The left side of his face was drawn up grotesquely as though by invisible threads. He stirred, looked up at her and opened his mouth with an effort that wrenched at her heart.

"Amy—" His speech was slurred, indistinct.

"Don't try to talk, Seelah."

"That boy. Been on my mind."

She brushed her lips against his forehead. "Go back to sleep."

"Where is he? Come to see me. About his flume."

"He had to go away," she said. "He'll come to see you another time."

"McKay, good solid name. Amy, tell him—" The reedy voice grew faint and trailed away, and he was asleep once more. She tucked the sheet back over his chest and tiptoed out again.

When she arrived at the bank, armed with an excuse to explain her absence of the morning, she was prepared to get through the balance of the day as though nothing had happened. She must, she told herself, present a normal unworried face to the town, and to her own immediate world of the Valley Union. She smiled at Matthew, chatted briefly

with Charlie Tatum and asked old Mr. Mervine about his wife's health. And when Huntley Raymond came in from his lunch she made a determined effort to be gracious.

"I was concerned about you, Amy," he said. "I hope you weren't ill."

"I played hookey," she told him lightly. "I knew nothing could go wrong with you in charge, Hunt."

He bent over his desk. "Could I see you in private? It's most important."

There were no customers at the moment and none of the other men could overhear, but she rose nevertheless and led the way back to the storeroom, puzzled and faintly apprehensive. "What is it?"

"I learned a startling fact last night." He glanced about as though someone might be eavesdropping. "I thought I should bring it to your attention at once."

She found him particularly trying when he was self-important and officious like this, but she said patiently, "Yes, go on."

"It's about that chap McKay, the one who tried to borrow a thousand dollars yesterday."

A little pulse quickened in her throat.

"He is a criminal, Amy. A notorious outlaw."

"And where did you learn this startling fact?"

"From a reliable person whose identity I am not at liberty to reveal." Raymond paused dramatically. "But that's not the worst. He used to ride with the Frankie Spain gang."

She couldn't help herself. She burst into laughter. "You mean well, Hunt, I know. But Mr. McKay told me about his lurid past. He's about as notorious as—as— Well, he's no more an outlaw than you are."

In hurt, incredulous tones he said, "And you believed him?"

"Of course I did. Why shouldn't I?"

"You can't deny that he has a bad reputation. He looked suspicious to me. Desperate. A man like that might do anything to get his hands on money."

"Oh, Hunt." She didn't feel called upon to defend Carse to him. She was simply too weary to argue. "This isn't Philadelphia. You can't judge a man out here by his haircut."

She started for the door but he stepped in front of her. "Amy, I cannot permit you to make this mistake. I happen to know you went to the dance with him."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"The dance at the fairground." His voice was smug with the virtue of a man who sees his painful duty and will do it, come what may. "I must point out to you the unfortunate impression your behavior might make."

"My behavior?" She stared at him in disbelief. "Are you suggesting what I think you are?"

"I trust I have your best interest at heart, Amy, and consorting with a known desperado is hardly—"

"In the first place," she cut in with icy fury, "my best interests are none of your business. And secondly, you're a silly pompous ass. Now, please let me by."

His pale face went crimson. "Amy, you don't know what you're saying!"

"Git! Before I really lose my temper!"

Hastily he moved aside and she swept out through the door and across the bank to her desk. She couldn't recall when she'd been so angry. That moralizing busybody! Her glance darted to the wall clock. One-thirty; three-and-a-half hours to closing time. The prospect of sitting here all afternoon, maintaining a mask of calm serenity in the face of Hunt's mute reproaches, was unbearable. Perhaps Dr. Baudet had been right. She did need a change, if only for a day or two.

The simplest solution was to go home, lock the door and draw the blinds. But the carnival atmosphere of Rincon was scarcely restful. Out of town, the doctor had recommended. She knew she would be welcome at any one of several outlying ranches, but the owners and their families were all in town for the celebration. So where? She pressed her hands against her burning eyes. Maybe I'm pampering myself, she thought. I'm needed here.

And then a new thought crossed her mind. The longer she considered it, the more it appealed to her as a compromise between business and pleasure. It was the kind of direct approach she was sure that Seelah would have approved. Seelah himself had never been one to sit behind a desk day in and day out. He had built this bank, as he often said, from the seat of a saddle.

She gathered up her purse and stopped at the front door, where Matthew was polishing the brasswork. "I won't be in tomorrow, Matthew," she told him. "I'm going out of town overnight."

"You do that, Miz Stewart," he said. "Kick up your heels. Do you good."

"If anybody inquires, tell them—oh, just say I'm visiting friends."

She hurried down the street, eager to be on her way now that she had decided.

From his station at the cashier's window Raymond watched her go, jolted to the core by a sensation he had never known until the night before. He did not call it jealousy. He thought of it as righteous wrath. He did not blame Amy, who clearly was not herself today; she had lashed out at him in an unthinking moment of heat. The fault lay with McKay. Illogically and woman-like she had flown to the man's defense, against all common sense.

Raymond looked around and surprised Charlie Tatum and old Mervine. Heads together, the teller and the bookkeeper were whispering and grinning in his direction. "Haven't you anything better to do?" he snapped.

Snatching his hat from the rack, he strode to the front entrance. He would not demean himself again by spying on her. But as senior officer of the bank, Raymond told himself, he was bound to take precautionary measures. "Boy," he said, "did Mrs. Stewart tell you where she was going?"

Matthew Howe gave him an impassive stare. "No," he said. "Sir."

He suspected that the janitor was lying. Everybody seemed against him, conspiring to humiliate him. Threading his way through the crowd, he crossed over to the sheriff's office. "I have a complaint," he said without preliminaries.

"So?" Pol Ortega lifted one shaggy eyebrow and waved him into the office.

"What can you tell me about an outlaw called Frankie Spain?"

"Spain? It is a name not unfamiliar to me. You wish to complain about him, Senor Raymon?"

"About one of his men. What sort of criminal acts did this Spain commit?"

The sheriff frowned and scratched his armpit and put a fresh matchstick in his mouth. "Frankie Spain, *si*. But this is not his country. He is of the north. Far from Rincon. Of what man do you speak?"

"Would you arrest him if I told you."

"Perhaps." Ortega turned to the rolltop desk and fingered

through an immense mound of papers that appeared to have been accumulating there since his first day in office. After a short search he pulled one out and squinted his good eye at it. "You understand, senor, there are big bad ones and little bad ones. Spain is one of the little bad ones."

"What is that, sheriff, a wanted dodger?"

"From Idaho authorities, a request to hold him on a charge of robbery. Unfortunately they did not include a photograph."

"I knew it!" Raymond said triumphantly. "The man is Carson McKay. He's a member of the Spain gang."

"McKay? The horse rancher?" A puzzled look crossed Ortega's face. "And how do you know this?"

Raymond played his trump. "The old man in the stable told me. Boise Brown. He comes from Idaho. So does McKay."

"You will pardon me, senor, but many men come from Idaho. Brown left there years ago. He is—how shall I say it?—perhaps not the most reliable of witnesses."

"But he knows, I tell you! He knew them both as boys."

"Do you have any other evidence?"

"What more do you need?"

"Senor Raymon'." The sheriff sighed. "It is not a crime to be a boy in Idaho. I cannot arrest a man for that. I will look into the matter, be assured, but I must have more than the word of one such as Boise Brown."

It was an effort to control his temper. He wanted to shake the stupid lazy old man. "That's up to you, of course, sheriff," he said acidly, "but I have another charge to lodge against him."

A sudden racket of shouting and banging broke out at the back of the building in the jail section. Ortega disappeared through the doorway and the noise ceased abruptly. When he returned he said with an apologetic smile, "One of our guests. You were saying—"

"This McKay has been forcing his unwelcome attentions on Mrs. Stewart. I want you to warn him off."

"Attentions. Of what nature?"

"Surely you don't expect a gentleman to discuss them, sheriff."

"This is a delicate affair, to be sure, but has the lady herself complained?"

"Not yet," Raymond declared. "She is too—refined."

Ortega's smile broadened into a grin. "You ask the impossible of me. I am only a humble enforcer of the law. I respectfully suggest that you permit the matter to arrange itself."

Raymond stiffened. "This is outrageous! I demand—" He was sputtering. "I demand that you, as a public servant, take some action."

"You demand, senor?"

"As a taxpayer and citizen I know my rights. Are you afraid of the man?"

The grin faded and Ortega's eye seemed to glow in its socket. "Puppy!" He snarled the word. "Go back to your bank. Now. *Andale*. Go!"

Raymond stood rigid with rage. The old fool, this incompetent bungling excuse for a sheriff, was laughing at him too. Like all the rest. Tears of helpless fury stung his eyes. "Damn you!" he shouted. "Damn you!"

He bolted out through the door onto the walk and blindly bumped into a bypasser. His legs were trembling, and he peered up and down the street for Amy, tortured by a picture of her rushing to another rendezvous with McKay. The image of her waltzing in McKay's arms made him groan aloud.

Aware that people were turning to stare, he raced over to the hotel and into the bar, where he gulped down three quick brandies, then went to his room and unlocked his trunk. From under the camphor-reeking folds of his winter underwear he drew out the .45 revolver he had bought in Philadelphia to bring West. He had never fired it, never fired any hand gun for that matter, but with clumsy shaking fingers he loaded it now.

Outwardly composed, he returned to the bank and took his position at the cashier's window. This was his world, a world of order and precision and columns of figures that added up to predictable sums. But somehow the world had tilted on its axis. He slipped the .45 into his cash drawer.

If McKay pressed his attentions any further he, Huntley Raymond, knew what had to be done. He was ready. And damn them all.

They had used the rope from his saddle. Carse lay on his back in the dirt, ankles trussed, arms bound tight behind his back, with a rag stuffed in his mouth and secured by a strip of blanket. The afternoon heat, trapped inside the dobe walls, enclosed him like a shroud. Sweat trickled down into his eyes and flies buzzed maddeningly over the matted blood on his scalp. He lay in a semi-stupor and tried to concentrate on the sounds outside.

For some while Pike and Crip had been arguing in angry low-pitched voices. Now and then Carse caught a few words, enough to realize that he was the main cause of their disagreement. "Naw, you can't do that," Pike was saying. "How we gonna find this ranch without he's along to show us? Use your head, man."

Crip's retort was inaudible and Pike went on. "I don't like it any better'n you do, but now Frankie's made the play we got to back him."

"Damn that McKay to hell!"

"Too late now." Pike paused, evidently to look at his watch. "Five till four. Make up your mind."

After a long silence Crip said, "I can't go into town lookin' like this."

"That's what I been telling you. So I go. You stay here. Two of us can pull the job."

Presently the voices faded and one of the two, presumably Pike, moved off through the brush. Carse made one more futile effort to loosen the rope around his wrists and subsided as Crip stepped back through the doorway. Crip's lips were mashed and swollen, and his nose was a shapeless grotesque blob in the bloated pallor of his face.

He prodded Carse with the toe of his boot and said, "We got a little time to kill, you and me, till the boys get back. What'll we do for laughs?"

Carse stared up at him and tightened his muscles. Crip's boot dug into his ribs, playfully the first time, then with a savage free-swinging kick that lifted him off the dirt. He fell back and the pain flared up and down his side like the shock waves of an explosion.

"That was a trial heat, sport." Crip's broken tooth gleamed whitely in the ruin of his mouth. "Let's see how you do in the finals."

He kicked again. Carse felt his body arch and sag, and he

cried out soundlessly against the gag. Teetering on the brink of consciousness, he thought: he'll kick me to death.

And then Crip straightened with a grunt and turned to the doorway. Above the roaring in his ears Carse heard voices outside, shrill childish voices. Crip swore and bounded to the door. "Hey, you kids," he called. "I told you yesterday, keep away from here."

"Aw, we're only fishin', mister. Say, what happened to your face?"

The voice might have belonged to a nine-year-old boy. Carse shut his eyes and willed the boy to come closer.

"Horse kicked me. G'wan, beat it!"

"That horse there?"

"Yeah, that horse. There ain't no fish in this river."

"There is so. Why'd he kick you?"

Blocking the door, Crip made no reply. His mind would be racing now, Carse knew, as he weighed this act against that, how to get rid of these intruders without arousing their suspicion. He rolled over in the dust, straining to reach the fireplace and the coffeepot. The pot would clang against the rocks, if he could knock it over. He flopped over again and the shack whirled about him in dizzy waves. One more roll, five more feet—

"Why'd he kick you, mister? 'Cause you're mean, I bet."

"Clear outta here!" Crip roared.

"My pa heard shootin' up this way last night."

Crip took a threatening step and reached down for a rock.

There was the patter of running feet and then, from a distance, a final taunting yell. "I'll set my pa on you, I will! You don't own this river."

Panting and exhausted, Carse collapsed beside the fireplace. Crip turned and stamped back inside. Ponderous thoughts moved across his face as he took in the significance of Carse's altered position. His chest rose and fell and he pulled the .45 from the waistband of his pants. "Nearly made it, huh?" he said. "Lucky for those kids you didn't."

Carse saw the downward sweep of his arm. The barrel thudded against his skull and he sank into a wet dark sleep.

* * *

By the time Pike Lary climbed out of the river bottoms and reached the depot, the crowd of idlers that gathered every aft-

ernoon to watch the train come in had dispersed. He checked his watch by the telegrapher's clock and continued up Main Street at a hobble-footed amble that belied his state of inner tension. Despite his assurance to Crip that two men could do the job, he had some grave misgivings. The woman didn't count; likely she'd be a hindrance. Two men, Frankie and himself, would be spread thinner than a whore's kimono.

As Pike saw the situation, they had no choice. They had to go ahead today. They couldn't risk another night in the shack, not with McKay on their hands and Pony Reese under a cutbank fifty yards away. He did not think of himself as a worrier. He was a realist. And common sense told him they had to take the bank this afternoon, if they ever hoped to take it, thirty minutes from now, according to plan.

On the other hand if he went to the hotel and explained why Crip was missing, Frankie would blow up. In a way, Pike supposed, he was afraid of Frankie Spain. Lately Frankie had taken a queer unpredictable turn; he swung from one wild scheme to another like some aerialist on a trick trapeze. And that was dangerous—to flipflop in midair.

The woman had been Frankie's idea. The woman had led to Reese, and Reese had led to McKay, and McKay had knocked out a third of their strength. I wish to God it was over, Pike thought. I got a feeling in my bones about this one. It's wrong. It's gone sour. Frankie's lost his grip. After today I'll never ride with him again.

He plodded glumly past the Valley Union, turned south on River Street for half a block and cut into the alley. In the reeking gloom of the stable he peered about and called for the hostler. Boise Brown shuffled into view and screwed up his rheumy nearsighted eyes.

"Me and my friends are pullin' out," Pike said. "How much I owe you?"

"Mr. Smith, ain't it? That'll be three bucks," Boise said. "Wat'sa matter, don't like our town?"

"No jobs here." Pike handed over the money and stepped into the stall. None of the horses had been curried and he doubted if the old man had grained them either, but it was no time to kick up a ruckus.

"Which way you headed?"

"South, toward Soyopa," Pike said, and wished it were true.

"Soyopa? Long hot ride and you won't land jobs there, neither."

Pike shrugged and went on with his saddling. "Funny thing happened this morning," Boise rambled on. "Feller found one of your horses out in the brush."

"Not mine."

"Same brand. Big blue roan. Feller named McKay. For a wonder he didn't steal it."

Pike's hand tightened over a cinch strap. Reese's horse! And McKay had been the one to find it. How many other people had he told? Would anybody recognize it and begin to wonder? That had been Frankie's idea, too, to turn the roan loose.

"That'll cost you six bits more. 'Less you don't care to claim it."

Pike swallowed. "Kinda slipped my mind. The bugger jerked his halter and wandered off last night."

"Absent-minded, ain't you, Mr. Smith?"

The old man knew he was lying. A rider looking for work didn't forget a hundred dollars' worth of horse. And this old man was a talker. Pike fished five dollars out of his pocket. "Here you go, old-timer. Buy a bottle for your trouble." One scaly eyelid dropped in a wink and Pike added hastily, "I'll leave 'em here in the shade till we come back. The boys are havin' one last drink before we hit the road."

He slapped on the last saddle, led all five Circle W horses to the alley end of the runway and tied them to a rail, then ducked out before the old rummy could ask more questions. His shirt was sweat-plastered to his back by the time he reached the corner and he had difficulty rolling a smoke. Leaning against a post in front of the mercantile, he glanced across the street at the hotel and up at the windows again. Five minutes to go.

Five minutes to decide, he thought. Yes or no? Five minutes. All he had to do was cross the street, climb the stairs and knock on the door of Number Seven. "Frankie," he'd say, "I quit. No deal. Take the bank yourself, you and your fancy woman."

That's all. Tell Frankie off and walk out.

He felt mother-naked here on this corner, as though ever man in Rincon was staring at him, waiting to see which way he would jump. Once he gave the signal there would be no jumping back. Five minutes? Four now. Yes or no?

Pike fingered his kerchief and wished he had bought two more. He'd never find another bargain like it.

"Will you stop that!" Verna said. "You're giving me the willies."

Frankie tucked his watch into his pocket and paced across the room to the front window. He eyed the entrance to the bank, squinting at the gilt figures on the glass to the right, as if he could read off the magic number, \$250,000.00, and watched the janitor come out with his bucket and long-handled mop. Then he turned to the side window for another look at the sheriff in the courthouse doorway on the opposite corner. The scene was like a picture in a book, he thought. Always the same. He'd seen it a hundred times, and still it had the power to draw him back again and again.

"For Pete's sake," Verna said. "Lie down and relax."

He stepped to the mirror and studied his reflection, finding half a dozen gray hairs that he must have missed the day before. He yanked them out, and went to work with his bottle of dye and a small brush.

Verna laughed. "Fussing about your hair at a time like this."

She was lying on the bed in her petticoat. He grinned and leaned over and gave her bottom a pat. "You're a good kid, Verna."

"Kid? Hah! Thanks, lover." She sighed. "That ride's gonna kill me."

"Isn't it worth it?"

"Frankie." A dreamy wistfulness crept into her voice. "When we get to that place we're going, you'll marry me, won't you?"

"Sure, we'll find a priest and stand up together."

"I wish we were married now, Frankie. It never mattered much before, but somehow today it seems important. I feel—oh, I don't know, all good and peaceful inside. I'm not scared any more, Frankie. You're the one who's scared."

He snorted.

"Yes you are. Verna knows what you need."

"Not a drink now."

"Who's talking about drinks?"

He looked down at the tangle of yellow hair, at the soft powdered flesh of her shoulders and throat, and the scent of her was like an aphrodisiac. He could not rip his eyes away from the globes of her breasts and the rich curve of thigh and swell of belly. She was smiling up at him, her

lips parted, and he stood mesmerized over her, unable to move. Not this either, he told himself. Not now. Got to keep my mind on the job.

"Hon." The springs squeaked as her bosom rose and she lifted her plump arms to him. "Come on. Now, hon. Now."

He fell on her and with a little whimper of joy and pain she met his savage thrusting, as though she were joining battle. Afterward he lay spent beside her on the pillow and she rubbed her hand in a gentle circular motion over the small of his back. "Frankie," she murmured against his ear, "did I make you happy?"

"Happy?" Before he had always thought of her in limited terms, as a woman he needed for the job, handy for a roll in bed, but now a kind of tenderness welled up in him. "Sure you did."

"You don't have to say it, Frankie. But I think you do love me. As much as you can love anybody."

He said, "Hey, why the tears?"

"Because I'm happy too." She wiped her eyes. "I wish we were married, that's all."

He pulled her up, laughing at her pink-and-white nakedness, "Wait till I show you off to Butch and the boys."

They had to hurry now. While Verna scrambled into a dress he checked the contents of his pigskin bag and stuffed in the man's clothing she would need for the ride. The other baggage and clothes, his coat with the bullet-holed pocket, they'd leave behind as a souvenir from Frankie Spain. He reloaded the belly gun and wound his watch, and moved back to the window for what would be his final lookout.

The janitor had finished washing down and had gone back inside the bank; late afternoon crowds were stirring along the sidewalks. This was better than his first plan. Tomorrow, with everybody at the fairground, he and Verna would have stuck out like a pair of freaks on that empty street. Today they would pass unnoticed. He had only one last-minute niggling doubt: McKay. Some men you could buy for a ten-dollar bill, but McKay had shown a peculiar stubborn streak quite unlike the tagalong kid back in Idaho. He shook his head and put the question from his mind, as Pike Lary sauntered into view.

Frankie swore.

"Now what?" Verna said.

"Where the hell's Crip? Pike's supposed to be back in the alley."

"Frankie, honestly! You keep telling me not to fuss. Don't you trust your own men?"

He held his breath, watching Pike. Had something gone wrong? Why had Pike taken Crip's place as tipoff man? Any number of possibilities, all bad, occurred to him. But Pike appeared to be nonchalant and unconcerned. He could have been any puncher in town for a fling, loafing on the corner and eyeing the girls. Presently he threw away his cigarette butt and straightened his kerchief. Then he shoved back his hat and swiped an arm across his forehead.

Frankie expelled a sigh of relief. "That's the signal. Everything's set."

He handed Verna the belly gun, which she placed in her purse, and picked up his bag. With a flourish he opened the door. "After you, Mrs. Leonard."

It was nine minutes to five by the clock in the lobby.

Only one customer was at the counter when they entered the Valley Union. Frankie waited until the man concluded his business and nodded to the cashier.

"Mr. Leonard, madam." Raymond's voice made a precise little bow. "Good afternoon."

Frankie's glance raked the room. The Stewart woman was not in sight, nor the janitor. The old man on the stool had shut his ledger and was cleaning his pens, and the third man was gazing out the window with a bored time-to-go-home expression. By turning his head slightly he could see the sheriff in his doorway across the street. "Is Mrs. Stewart in?"

"No she's not."

Raymond's manner was so abrupt that Frankie peered at him sharply. The man looked glassy-eyed and flushed, as though he'd been drinking, and he stared with open insolence at the vee of Verna's dress. "Those papers I left with you yesterday," Frankie said. "I need them."

"Yes, sir." Raymond withdrew to the safe, pulled open the door and returned at once with the envelope, which in fact contained several pages from a mail-order catalogue. "Sign this receipt please."

Frankie scrawled his signature and glanced at the clock. Three minutes to closing time. Where was that black man?

"My wife wants to draw some spending money out of our account."

Verna put on her wheedling smile. "Is twenty dollars too much, dear?"

Raymond reached for the cash drawer, hesitated a second and reached in. Counting out the coins he said stiffly, "Will that be all today, sir?"

One eye on the clock, Frankie pretended to examine the envelope. This has gone too fast, and now the cashier was eager to shunt them out the door. He had to stall for another minute or two, but he couldn't think of any plausible excuse. An almost unbearable tension gripped him.

And then Verna plucked a handkerchief from her purse and held it delicately to her nose. "I—I feel dizzy. Have to—" She pressed one hand to her bosom and sank down on a bench. "Silly. Not used to this heat."

It sounded like some shopworn music hall turn, but Verna's little tactic diverted Raymond temporarily. "Would madam care for smelling salts? I believe Mrs. Stewart keeps some in her desk."

Verna let a hand fall in limp acquiescence. Frankie ground his teeth and stared at the clock with agonized impatience.

The door in the rear partition squeaked open and the janitor emerged, key ring in hand. He crossed the length of the bank slowly, so slowly that it seemed to Frankie there must be something wrong with his legs. He peered out into the street, closed the double front doors, and locked them with a grinding thud of metal. Without a glance at Verna or the staff, he pulled the bilious sun-faded curtains across the front windows and then the side windows, shutting out the bright afternoon light and the busy commerce of Main Street.

Frankie's chest swelled against his coat. For months he'd dreamed of this. He'd worked and schemed and even killed for it, and now the moment was here. Frankie Spain was here. Inside. Locked in with all that money.

"You!" He pulled a .44 from the bag.

Matthew Howe turned from the window. Charlie Tatum glanced up. Mr. Mervine coughed nervously. Huntley Raymond blinked behind the counter.

"This is a holdup," Frankie said in a pleasant conversational tone. "My name's Spain and I'll shoot the first man who opens his mouth."

Four men stared at his gun. The only sound was the ticking of the clock, whose hands now read two minutes after five o'clock.

"You three." He indicated all but Raymond. "Come out here. Down on your bellies."

One by one they filed through the counter gate and lay face down on the floor. Raymond stood behind his wicket with his hands in the air, all the brandy flush drained from his face.

"Go let the boys in."

Verna disappeared through the partition into the store-room toward the back door, which opened on the alley. In the bank the clock ticked on. Three minutes, four, five. Still Verna did not return. Christ, Frankie thought, I can't stand here forever; where is she? Why don't she come back? For godsakes, hurry. Outside on the street a firecracker exploded. He started so violently he almost dropped the gun.

One of the men on the floor began to sneeze. Frankie cocked the hammer of the .44 and the sneezing ended in a strangled cough. And then Verna was back, gasping and flushed. Alone. "The door bolt, Frankie! It's stuck!"

"Try again, dammit!"

"It won't budge! I'm not strong enough."

He wheeled toward the rear of the bank and stopped. Could he trust her to cover four men while he jimmied the door open? No, too risky. They might try to jump a woman. His mind leaped to the alternative. Pike and Crip would have to wait. The money first. He could handle this bunch himself.

"You." He pointed at Raymond. "Empty your cash drawer. Then the safe."

In a thin strained voice Raymond said, "Are you Frankie Spain?"

"That's me, sonny. Reach."

Raymond's face twitched and he wet his lips. Very slowly he lowered his right arm to the drawer and pulled it open. His hand came up with a .45.

For an instant Frankie was too astounded to react. Verna screamed. "Frankie, look out!"

The .45 wavered and went off with a shocking roar. Frankie fired once, through the wicket. Raymond dropped his gun and staggered back and Frankie shot him again.

Raymond collided with a desk, grabbed at a chair for support and fell behind the counter.

Waves of sound seemed to echo and re-echo from the walls, and the stink of gunpowder bit at Frankie's nostrils. He stared at the tendril of smoke from his gun barrel, not yet able to comprehend what had gone wrong, nor grasp the enormity of this disaster. Another sound, as faint and soft and tremulous as a human sigh, made him turn. Verna lay on the floor in a pool of blood.

"Verna?" He knelt down. "Verna!"

Her eyes were closed and a strand of hair had fallen across her face. He brushed it back in place and touched a finger to her cheek. Raymond's one wild shot had struck her in the breast. "Verna," he said again. But she was dead.

None of the men on the floor had moved, but Frankie now became aware of the buzzing of a crowd outside. Somebody was pounding on the front doors. He backed off from the body. In a daze he looked about the interior of the bank, at the safe, at the framed maxim on the wall, at the clock again. It was eleven past five. The crowd noise out on Main Street had become a deep-throated rumble. He rubbed at his eyes and tried to think. The money. Get the money. Then get out. You're locked in here and Verna's dead.

"Open up in there!" a voice shouted. "Open up."

Frankie stumbled to the counter and reached for the cash drawer, then jerked his hand back. It was sticky with blood. Raymond's blood. "You, boy!" He kicked the janitor's outstretched leg. "Stand up."

Heavily, slowly, as though his joints ached, Matthew Howe got to his feet.

"Open that back door for me. Quick!"

Matthew shook his head.

"Move, nigger, or I'll kill you dead."

"No, sir," Matthew said. "This is Mr. Seelah Stewart's bank. I'm not givin' you no help."

Frankie fired once and watched Matthew's knees buckle. As Matthew fell the key ring clattered to the floor and he rolled over on his face. A fist banged on the plate glass at the front, and a voice yelled, "Open up, or I'll shoot out the lock!"

Frankie threw one last despairing look at the safe, snatched another gun from his bag and ran for the storeroom, then

through a second doorway into the janitor's room. Hurling himself against the sheet-iron door, he clawed at the knob that moved the bolt. The bolt turned slightly in its rusty socket and stuck. Frantically he hammered with the butt of his .44, hit his thumb and cried aloud at the pain. Suddenly the bolt gave and he yanked the door inward and tottered out into the alley.

Pike was there, his face a yellow blur in the blinding sunlight. Pike shouted at him, but the words were only a babble of sound. He shook Pike's hand off his arm and started for the mouth of the alley. Then a face appeared there, blocking his exit. An old brown, wrinkled face with one eye, and this face was shouting at him too.

Through the dust and the sun dazzle he saw the shape of the man, saw the gun at his hip, the glitter of a star on his shirt. Then all the pieces merged into a single whole and the man took on identity. Ortega, the sheriff, the Mex who had a reputation but not much else. Frankie flung himself forward and raised his gun and fired. The old man reeled back into the street, clutching at his holster and Frankie shot again, driving him to his knees. With a final spasm of effort Ortega cleared his gun. It discharged into the street with a spurt of dust, and he slipped sideways, trying to brace himself on one arm.

Frankie fired again and again, and with each shot Ortega jerked and sank a little lower, a terrible will burning in his good eye like a dying coal. Suddenly it winked out and he lay sightless on his back, and a hushed silence crept over the alley.

"Sweet Jesus!" Pike breathed.

"Come on, get those horses!"

Frankie dodged around Ortega and dashed out into River Street, dimly conscious of the people grouped like statuary along the sidewalks where the crash of gunfire had frozen them. As he burst into sight, a blood-smeared, wild-eyed figure with a gun in his hand, a woman screamed and the nearest man broke for cover. He ran past them into the opposite alley mouth, side by side with Pike and turned into the livery. Four saddled horses and a bareback roan were hitched inside the door.

"The money, Frankie?" Pike grabbed his shoulder. "Where's the money?"

Frankie shoved him aside, jerked the reins loose and

swung up on the bay, just as a dumpy little man shuffled out of a stall. "Now looky here, mister," the man said, and clutched at a bridle strap. "You can't go taking horses without my sayso."

"Turn loose, grandpa."

Boise Brown hiccoughed and focused his eyes. Then his mouth sagged. "I know you!" he exclaimed. "By jibbies, you're Frankie—"

Frankie planted a foot against his chest and sent him sprawling on his back into the dirt and manure of the runway. Boise stared up in a state of disbelief and alcoholic shock, hurt bewilderment on his face. Out on the street men were shouting back and forth again and the firehouse bell began to clang an alarm. Frankie tossed a gun to Pike and reloaded his own from a box of shells in his pocket.

"Frankie, the money?" Pike swallowed. "What happened?"

Frankie shook his head. How could he explain a mess like that? If the bolt hadn't jammed, if Raymond hadn't pulled a gun, if the nigger hadn't been so stubborn— If. And now the whole town was boiling around his ears. He hadn't taken a lousy stinking dime. Worse, he'd left two hundred dollars of his own money, his last two hundred, back there in the Valley Union.

And Verna. He'd left Verna back there too. One crazy fluke shot and Verna Gale was gone, along with the trip to South America and the luck of Frankie Spain. He beat his fist against his thigh. He'd still show this town. He'd leave the bastards something to remember him by.

Pike climbed hurriedly into the saddle. "Which way?"

"Gimme back that .44. I'll show you which way." Frankie reloaded the second gun and jammed it in his belt, then looked down at the now terrified Boise. "You're right, grandpa. Tell 'em Frankie Spain was here."

He gave the bay a vicious kick. The horse leaped forward into the alley and he swung it left onto River Street as men scattered out of their path. At a dead run he swerved right on Main street, past the hotel and the bank, and snapped two shots at the Valley Union's windows. Yelling and cursing, he thundered down the street. A man fired back at him once and sprinted for a doorway. Frankie emptied one gun at him and drew the other, shooting at anything that moved—man, woman, child or dog.

With Pike at his shoulder he flashed past the depot and

over the tracks, pounded across the fields into the trees and forded the San Luis. On the far bank he sawed the lathered bay down to a lope and turned upstream along the bottoms. When they neared the shack he slowed to a walk. Pike looked over at him and looked away again and didn't say anything.

He threw back his head and laughed. He didn't know why. But one thing sure, Rincon would never forget Frankie Spain. He couldn't seem to stop laughing.

* * *

Carse could only guess how long he'd been unconscious. More than an hour, he thought, judging by the shadow pattern on the floor of the shack. The air had cooled perceptibly and the bottoms were silent except for the faint lisp of the river. His head throbbed and his ribs on the left side felt as though they had been seared by fire, but he lay rigid, leery of attracting Crip's attention by any noise or movement. Through slitted eyes he observed him pacing back and forth between the walls.

From time to time Crip would step to the door and peer out. Twice he went outside to look around, mumbling to himself. Some thirty minutes passed like this, and almost the entire floor was in shadow before Carse heard hoofbeats. Crip grabbed his gun and sprang back to the door.

Horses approached through the brush and stopped nearby, and Crip hurried out. There were voices, angry voices, and the sound of shrill harsh laughter. That would be Frankie. Nobody in this world had a laugh like that. To hear it again was like an old ugly dream.

"I say leave him." That was Pike. "He's no use to us now."

"His ranch is. We have to hole up somewhere."

"Haul him out here then. We ain't got time for tea."

Frankie came in and bent over him, a wild dancing glitter in his eyes. Carse remembered the look, too. He'd seen it in Frankie's eyes the day they'd tried to rob the store. "That was a fool stunt," Frankie said. "Going for your gun. For a wonder Pike didn't cut your liver out."

He slashed the ropes with his knife and ripped the gag out of Carse's mouth. Carse spat out shreds of rag and the blood spurted into his hands and legs with the excruciating

pain of a thousand tiny needles. He got to his feet and fell back on his knees, then made it on the second try and stumbled against the wall. Pike and Crip stared at him impassively through the doorway.

"How far to your place? Forty miles, you said?"

He nodded and fought down a storm of nausea.

"We got two hours or more daylight left, and we may have riders on our trail. Your job is shake 'em off. You know the country."

Carse nodded again.

Frankie backhanded him across the mouth. "Answer me! Say it."

"Shake any riders off our trail."

"That's better. Keep clear of ranches and settlers. If anybody shows up there tonight I'll shoot you first. Now get your butt in the saddle."

With numbed shaking hands he hitched up the cinch and pulled himself onto his horse. The others, mounted on three of the Circle W horses, swung into line and followed him up the bottoms. A fourth horse was riderless, which led him to wonder about the missing woman. Was she party to the holdup? If so, why had she been left behind? Questions seethed in his mind. Amy Stewart, what of her? Had Amy been at the bank? Where was she now? What little he did know heightened his concern for her.

The brush thinned where the San Luis made its big bend to the north and they rode across the sand bars at a trot into the mouth of the first canyon. Clay bluffs gave way to rocky walls and although a well-worn trail paralleled the river Carse kept to the water, splashing through the shallows. Such an obvious dodge would not fool any experienced tracker for long, but Frankie might not think of that. All he could do was follow orders and wait for dark.

Turning and twisting through the bends of the canyon, presently they broke out into a valley, and Carse cut out of the river bed onto a rocky ledge. After a steep climb this led onto a ridge which afforded a sweeping view of the country to the south. They pulled up to blow the horses and looked back over the route they had traveled. He could make out the distant sprawl of Rincon beyond the last fold of hills, but no clouds of dust rose in the clear twilight air.

"No sign of a posse so far," Frankie said.

"Could be down in the canyon," Carse pointed out.

"You better hope not, kid."

"What happened back in town?"

"Still worried about that feed bill?" Frankie gave another bark of laughter. "I paid it for you."

The woolliness in his head was clearing as they rode down off the north slope of the ridge toward the area known as The Breaks. Here, if anywhere, in the maze of gulches, box canyons and side draws, was the place to lose a would-be pursuer or lay a false trail. He could never outrun three armed men in open country. But in The Breaks he could lead them around in circles all night. Or, he might be able to make his own break.

From the foot of the ridge he led them across a mesa and down again into a region of broken tortured sandstone that had weathered into fantastic forms of spires and pinnacles and minarets. A few stunted piñons grew in crevices among rocks, and once they passed a dry pothole and the skeleton of a cow. There was no wind, no sound except the clatter of their horses' shoes. It was an eerie, lonely spot that even the Apaches, according to legend, had shunned.

They had penetrated some three miles into The Breaks and the last lavender glow was fading from the western sky when Frankie called sharply, "Hold up."

Carse stopped and turned in the saddle.

"You told me your place was north of town."

"It is."

"We been heading west and south the last half-hour."

"I'm taking you the long way 'round. They couldn't track us through here with hound dogs."

"I'd sooner trust a hound dog," Frankie said. "You're mighty cute, but I taught you every trick you know, twenty years ago."

"Maybe you better ride lead then."

"Maybe I will. Hold your gun on him, Pike."

Frankie rode up beside him, uncoiled his rope and knotted one end around Carse's wrists, and dallied the other end around his saddle horn. "You ever been dragged, kid? Through cactus, these little prickly devils they call cholla?"

"What's the rest of it?"

"We'll doub'e back toward the river," Frankie said. "And when I ask directions I want some answers."

By the time they climbed back out of The Breaks it was full dark and a breeze had sprung up from the desert. From

a high bench they looked down on the black slash of the upper San Luis canyon and saw a single dot of light far across the flats. That, Carse knew, was Anchor 4, Harry Heath's spread. Probably Heath had left the cook or wrangler behind to water the stock while the family went into town. There would be no help for him there, the last ranch this side of Massacre Basin.

With Frankie leading him on the rope and the other pair crowding him behind, he gave up any immediate idea of escape, as he had given up hope that a posse would overtake them tonight. Nor could he count on help from Halloran and Larsen. Farmers, family men, they'd be no match for this crew. He was on his own, absolutely alone. And now that his first feeble scheme had fallen through he realized that his only chance would come, if one ever came, after they reached the basin. There at least he'd have the advantage of being on home ground.

They skirted Anchor 4 and angled back into the river trail and plodded steadily up the bottoms. At the mouth of Massacre Creek they made a water stop and his tired horse pricked up its ears in anticipation. From this point on the trail grew rougher and narrower and the canyon walls closed in to a width of a few yards. Here was the site he had chosen for the dam and flume intake, and he rode past it now with bitter thoughts. Some day an irrigation dam might harness this creek, but who would build it?

And then they were clear of the canyon at last, climbing down the final pitch into the basin. To Carse it seemed unbelievable that he had left only yesterday, less than forty-eight hours ago. At the fork in the trail Frankie asked him, "Where's that go?"

"Neighbors. Two families back in there."

"How far?"

"Nearest one's about four miles. They keep to themselves."

"That's the kind to have," Frankie said. "I think I'm gonna like your setup."

Beyond the next rise the ranch appeared and Carse felt, as he always did when he returned, a stir of pride. It wasn't much, he knew: a rock house built by the original owner, a primitive barn, two sheds and a corral whose poles he'd cut himself and laboriously dragged from the nearest timbered peak. A thousand dollars would buy the whole out-

fit twice over. But nobody could fire him here, or tell him to move on. Every boulder on it belonged to him, every breath of sage and dust and sun-cured cedar had a familiar tang. And now Frankie Spain had befouled it just by coming here.

The house lay black and silent under the starlight and his horse quickened its gait. Then another smell drifted to him. Smoke. Wood smoke from the chimney. Somebody had used his fireplace or cookstove within the past few hours. He was still puzzling over this when a horse whinnied from the corral. Frankie reined up short and drew his gun. In a low savage voice he said, "Yours?"

"Turned all mine out yesterday."

"Somebody's here then. Don't cross me again, kid. I mean it."

"Some drifter maybe."

"Pike! You and Crip cover us from here." Frankie jerked him from the saddle, untied the rope and jammed the gun into his back. "Let's go find out." Circling to the rear of the house, they walked on soundlessly to the corral. The horse, a fat spotted mare, rubbed against the gate and limped over to sniff them. Carse had never seen it before but a sudden cold fear touched him.

"Lame," Frankie said. "Anybody you know?"

"No."

Frankie nudged him. Moving very carefully, Carse led the way around to his front door. It was closed, as he had left it. He listened intently for a minute, but could detect no sound inside. The visitor might be sleeping in the barn or somewhere outside, but that seemed as unlikely as the fact that he should have a visitor at all. Aside from his neighbors, this would be the first in three years.

"Sing out," Frankie whispered.

He drew a deep breath. "Halloo, the house!"

There was only the rasp of Frankie's breathing in the deep night silence. He waited until the muzzle jabbed against his spine and called again.

"Yes?" The voice that answered was sleepy and muffled—a woman. "Who is it?"

He recognized that voice, and the fear became a spreading chill. "McKay. Is that you, Amy?"

"Yes. Will you wait a minute please."

Behind him Frankie gave a startled grunt and the gun pressed harder. "What's she doing here?"

"I don't know."

There were sounds of movement inside and the yellow gleam of a candle shone at the windows. Sleepy-eyed and tousled, Amy Stewart opened the door. "Carse, I'm so—" Her breath caught as she saw Frankie behind him in the wedge of light. "Is that you, Mr. —"

"Leonard," Frankie volunteered. "Remember me? Are you alone here, Mrs. Stewart?"

"Why, yes." Her glance shifted back to Carse, seeking some explanation. "I rode up this afternoon, Carse, to look over the basin and your damsite, so I could report to Seelah."

He nodded, too stunned to answer, knowing that she couldn't see the gun in Frankie's fist.

"I planned to spend the night at Anchor 4. But my mare threw a shoe and it was getting late, so"—she smiled—"I took the liberty of making myself at home."

Carse stared at her pale, full-lipped face and his throat tightened. That was the open-handed custom of this country; everybody, friend or stranger, was welcome. A range-bred woman, one as independent as Amy, would think nothing of sleeping under a strange roof. The fact that she had come alone, on his behalf, to help him get the loan, clouded his moment of astonished pleasure with a single grim reality: He had to get her away from here, away from Frankie Spain. "This afternoon?" he said. "Then you left town before—early?"

"About two o'clock. I needed the ride, a little change." Her manner was easy and unembarrassed, but he saw the deepening uncertainty in her eyes. She was too intelligent not to sense his anxiety. "I didn't expect you'd be here."

Frankie broke in with a laugh. "We didn't count on company either, Mrs. Stewart. But it's a small world, as Carse here says."

"I'm afraid I've put you out."

"Not a bit," Frankie said with elaborate courtesy. "Carse is real glad to see you, and so am I. Right, kid?"

Through the doorway Carse could see his bunk and the shelf above it, where he kept an always-loaded Winchester. But how to reach it? He couldn't risk a run without en-

dangering Amy. "You'd probably be more comfortable at the Halloran's," he said. "Mary would put you up. One of us can take you over."

"Now that's not hospitable," Frankie said. "Mrs. Stewart don't want to move in the middle of the night." He called back into the darkness. "Bring the horses in, Pike. All clear."

Carse tried to warn her with his eyes, desperately willing her to read his message. *Get out! Tonight. Get away from here.* She gave him a puzzled frown and said, "Are you and Mr. Leonard old friends?"

"Grew up together," Frankie said. As Pike and Crip rode into the ranch yard, leading the other horses, he added, "Meet two more old friends. Boys, this is Mrs. Stewart. Her daddy-in-law owns the bank."

"Amy!" Carse snapped. "Go inside and shut the door."

Her eyes held genuine concern now as she studied his face, then she backed into the house. He turned to Frankie and lowered his voice. "She doesn't know about the holdup. Neither do my neighbors. Send her over there. She can't make trouble for you tonight. By tomorrow you'll be gone."

"Will we?"

"You can't stay here. Ortega'll be on your trail by sunup."

"Like hell he will." Frankie jerked his head at the windows. "She must think a lot of you, riding clear up here to loan you a thousand dollars."

"You're crazy, Frankie. Let her go."

"Not crazy, kid. Lucky." Frankie prodded him in a kidney. "Inside now. We mustn't keep the lady waiting."

Carse pushed open the door and went in first, with Frankie on his heels, followed by Pike and Crip, the four of them almost filling the small room. Amy, her back to the fireplace, said quietly, "I'm sorry, Carse. I shouldn't have come, should I?"

"It's all right, Amy." He tried to put reassurance in his voice. "They won't be here long."

He kept his eyes away from the shelf, but that was the first place Pike looked. Pike lifted down the Winchester, then poked into the other corners hunting for guns. "That's all I reckon, Frankie," he said.

"Frankie?" Amy's eyes widened.

"Yours truly, Frankie Spain." He grinned at her. "You're a business woman, Mrs. Stewart. I'm a business man. So maybe together we can work out a little business deal."

* * *

The gaiety, the carnival spirit, had withered and died like the last green shoot of grass. Rincon sweltered in a sullen stupor under the noonday sun. Not a firecracker exploded. For the first time in three days the fairground was silent and deserted. Knots of grim-faced men clustered on the street corners or in the saloons. A black wreath hung on the doors of the Valley Union beneath a sign which said, unnecessarily, CLOSED. The curious and the morbid shuffled past the Elyseum Funeral Parlor; in the back room lay the bodies of two men, a woman and a six-year-old girl named Sissy Frieburg.

Over at the Palace bar Boise Brown was retelling his tale to anyone who would buy him a drink.

About one o'clock a weary group of riders, who had organized themselves into a posse the evening before, straggled back into town, and their news flashed through the crowd. They had tracked the outlaws, four in number, as far as The Breaks and there, after a night and half a day, lost the trail. A telegram requesting the loan of an Apache tracker had been dispatched to the reservation's agency headquarters.

Andy Hinkle, self-appointed sheriff *pro tem*, called an emergency meeting of prominent citizens at the courthouse. An occasional, part-time deputy with political aspirations, Hinkle had never led a manhunt before, nor handled a murder case, let alone four in one batch. But he was determined to try. No one else had volunteered to bring in the Spain gang.

"They gave us the slip in the dark," he explained. "Heading southwest when we lost 'em. Now my theory is they started up the river to throw us off, then circled around and hit south for the border. It fits in with Boise Brown's story."

"That old windbag," Dr. Claude Baudet growled, "has so many stories I've lost count. What's this one?"

"According to Boise, the man who called himself Smith said they were going to Soyopa to look for work. Boise didn't believe him at the time."

"Neither do I."

"Makes sense to me," Hinkle said doggedly. "Just what a local man like McKay who knows the country would do. Hell, doc, wouldn't *you* light a shuck for Mexico?"

"Now wait, Andy," Tom Judd interrupted. The gambler

had been invited to sit in because he was known to be a friend of McKay's. "I'm as anxious as the next man to catch those son-of-bitches, but we can't be sure Carse was a member of the gang. Nobody saw him near the bank."

"The Spooner kids saw his horse up the river at that hideout shack. He left that roan horse at the stable. And everybody knows he was busted, tryin' to borrow money all over town."

"You ever been busted in your life?" Tom Judd said mildly.

Hinkle flushed scarlet. "I'd be careful who I stood up for, Judd. McKay ain't so popular right now."

"My God, man, you can't accuse him of murder because he needs money! Name me a man in this room who could raise a thousand dollars cash today."

There was a general clearing of throats and scuffling of feet among the group of merchants and stockmen: Emil Schlaudt, Heath of Anchor 4, Charlie Tatum from the bank. Nobody spoke.

Hinkle pointed. "You all know how much we owe Mr. Raymond there. If it wasn't for him they'd 've cleaned out the bank. Raymond, tell these gents about McKay."

Everyone turned to look at Huntley Raymond. The cashier's head was swathed in bandages, his right arm rested in a sling and his face was the color of skimmed milk as he sat propped in a chair. A murmur of sympathy rippled across the room and Hinkle raised a hand for quiet. "Raymond stopped two .44 slugs yesterday. It's a miracle he's alive and he ought to be flat in bed this minute. But he offered to come over here and make a statement."

"Gentlemen," Raymond said in a weak hollow voice, "I felt it was my sacred duty."

"When did you first notice McKay?"

"Two days ago, sheriff, when he came to the bank. He acted very strangely, as Charlie Tatum will bear me out. That night he followed Mrs. Stewart, obviously seeking information."

"What about this man Spain?"

Somebody handed Raymond a glass of water. "He came in the same afternoon with that—that woman. They made me suspicious at once. Later I took it upon myself—"

His voice seemed to grow in intensity, filling the room with an angry waspish whine. Spittle flecked his lips and

his feverish eyes darted from face to face. Men began to shift uncomfortably and stare at the floor. They felt sorry for the poor devil; sure they did. He'd killed the woman accidentally, an outlaw's woman at that. But still, she'd been a woman. Come to it, there was something indecently womanish, almost hysterical, about Raymond himself.

"—So I took my suspicions to Sheriff Ortega. If the old fool had listened to me—"

"You did your best, Mr. Raymond," Hinkle broke in soothingly. In his private opinion old Pol Ortega had been worse than a fool, but to say so would scarcely win him votes. "I'm sure we all thank you." He turned to Tom Judd. "That change your mind?"

But Raymond hadn't finished. "McKay planned this hold-up from the start. He brought in his killer friends to help. I call upon you, gentlemen, to bring this man to justice for his crimes."

"Justice!" Marcus Frieburg, owner of the Congress Hotel, jumped to his feet. A frail gray-bearded man with a face ravaged by grief, he might have stepped straight from the Old Testament. "These monsters shot my little granddaughter, and you talk of justice! I say scourge them from the earth!"

During the uproar that followed, Raymond and Frieburg were helped from the room, both near a state of collapse. When some order had been restored, Hinkle called on the doctor. "We have to bring old man Stewart into this, doc," he said. "I don't care how sick he is. Folks are worried about their money."

"Their money's safe," Dr. Baudet snapped. "Mr. Tatum spent most of the night making an audit. The bandits didn't get one penny." He shook his head. "The shock would kill Seelah Stewart."

"Then where's the girl? She runs the bank. Why don't she come forward?"

"Because," Dr. Baudet said, "she's out of town, visiting friends. On my orders. Thank the good Lord for that."

"Let's go after 'em, Andy!" someone shouted.

"Yeah, we're wastin' time."

"I'd like to get that McKay in *my* sights."

Andy Hinkle pounded on the table for silence. "I'm not waiting on any Injun tracker. I've got four warrants here: McKay, Spain and two John Does. We know they're

headed south and we'll cut their trail. Who's riding with me?"

Half a dozen men stood up.

Tom Judd glanced at Dr. Baudet and raised his eyebrows. The doctor shrugged and slumped back in his chair.

Twenty minutes later fifteen heavily armed men rode out of Rincon and turned south into the desert in the direction of Sonora.

In front of the Valley Union people stopped to stare at the bullet holes and tried to peer inside through the thick dark curtains. Somebody had ripped down the red, white and blue bunting from the hotel gallery. The Glorious Fourth was over before it began.

* * *

A red-tailed hawk soared over the ranch, sailing effortlessly on the late afternoon thermal currents, and glided down for a closer inspection. On a rise behind the house Pike threw the rifle to his shoulder and began to track it. The hawk took instant alarm and with a sudden galvanic flapping of wings flew off, dwindling to a speck, and vanished in the heat haze.

Perched on the top rail of the corral, Carse dropped his gaze to the barn where Frankie and Crip sat in the shade. Crip was playing another nonstop game of solitaire on a gunny sack and Frankie was cleaning his gun, wiping it endlessly with a rag. No sound came from the house. The door was shut, the flour-sack curtains drawn against the light. At least Amy would be cool in there, he thought, behind the thick rock walls. Cool and helpless and frightened, a prisoner in his own house.

He hadn't seen her since breakfast, hadn't spoken to her since last night. There hadn't been a chance. Frankie or Pike or Crip, one of the three, moved whenever he moved, watchful and wary. Hawks.

All the horses had been run into the barn, where they remained out of sight. But as the hours dragged on his hopes faded. No help was on the way. If a posse was coming it should have been here long before now. By leading Frankie into The Breaks and confusing their trail, he had greased his own skids. The law had no reason to hunt for Frankie Spain in Massacre Basin.

Over by the barn Crip slapped down a card and swore. "How much longer you gonna wait?" he demanded.

Frankie spun his gun by the trigger guard and sighted along the barrel. "You in a hurry?"

"Damn right I am." The bandage had pulled away from Crip's face and the grotesque swelling that was his nose had turned the color of eggplant. "Every hour we sit here—"

"Don't bellyache, my friend," Frankie said. "You're the one who had it soft yesterday." He got lightly to his feet, hitched up his belt and, with a glance at Carse on the fence, sauntered over to the corner of the house. He dipped a drink from the water barrel, let a few drops dribble on his face, and moved on to the door.

"Mrs. Stewart," Frankie called.

Carse slid off the rail and walked up beside him.

Amy pulled open the door. Her eyes were shadowed and her face was so pale that a faint dusting of freckles stood out against the texture of her skin, but she said in a quiet even voice, "I haven't changed my mind, if that's what you came to ask me."

"That's too bad," Frankie said. "I figured maybe you'd had time to think it over."

"It—it's fantastic! No bank is going to hand over fifty thousand dollars for a worthless scrap of paper."

"Old man Stewart will." Frankie grinned. "If you tell him to."

"Seelah Stewart isn't rich. He doesn't have that much money."

"The Valley Union does," Frankie said. "The way I see it, Mrs. Stewart—Amy—you're kind of my frozen asset. My hole card ace. All I have to do is convert you into cash."

"My father-in-law is a sick man, Mr. Spain. I won't ask him for a penny no matter how long you keep me here. I don't know how much you stole yesterday—"

"Yesterday," Frankie said, "we ran into a little trouble. Upset my plans. So now I figure you sort of owe me something."

"Trouble?" Amy said faintly. "Was anybody—hurt?"

"Nobody to speak of. Lucky you weren't there, Amy. Lucky for you, lucky for me. We don't want anybody hurt, do we?"

He was smiling as he spoke, easily and brightly, but

Carse saw the tic at the corner of his eyelid, saw the congested veins in his throat. "I'll talk to her, Frankie," he said. "Alone. Let me handle this."

Frankie's chest swelled and a hand clenched at his side, and Carse said quickly, "If you want that money, get away from her. She's not goin' to run."

Frankie laughed. "That's the shinin' truth. All right, kid. You tell her." He backed off a few paces.

Her lips had a tremor now and Carse turned his back to shield her face from Frankie's stare. All three men were watching them; Frankie from the yard, Crip from the barn, Pike from the hillcrest. Oh, God, he thought, help me get her away from here. Help me! "Amy," he said, "who knows you were coming to the basin?"

"Nobody. I decided on the spur of the moment. I wanted to get away from town, from everything for a few hours."

"Did you pass anybody on the trail?"

"No." She bit her lip. "Not a person."

He'd been afraid of that. The last place anybody would think to look for her was a remote hardscrabble ranch like this. The hell of it was, she didn't fully realize yet what kind of situation they faced, never having known a man like Frankie. He said, "Do like he says, Amy. Right now Frankie's in the saddle."

"But, fifty thousand dollars! To let me go? He must be insane to think—"

"When it comes to money Frankie doesn't think like you and me. Write out that note for him. So I can deliver it tonight."

"Tonight?" Her voice faltered. "And I have to stay? Alone, with them?"

He nodded. "I'll be back. Believe me, I'll be back."

"I'm frightened, Carse. I can't pretend I'm not."

"Amy." He took her hand. "Remember this, the whole country's looking for him. He's cornered and he knows it. That's why you'll be all right." It was a hope, a prayer.

"If you say so. But what goes on inside a man like that? He doesn't seem human."

He rubbed the scar on his cheek. Frankie had put it there. How many years ago? Nineteen, twenty? He remembered the day more vividly than any other day of his life. They had been scuffling around, wrestling kid-fashion, when by accident he'd tripped up Frankie, and Frankie had fallen

ignominiously on his tail in the schoolyard during recess. The laughter turned Frankie into a raging catamount.

He leaped up and ran to the trash pile, smashed a bottle on a rock and came back at Carse with the jagged bottom. "I'm gonna brand you, kid," Frankie threatened him before a horrified and spellbound audience. "I'm gonna cut your hide. Nobody does that to Frankie Spain."

Carse, four years younger and forty pounds lighter, had stood there with a foolish grin, matching his bluff, never believing such violence could happen in his schoolboy world. His hands were still at his sides when Frankie slashed his cheek to the bone. Perversely, he didn't hate Frankie at the time. Frankie remained his hero. It had taken him the year in jail to learn.

No, Frankie hadn't changed. He was still the cock of the schoolyard, only now he carried a .44 instead of glass; he held up banks instead of stealing apples. Carse looked down at Amy and gripped her hand a little tighter. This was the man he had to leave her with overnight, and she would need every bit of confidence he could give her.

"Human?" he said. "Sure he is. There's nothing wrong with Frankie that a Colt won't cure. You're supposed to smile now. Laugh. Let him see you're not afraid."

She worked up a wan smile. "Not a very good actress, am I?"

"You're doing fine. Keep it up. This'll all be over by tomorrow."

"I'll try. But I'm so worried about Seelah, all this trouble, his heart— And you, Carse. He hates you, Frankie does. I can see it in his eyes."

"He hates the world, Amy. He could have been anything once. He had the brains, the strength, the drive. But somewhere he went sour. He's nothing now. He hates himself most of all."

"You saved his life that time, didn't you?"

"I've done a lot of fool things in my day."

"Carse, when you get to town tonight, what's going to happen? What can you do?"

"Wish I knew. Guess you'll have to trust me."

"I do. But Carse—" She returned the pressure of his hand. "Don't be gone too long."

Her eyes held his for an instant and then they widened in alarm at the sound of a sharp low whistle. He turned to

see Pike, crouched behind a boulder on the rise above the house, signal with his hat. Frankie drew his gun. "Somebody comin'! Get back inside."

She hesitated and backed through the doorway. A minute later Pike hurried into the yard with Carse's rifle across his arm. "Lone man," he reported. "Riding slow across the flats this way."

"What kind of horse?" Carse asked.

"Big fellow on a gray with black stockings."

"That'll be Tim Halloran, my neighbor."

"The one who keeps to himself?" Frankie swung around. "Pike, you and Crip, in the barn. Move! I'll take the house." He wheeled back to Carse. "Get rid of him. Fast. If you don't, I will."

He followed Amy into the house and shut the door, and Pike and Crip ran into the barn. Carse squinted up at the rise where the trail led down from the flats. If he stayed out of sight, would Tim ride by without stopping? Not if he knew Tim Halloran. Tim would think it only neighborly to keep an eye on the place while Carse was gone: he'd expect Carse to do the same for him.

Carse wiped the sweat off his forehead and moved a few steps out from the house, acutely conscious of Frankie's face at the window. Keep riding, Tim, he thought. Don't come here. Go back home to Mary and the kids, and stay there.

And then Tim plodded over the rise on his swayback gray. When he saw Carse in the hollow below, his homely red face broke into a grin, he waved and came down the trail at a lumbering trot. Carse threw a quick glance around the yard to make sure there was no tell-tale evidence of visitors, and his heart skipped a beat. Crip's bandage, a filthy blood-stained rag, lay in plain sight where he'd discarded it beside the barn.

"You heathen Mormon horse thief," Tim boomed. "Why don't you let a man know you're back from town?"

Carse forced a stiff-lipped grin. "Go stick a pig, you black Irish bog trotter."

The amenities having been observed, Tim Halloran laughed and shook hands. "How—" he started to say and his glance came to rest on the side of Carse's head. "What happened to your noggin, bucko?"

"Nothing much. A little fight."

"Little, he says. Sodden drunk and brawling in the bawdy houses." Tim gave a mock sigh. "Ah, the temptations of a single man. And did you get the bank loan? No you did not. Else your face'd not be longer than a saint's beard."

"We still have a chance, Tim." From the corner of his eye he caught a flick of movement at the window curtains. Over by the barn Crip's bandage stirred lazily in a puff of wind. "Don't give up yet."

"Well, come along. You can tell me the why's and wherefore's while we're ridin' over to the Mansion Halloran. Mary will be fixing you a bite of supper and patching up your thick skull."

"Thanks, Tim, not tonight. Too many chores to catch up on."

"Have to pay the piper, eh? Boil me up some of that magoo you call coffee and I might give you a hand."

"Fresh out," Carse said. "'Bout all I got left is branch water."

Tim gave him a quizzical look, glanced over his shoulder at the closed door, and a tiny frown pinched between his eyebrows. His expression said, *Maybe you're too broke to buy coffee any more but why don't you ask me in?* Then he lifted one shoulder and stepped to the water barrel for a drink. "What's the talk in town?"

"Same old thing. No rain. No grass. Money's awful tight. But we'll raise it somehow." Carse took him by the elbow and faced him toward his horse. "You go along now and tell Mary not to worry. I'll be over when I can get away."

Tim regarded him with sober eyes. "The bum's rush," he said. "Why?"

"I told you, I'm busy. Sooner you let me get back to work, the sooner I'll be done."

"What's got into you, bucko? Come on, tell old Uncle Timothy your woes. I know you better than that."

Carse squeezed his arm hard. He couldn't bring Tim into this, not stubborn, slow-thinking Tim, who was probably the closest friend he had; not Tim, who'd never owned a gun in his fiddle-footed life. The wind freshened, whirling little dust devils across the earth, and a tumbleweed butted against his legs. The horses stamped restlessly in the barn and a rusty hinge squeaked on the shed door. "For God's sake, get out!" He hissed the words between his teeth.

Tim's mouth opened and snapped shut. He shook off

Carse's hand and walked to his horse. The gray shied and backed away as something flapped against its reins. Tim grabbed the object away to hurl it aside and his shoulder stiffened. He turned back to Carse and held out the blood-soaked rag that minutes before had covered Crip's broken nose. "That must have been a dandy fight you had."

"Nicked my arm, that's all. Fellow pulled a knife."

"Let's see your arm." Tim's face had set into belligerence. "Have to be careful of infection."

Carse mustered a false smile. "I wouldn't let you doctor a hangover, you bull-headed hog butcher. Go home."

It didn't work.

Tim shook his head. His eyes, bright with suspicion, ranged slowly over the house, the barn, the corral and came back to the house. He cocked his head, listening, and tossed the bandage at Carse's feet. "You're a bloody liar," he said. "What're you hiding in there?"

As he strode toward the door Carse blocked his path but Tim poled him aside with a mighty straight arm and went on. He was reaching for the latch when the door swung inward. Frankie fired once. The shot drove Tim back on his heels. His big body sagged and fell and was still.

Carse dropped to one knee and bent over him. The wind had blown off Tim's hat, and he stared down at the brush of red hair, at the patched and faded overalls, and shut his eyes for a moment. Then he looked up at Frankie in the doorway.

"I warned you," Frankie said.

I'll kill you, Frankie. I don't know how or when, but I'm going to kill you. He said, "He had six kids. Six. And you shot him like a dog."

"Carse!" Amy stumbled from the house. "Carse, I can't—"

Her face was blanched and her eyes were glazed with shock, and she would have fallen but he caught her as she broke into sobs and held her hard against him. It was as though the senseless cruelty of Tim's murder had deepened his every emotion, his rage at Frankie and his feeling for Amy. The pressure of her body aroused his pity and protectiveness and longing all at once. "Yes you can," he said. "You can because you have to."

She shuddered and he shook her gently by the shoulders. "Think about Mary Halloran," he said.

After a minute her weeping stopped and she raised a

tear-blotched face. "That poor woman. Whatever will she do?"

"She's tough, Amy. She has to be to stick with it here. And so are you."

"I told you that once, didn't I? A million years ago." She clung to him. "Now I have to prove it."

"Amy," He drew a deep painful breath. "I'm glad of one thing—"

"I know. So am I." She stirred in his arms and whispered, "Come back, Carse. Come back!"

Pike and Crip had emerged from the barn and were stripping Tim's horse. Frankie rolled the body over and went through the pockets. "Anybody likely to come hunting him?" he asked.

Carse considered. He had not only Amy to worry about, but now the Halloran family as well. A woman and six youngsters, the oldest a thirteen-year-old boy. He thought of the candy in his saddle bags, the teething ring, the other presents he'd bought in Rincon, and his voice was like a file. "You'll be safe tonight. Tomorrow his wife'll start wondering."

"She better not wonder too hard." Frankie jerked a thumb at the barn. "Saddle up, kid. On your way. Be dark before you hit town."

"Frankie's little messenger boy?"

"That's you. And Crip's gonna ride along. To make sure you don't miss the trail again."

He crossed to the barn and threw his saddle on the old claybank. He seldom wore spurs but he took his down from the peg now, a big rusty Spanish pair with cartwheel rowels, and strapped them over his boots. With Amy here and Mary Halloran just across the ridge, his hands were tied. Once he got clear of the ranch and down out of the basin he could make his move. Maybe in the canyon. But not before.

A minute later Crip came in, followed by Frankie, and began to saddle up the Circle W roan he'd ridden yesterday. He was glum and silent, until a dangling rope end flicked his nose. He grunted with pain and hauled up savagely on the cinch strap. "I dunno, Frankie," he said. "That town'll be buzzin' like a bee tree."

"You wanta quit now?" Frankie said. "Like Reese did?"

Crip stared at him, hand resting on his gun butt, and wet his lips.

Frankie waited a moment longer and dismissed him with a shrug. Handing Carse a piece of folded paper, he said, "Here's the note from Amy to old man Stewart. Pay to bearer on demand."

Carse stuck the note in his shirt pocket without glancing at it. "You heard her. Stewart's a sick old man, maybe dying."

"He'll pay. If he wants to see his daughter-in-law again, he'll pay. Pretty little piece, ain't she, kid?"

"You won't touch her. Not even you."

"Because she's a woman? Is that what you told her?" Frankie's eyes were splintered glass. "They killed my Verna in that stinking bank. She was a woman."

"Verna?" His mind pictured her in the hotel room, a plump blonde with an anxious smile. "She's dead?"

"Dead. So you get that money here. By tomorrow sundown. If you don't, if one lawman or posse rider shows his face, I'll shoot Amy Stewart deader than that shanty Irishman."

Suddenly it seemed very still in the barn, and the smells of old leather and hay chaff and horse droppings were suffocating. "You know what the old-timers in this country say, Frankie? That alongside an Apache the devil was a greenhorn." He shook his head. "The lowest lousiest buck Apache who ever wore a gee string wouldn't stand downwind from you."

"Tomorrow, sundown, you better believe me," Frankie said. "Now get going."

Carse led his horse out and swung up, and Crip mounted behind him. The outlaw exchanged a few words with Frankie and followed the claybank across the yard. They rode past the house and up through the boulders onto the rise and Carse turned for a final glimpse of the ranch. Amy stood in the doorway below, a tiny motionless figure caught in the last golden shaft of sunlight, and then she was gone.

The trail curved across the flats around the foot of the hills that hemmed in Massacre Basin like a bowl. A low ridge to their right concealed the Halloran and Larsen places, and beyond the basin's southern extremity a mesa stretched off toward the evening skyline into infinity. A barren dusty hole in the middle of nowhere, he thought. Without water this

land was desert—useless. He'd walked and ridden over it, he'd surveyed it and cleared it and worked it. He knew every feature of it. But he'd never had to fight for it.

The roan plodded silently along behind him and he put his mind on Crip. What kind of a man was he? To begin with, he was a dour close-mouthed man who nursed a grudge like some men fondled a woman, with brute loving passion. Loyal to Frankie? Maybe. Not overly quick and not too much imagination. But stupid? No. And Crip had the gun, Carse's bone-handled .45, tucked down in the waistband of his pants.

By the time they reached the canyon rim he had decided what to do and where he was going to do it.

It was cool and dusky down in the bottoms, and the wet rocks gleamed like old pewter. The burble of the creek was a refreshing sound after the hot dry silence of the basin, and the horses snuffled eagerly at the first pool. Crip had nothing to say and they rode on, picking their way through the ferns and chokecherry thickets and snarls of willow. They saw three of his horses browsing among the brush but there were no fresh tracks in the soft dirt. Nobody had come this way since the night before.

He wanted much less light and so held the claybank close, stretching out the minutes. They passed through the narrows and as they neared the junction of the main canyon a new doubt began to trouble him. Crip's prolonged silence might be natural, but such patience wasn't. Crip had been hell-bent to quit the ranch and get this ride behind him, but now— Now he seemed content to poke along at any pace. It was as though he'd guessed Carse's intent, or had some idea of his own.

It was nearly dark when a clump of cottonwoods loomed ahead and they pulled into a larger canyon of the San Luis. Carse rode into the shallows and gave his horse its head. Crip reined up a few yards downstream and did the same. He's leery, Carse thought. Keeps his distance. Maybe he can smell it on me, like an animal scenting danger. But I'll never have a better chance.

"See that trail?" He pointed up canyon. "Know where it leads?"

Crip didn't follow the direction of his finger. "You tell me."

"Heads up in the Jubilees and crosses the range. Not a ranch that way for sixty miles, till you hit the railroad."

"So?"

The horses went *slurp-slurp* and water murmured over the rocks. A mosquito hummed in Carse's ear. "If I was you I'd take it. If you ride into Rincon tonight you'll never ride out."

"I'm not ridin' to Rincon. You ain't either."

Carse eased his left foot out of the stirrup. "Since when?"

"Since now. I wouldn't go near that town again if they give out gold samples with the drinks. Frankie can have it all." Crip slid his hand deliberately to the gun butt and a grotesque little smile flickered over his battered face. "What I want is you, sport, and you I got."

Fear churned up in Carse's stomach, and with a wild irrelevance he thought, I wonder how it feels to be shot with your own gun. He knew what it was that men like Crip and Frankie had in common: they couldn't bear to be bested in any way, to be laughed at. They carried their grievances around like a stick of blasting powder and dared you to light a match. He tensed his leg, shifted his weight in the saddle. "You running out on Frankie after all?" he said.

"After nothin'. Frankie's finished, he'll never make it."

Carse swung the horse's head around. "But you will?"

"I ain't like Frankie. I give a man a show for his money. How do you want it, sport—front or back?"

Carse socked his spurs into the claybank's belly. The horse reared with a whiplash force that almost hurled him from the saddle. The animal pawed the air and struck down with its forelegs, then seemed to explode as its haunches uncoiled like springs, and leaped toward the roan. Crip was shouting, fighting to control his horse, and snapped off a shot. The claybank screamed and stumbled and crashed against the roan and the .45 went spinning out of Crip's hand.

The claybank began to sink under him but he got a fistful of Crip's shirt and hauled him from the saddle; they both fell into the river, clear of the thrashing hooves. His head struck a boulder and he went under, choking on a mouthful of water, and for a moment he wallowed helplessly. Then he heaved himself up to his knees and as his vision cleared he saw the dull glint of his .45 over on the bank where it had landed in the mud. At the same instant he saw Crip.

Crip was on his feet, knee deep in the river, and he held a rock above his head, a rock big enough to brain a bull. His face twitched and he made a low whimpering noise as

he waded toward Carse with the rock poised in both hands and death in his eyes. For Carse there was the splash of oncoming boots and the awful sucking gasp of his horse and the blood-darkened water, a split second of total awareness before he jackknifed sideways and rolled into the bank.

The rock grazed one arm and Crip let out a yell and lunged after him. Still on all fours, Carse groped for the gun, snatched it from the mud and eeled around just as Crip came at him with another rock. He fired upward, blindly and fired again, and Crip went staggering back as though he'd hit an invisible wall. His legs buckled and he fell face down in the water, and his hat went floating off on the black currents of the San Luis.

* * *

Dr. Claude Baudet closed his bag wearily, turning his back on the bed and the sleeping form of Huntley Raymond. He was not the kind of a doctor who could pretend that he brought a professionally detached and impersonal attitude to every patient he treated. They were human beings in need of his skill and he liked most of them, but a few he did not. He didn't like Raymond.

Of the five people who had been shot during the course of yesterday's holdup it was, in Baudet's opinion, grimly ironic that Raymond should be the only survivor. The cashier had fired the first shot. He had been shot himself not once, but twice, and at practically point-blank range. One bullet had creased his scalp and another had smashed his collarbone, and he had lived to point the finger of blame at a man named McKay. The doctor didn't know McKay at all, but he had known Apolonio Ortega and Matthew Howe and little Sissy Frieberg. Known them and liked them. And the life of any one of them had been an exorbitant price to pay for what he regarded as Huntley Raymond's idiotic heroics.

His was not the orthodox view, Baudet knew. Hadn't Raymond saved the bank's money? Yes indeed—the money. Mustn't forget the money. All the same, he wished that young Raymond had never left Philadelphia.

Leaving the hotel, he climbed into his buggy and drove off on what he hoped would be the final call of an exhausting day. Every establishment along Main Street, except the Valley Union, was brilliantly lit, and crowds aimlessly milled about in front of the stores and restaurants and saloons, as if they

had no better place to go and longed for more excitement. The Fourth might have fizzled out, Baudet thought, but nobody was heading for home until the last dog was hung.

A single light was burning in an upstairs bedroom when he arrived at the Stewart house, and he let himself in without knocking. Mrs. Rabb got up from her rocker with a guilty start when he tiptoed into the room. He put a finger to his lips, looked down at his sleeping friend in the big bed and took his pulse. Seelah Stewart stirred but did not wake and Baudet nodded with satisfaction, then motioned the house-keeper to follow him out into the hall.

"I think we'll pass the medicine tonight," he told her. "His count is much stronger."

"He's been that way all afternoon," Mrs. Rabb said. "Quiet-like. Now and then he wakes up and fusses a bit, asking why Mrs. Amy hasn't been in for a visit. Almost his old self again."

"Good. Any callers at the house today?"

"Three. I sent 'em packing. Mr. Seelah, bless his heart, doesn't know a thing about that terrible business." Mrs. Rabb's several chins trembled with indignation. "Have they caught those fiends yet?"

"Not yet," he looked at her closely. "When did you last have a solid hour's sleep, Mrs. Rabb?"

"Why—I catch a wink in my chair, off and on."

"That won't do, you know. You're dead on your feet." He took a packet of powders from his bag and dissolved them in a glass of water. "Here, drink this."

"What is it?"

"A love potion. Not that you need one, I'm sure, but it will help you get some rest."

She giggled and went pink. "But I couldn't, doctor. He might wake up in the middle of the night and—"

"You carry on like this much longer, my good lady," he said sternly, "and you'll be sick abed yourself. Drink."

Mrs. Rabb drank and made a face.

"Now," he went on, "you lie down in the back bedroom and leave the connecting door open. He has a voice like a seal. If he calls you'll hear him." This was not precisely true, Baudet knew; within minutes she should be sleeping the sleep of the dead. It was a calculated risk, but he suspected that tomorrow she might need all her strength and capacities at full effectiveness. "That's an order."

He drove back through town with every intention of going straight home to bed himself. He was tired in the marrow of his bones. But as he turned from River onto Main Street, he became aware of the charged atmosphere, as though an electric current had shot sparks through the crowd. It was a case of the sum being greater than the total of its parts: the quiet along the street, a gun on a hip, the absence of women and kids, a blank mindless look on a face. It was the static tension of men waiting for something to happen, a lightning rod to strike.

Catching a glimpse of Tom Judd outside the Palace, he pulled up his horse and stepped down. He had known the gambler for years but he doubted that in all that time they had exchanged a hundred words before today. Since the meeting at the courthouse, however, he felt as though he'd found an ally. An ally against *what*, he didn't know exactly. "Any word of the posse?" he asked.

"That jackass Andy Hinkle," Judd said. "He couldn't find his fly on a dark night."

"Then you don't think the gang headed for the border either?"

"What I think don't count for billy-be-damn. I always liked Carse McKay. I can't believe he's mixed up in this."

"Seems to me I heard he had a ranch hereabouts."

"He does. And I'll bet that's where he is. Innocent as a jay-bird. I'm half a mind to ride out there and warn him off." Judd held up a hand. "Listen, doc."

Baudet turned toward the saloon doors. Inside a hoarse drunken voice was proclaiming loudly. "Minute McKay rode into the stable I knew he was up to no good. I says to him, I says—"

Judd made a grimace of disgust. "Boise Brown. Foul-mouthed old devil. He's been propped against my bar since noon, cussing McKay nonstop."

"He has a lot of company," the doctor said dryly. The whole town, he thought, was suffering an emotional hang-over. He wished he could give them all a sleeping powder. "And a most attentive audience."

"A townful of drunks. You know, I'm not much for hunches. In my business it's fatal. But I got a feeling that all hell is about to bust loose." The gambler sighed. "I wish Pol Ortega was around to handle this. What happens to a man like that, doc?"

"He got too old on the job, Tom, like all of us eventually. In *his* business that was fatal."

Judd nodded morosely. "There's one thing I can do."

While the doctor watched, he pushed through the doors and crossed the long crowded room to the bar with a determined step. Moving up behind Boise, Judd grabbed the seat of his pants with one hand, the slack of his checkered vest with the other, faced the hostler around and frog-marched him out of the saloon onto the sidewalk. "You've shoveled enough horseshit for one day," he said. "Go home, Boise. Sleep it off."

Boise Brown sputtered with outrage.

"What you got against McKay?" Judd demanded. "He never robbed that bank."

"Cain't treat me like dirt. You nor him neither."

"Keep away from my place, old man. You come in again, I'll have you carried out."

Boise gave him a poisonous look and lurched along the uneven planking of the walk. At the corner he turned and made an obscene gesture. Judd stared after him and shook his head. "Sometimes I give up on the human race. You ever feel that way, doc?"

"Frequently," Baudet said.

He knew he wasn't going home to bed just yet. In some obscure way Tom Judd had made the decision for him. He stood beside the gambler without speaking and looked up at the stars, and a hot dry wind off the desert brushed his skin. He couldn't understand why he was shivering.

* * *

Carse hauled Crip's body out on the bank and waded back into the river to see to his horse. Crip's bullet had struck the claybank in the neck and blood was gushing from the wound. A horse was a horse, he told himself; he had no special attachment for this one beyond the fact that it had been steady and dependable. But his mouth was dry and his hand shook as he put the .45 behind its ear and pulled the trigger.

There was a final lashing of water and the claybank went slack and still. He managed to pull his saddle free and carried it over into the trees where the roan stood with trailing reins. His teeth were chattering and his body felt so

drained that he had to sit down on a rock. Head slumped between his knees, he tried to figure out his next move.

His one burning impulse was to go back for Amy. But if he did go back now, what were the odds? Better than they had been. One from three left two: Frankie and Pike. But still not good enough. Amy wasn't a number, a digit in some problem in arithmetic. You didn't gamble a woman's life on percentages. Frankie would shoot her with no more feeling than he'd shot down Tim Halloran. For once he did believe Frankie Spain.

Till sundown tomorrow. He reached into the pocket of his dripping shirt and brought out a fold of crumpled soggy paper, and tried to strike a light before he realized that his matches were soaked too. Nobody would be reading Amy's note, he thought. Well, he didn't need it. What he needed was help, law help. And the nearest law was in Rincon. He tossed the paper into the river and climbed onto the roan. Glancing back at the still shape under the cottonwoods, he rode down the canyon and put the man who'd gone by the name of Crip from his thoughts.

By pushing the roan hard, he broke through the last barrier of hills onto the desert about midnight. The lights of Rincon gleamed across the flats and he followed the bend of the river to the outskirts. Two days before, when all this had started, he hadn't known there was an Amy Stewart. He had ridden into town to borrow a thousand dollars, which had seemed like all the money in creation. Now the money didn't matter a sheepherder's damn. What he wanted was Amy, more than he'd wanted anything in his life.

He crossed the railroad and stopped in the shadow of the depot. Not a light showed over by the fairgrounds, which seemed strange, but there was a bustle of men and horses farther up Main Street. A posse would be out hunting Frankie, he assumed, but he hoped that the sheriff was in town. He didn't want a mob of trigger-happy volunteers riding back with him to Massacre Basin. Ortega and two or three deputies could quietly surround the ranch while he flushed out Frankie and Pike just before dawn. That, he had decided, was the one safe way to get at Amy.

He chose a back street that paralleled Main, followed it for two blocks and turned south on River, which brought him alongside the courthouse. Ortega's office was dark. He

glanced across at the Valley Union, noticed some black circular object on the door, then swung down from the saddle and tossed his reins over the hitch rail. Three men on the hotel corner who had been passing a bottle from hand to hand eyed him curiously. "Happen to know where I can find Ortega?" he called.

One of the three, a tall bearded man in cavalry boots, halted in mid-drink. "Ortega? You looking for Ortega?"

"He's the sheriff."

"Was the sheriff," Blackbeard said. "Where you been, man? He's dead."

Carse stared at him blankly.

"Shot four times. Funeral's tomorrow. His and the little girl's and the nigger's. They buried the floozie today. Ain't no flowers on *her* grave, I can tell you."

"Floozie?" He repeated the word, feeling as if he'd been hit by a mallet. That would be Frankie's woman, Verna. And the sheriff. And the colored janitor. And a little girl. "You mean they were shot to death—four people?"

"They didn't die from measles." Blackbeard took another pull at the bottle. "Dirty butcherin' dog!"

"Hey!" The second man pointed at Crip's horse, his caliope voice shrill with excitement. "That's one of the horses, Jake. The roan. That Circle W brand!"

"Yeah?" Jake blinked his eyes to bring Carse into sharper focus. "That your horse?"

"Look," Carse said, "I'm in a hurry. If one of you gents—"

"That's it for sure, Jake! Seen it myself yesterday."

Jake stepped down from the walk and advanced across the street, trailed by his companions. Carse turned away impatiently. He hadn't time to argue with a drunk. As light from the hotel windows fell across his face Jake halted so abruptly the other two bumped him from behind. Jake's mouth went loose and his breath came out like live steam.

"Lookit his face! The old man said he had a scar."

"Watch him. He's got a gun."

Several other men had rounded the corner and stopped to watch, and now one stepped forward, drew his revolver from a holster and leveled it at Carse. "Don't you move, mister," he said. "Who are you?"

Carse felt his heart give a lurch. "Get that gun off me."

"Somebody go fetch Boise. We'll damn soon make sure."

Half a dozen more men hurried from the hotel saloon

and fanned out into a semicircle that penned him against the courthouse wall. They weren't all drunk but the whisky smell was rank, and as he peered around the ring of faces his first startled anger gave way to a ripple of fear. They were staring back at him in the way a man might look on finding a diamondback in his bedroll. He said, "Who's taking Ortega's place?"

"Shut your mouth." The man with the gun cocked the hammer. "Lift his Colt, Jake."

Jake shambled forward and at cautious arm's length snatched the .45 from his wasitband. "He musta been first in line when gall was give out," Jake said. "Ridin' in here like he owns the place. Lucky I recognized him."

"You recognized him? If there's any reward I—"

"Listen, you men!" Carse aimed his voice at the soberest looking man in the crowd. A cold sweat broke out under his arms and his tongue felt like a strip of shriveled rawhide. "I don't know what you want, or who you think I am, but I need help. You—"

The gun barrel jabbed into his belly, doubling him over, and he heard a familiar voice cawing, "Where's he at? Lemme through."

A hand grabbed him by the hair and jerked his head up. Men were running from every direction, squeezing in on the circle, and a dumpy little man in a checkered vest wiggled through the crowd. Boise Brown screwed up his bleary eyes and staggered in for a closer look.

"Boise, tell 'em who I am!"

"That's him!" Boise said in a kind of howl. "That's McKay! Him an' Frankie Spain done it!" He threw back his head and spat in Carse's face.

Carse wiped the spittle off his chin, and suddenly the fear was an icy slime in his bowels, rising, rising up in his stomach to his chest and to his windpipe, choking off the air as he struggled to breathe. He tried to pick out a friendly face among the silent bristling crowd but there was only a wall of flesh. They filled the street now, pushing and jostling and craning for a glimpse of him, and above the body smells of sweat and tobacco and alcohol and hair oil he could almost smell the hatred, as though each man had a gland that secreted some vile musky scent.

"Don't give us no more lies." Boise was capering up

and down like an antic monkey. "By jibbies, you're done with lyin' and robbin' and killin'!"

He felt the tendons in his neck cord. Somebody would listen to him. There must be one reasonable man. All he had to do, he told himself, was explain. He opened his mouth but Jake drove a fist into his face, and he stumbled back against the tie rack and fell in the dirt.

With that the dam of silence broke.

"Git a rope!"

"String 'im up!"

"Down by the river."

"Hangin's too good for the bastid!"

He rolled over and got to his knees, but someone kicked him flat and tied his wrists behind his back. Three times in three days he'd been tied up now. It couldn't happen, he thought groggily. Not to him. They couldn't lynch a man because of a scar on his cheek and a brand on his horse. Just because his name was McKay and he'd once done a hitch in jail. Four people dead and they blamed him. They, they— Surely one man would speak up for him.

He shouted at them. "No!" he shouted. "No!" Listen to me. You've got to listen. Frankie's at my place. He has Amy Stewart there. He'll kill her. Kill her, can't you understand—"

The roar smashed over him like surf, snuffing out his shout as if it were a whisper. No voice could be heard. A tidal wave of sound seemed to burst from every mouth, a sound as inhuman and stupefying as the sea in flood. It battered at the windows and surged along the streets and swelled into the night, and no man could stand against it.

Hands yanked him to his feet and sent him reeling forward with a shove. The crowd had formed a cage around him and now it began to move, bearing him irresistibly along. Fifty men, a hundred? He had no idea. It grew larger and larger, gaining strength as it swept up onlookers from the sidewalks and saloons. He flung his words at them. He yelled and raged and begged them to listen.

"Stop it! Stop! Amy Stewart, you fools! You've got to believe me. Give me a chance to prove it. Amy—"

A push knocked him sprawling into the street, but they jerked him up again and bore him on, and his voice was drowned and lost in the storm. Here and there a face floated before his eyes. Boise Brown. Blackbeard Jake. Tom Judd.

Judd was shouting at him too, windmilling his arms, and still another face bobbed in front of him. The doctor, Amy's doctor, Baudet. They were strangers to him, all of them, howling for his blood, and they all wore the same lackwit look—the look of the mob.

They streamed past the depot and across the tracks out into open desert, and the glow of the town lights faded. They jostled him from side to side, herding him along, chanting and cursing and screeching, anonymous now in the starlight, like masked executioners, as shadowy and unreal as death itself. A few of these men he had ridden with, sold horses to, and bought drinks for over the bar. But not one could he call friend. Not one was going to stand up and vouch for Carson McKay. He had been a loner too long.

And then a hand gripped his elbow with warning pressure. He couldn't make out the man's features but the medicinal smell was unmistakable—paregoric, castor oil, tincture of iodine; it was the concentrated essence of every cowtown doctor Carse had ever met. Fingers clamped to his wrist, he felt a swift down-slicing motion—a surgical scapel?—and the rope fell away unseen in the darkness. His hands, numb and lifeless, were free. He held them behind him as before and bit down on his lip when the fiery needles of returning blood jabbed his finger tips. He swung his head to look but the shadow by his side melted back into the mob.

More than blood seemed to flow into his fingers and into his whole body, as though some vital fluid had been released. He was not alone then. He had one friend, a man to whom he'd nodded only once. As long as he had even that tiny glimmer of hope he could fight them. They might swing him from the highest tree in Rincon but they would have to kill him first.

The roar had risen to a frenzied pitch. One man was shrieking the chorus of *John Brown's Body*, another invoked God's wrath, and some were braying the idiot laughter of the very drunk. Others straggled and fell behind as the head of the crowd neared the dark fringe of the San Luis. They trampled on through the brush among the soaring trunks of the cottonwoods and faltered to a halt on a shallow bluff above the river. Somebody shouted for a light, somebody for a rope, and there was a minute of wild milling confusion.

Carse edged toward the river. His heart sledged against

his ribs and his breath came in whistling gasps. Only one man—Jake, he imagined it was—had a grip on his arm. Now, he thought, surprised that he could look at himself objectively. Once they get that rope on my neck, I'm done. It has to be *now*!

In one explosive motion he stomped his boot heel on Jake's instep and wrenched his arm free. Jake gave a yowl of pain and Carse drove his fist into the pit of the man's belly and flung him aside. The way was clear momentarily and he ran for the bluff. Somebody lunged for him, grabbed a handful of shirt, but he pulled away with a ripping of cloth and jumped over the edge.

For a heart-stopping instant he dropped through space toward the dark, star-scored surface of the river, then he landed on a sand bar and somersaulted over into the water, cushioning the impact of his fall. He got up and floundered across the shallows and out into the brush on the far bank. Behind him men were yelling and sliding and scrambling down the bluff, and a voice bawled, "Spread out! Run 'im down! Git a light, somebody."

Head down and legs pumping, he bulled on through the undergrowth and headed upstream. He had to keep to the bottoms, where there was natural cover to screen him. Out in the open he would be silhouetted, a target for any man with a gun. The men behind him knew that too. They had him cornered in a band of brush no wider than fifty yards at its widest. He had no plan. No destination. No place to hide. All he could do was run.

A branch raked off his hat and he lost precious seconds groping for it in the dark. Thorns clawed at his face and neck and he gashed his hand when he tripped over a snag and fell heavily. He got his second wind and ran on, dodging boulders and jumping downlogs and crashing through brush. He ran until his chest was heaving like a bellows and his legs would carry him no farther, and he fell again. On hands and knees he crawled to the nearest mesquite clump, wormed into the center of it and collapsed in retching, sweat-soaked misery.

Perhaps three minutes went by before he heard the first sound of pursuit. A distant voice called, "Over this way! Here's his footprint in the sand."

Presently footsteps crackled in the brush and smoky yellow light appeared—a pitch-pine torch. He made out the shapes

of a dozen men or more advancing up the bottoms in a skirmish line at staggered intervals, armed with shotguns and rifles. There would be no ducking into The Breaks and blotting his trail tonight. He was pinned down, trapped. In another minute or two they'd be on him.

A twig snapped nearby and something rustled in the dry leaf mould. Suddenly rigid, he shifted his gaze. A rattler, disturbed by the approaching noise, slithered from under the mesquite roots, then scented him and whipped convulsively into a coil a scant foot from his face. Carse held his breath. The flat head undulated from side to side in a sinuous questing motion and dropped back to earth. Then the snake glided soundlessly away.

The skirmish line had closed the distance to less than thirty yards. They came on slowly and raggedly but they made a thorough search, stopping to poke into every brush clump. He peered out at the torchlit scene and flattened on the sand as he speculated about the doctor. The doctor had helped him once, but there wasn't a prayer they'd miss him this time.

Two revolver shots slammed across the night and over to his left, on the far edge of the bottoms, a voice shouted, "There he goes! Over here and cut him off!"

The searchers nearest Carse stopped and stared off into the darkness. One called doubtfully, "You sure you seen him?"

"Ran right past me. He's doubling down the river."

Carse knew that voice. He'd heard it recently. But where? When? Either the man was drunk and seeing demons or, for some reason, was deliberately pulling the mob off his back. And then he matched a face to the voice. Two days ago he had tried to borrow a thousand dollars from Tom Judd, the gambler. Tom had offered him fifty, along with some sound advice. He hadn't taken either. But now Tom was taking him to one more chance.

"Bring that torch! We got him now!"

The line broke. Men wheeled downstream and plunged off through the brush, following Judd in a bawling frenzied stampede. The light dwindled and vanished, and an uneasy quiet settled over the bottoms. Carse crawled out of the mesquite thicket, cotton-mouthed and shaky with relief. Tom Judd had bought him a little time. But any minute the hunt might swing this way again.

He slogged straight up the river channel. It was slow treacherous going but the water covered his tracks. Around the next bend he almost blundered into a camp. Two wagons were drawn up on the bank and three men with rifles, apparently standing guard over their sleeping families, huddled beside a fire. He ducked behind a cottonwood and eyed their teams, four big work horses staked out on a sand-bar. There was no possibility of stealing a horse here; one shot or a yell would bring the mob rampaging back. But he had to get a horse somewhere. A horse and a gun.

A small spotted dog bounded from under the near wagon and came to a growling stiff-legged point. Carse froze behind the tree. One of the men glanced up and rose to his feet, whereupon the dog burst into furious barking. The man scooped up a stick and hurled it. "You, Spot, quit that fool racket 'fore you wake the kids."

Diverted, Spot snatched the stick in his jaws and trotted back to camp and dropped it at his master's feet. The man made some remark to his two companions and squatted down again beside the fire. One cautious step at a time, Carse retreated into the darkness around the bend and climbed up a cutbank into the edge of the trees. To bypass the camp and regain cover of the bottoms farther upstream, he saw he would have to make a wide circle across open ground. And then what? There might be other camps. He could dodge and hide on foot just so long. Come daylight he'd be hunted down like a coon in a canebrake.

A few outlying houses straggled off toward the center of town. All were dark except a two-story frame house that stood some distance from its neighbors among a cluster of cottonwoods, a single dim light shining out from an upstairs window. It had an air of familiarity. Sometime or other he had visited that house. And then he remembered. Seelah Stewart, Amy's father-in-law, lived there. Fuzzily his brain wrestled with that piece of information.

Seelah Stewart was sick. Heart. Very sick. Can't see anyone. Mustn't be disturbed. But Stewart had to hear him out, bad heart or no. If two men, the doctor and Tom Judd, had tried to help him, so might Stewart. There wasn't anyone else. No other place to go. Seelah Stewart was the end of the rope, for him and for Amy.

He crossed to a smaller shed-like structure behind the house, halted for a minute to observe the lighted window,

then approached the back door. It was locked, and so was the front door. Returning to the rear of the house, he located a ground floor window, wrapped a rock in the tatters of his shirt to deaden the sound, and broke the pane of glass. By reaching through he managed to unfasten the catch and then crawled over the sill into a room that smelled of cooking. He heard the sound of heavy snoring from upstairs and, reassured, felt his way carefully across the kitchen and along a hallway to the foot of the stairs.

The treads squeaked under his boots as he climbed, but the rhythm of the snoring did not alter. Two doors opened off the upper landing. He peered into the second and drew back quickly. The sleeper was a woman, fat and fully dressed—a nurse, he guessed. If she woke up now and found a strange man beside her bed, she'd scream her head off.

The front room was larger, and his glance slid from the lamp on the chest of drawers to the figure under a sheet in the big brass bed. For an instant he had the stunned impression that he was looking at a corpse laid out for burial. He'd come too late. Seelah Stewart was dead. Then the eyelids snapped open and a hand flipped the sheet aside. The other hand held a .45 pointed at his navel.

"Reach!"

Carse raised his arms, staring at the gun and then at the fierce yellow eyes in the leathery face. The old man had fooled him, playing possum, and he didn't look too sick to squeeze the trigger.

"Dirty sneak thief. I heard you bust my window." The voice rose to a bark. "Mrs. Rabb!"

"Mr. Stewart, I—"

The gun motioned him to silence. "Mrs. Rabb, come in here!"

The snoring in the next room continued with undiminished volume.

"Don't need her anyhow. I'm not so stove up I can't shoot your belly button off. Always keep a gun handy in my drawer." Stewart squinted against the lamplight as though seeing him clearly for the first time. "Been in a fight, have you? Drunk, like as not."

"No, sir. My name's McKay. Your daughter-in-law, Amy—"

"Amy?" The eyes blazed up. "What about Amy?"

"She's at my place, up on Massacre Creek."

"What's she doin' there? Speak up!" Before Carse could answer, Stewart reared back against a pillow and said, "Massacre Creek? McKay? I remember now. You're the fellow out to build that dam."

"That's how it started, yes. But after the holdup—"

"Holdup? Whoa now, young man. Back up and start over."

"Put that gun down and I'll try and explain." The old man hesitated, scowling up at him, and Carse added, "I don't know how much they've told you, Mr. Stewart, but this whole town seems to think I robbed your bank. What I think is that you're too smart to believe it."

"The Valley Union? Robbed? And nobody told me?" He smacked his fist against his thigh. "Goddam! Baudet's worse than two old women. Afraid I'll throw a fit." He swung his feet to the floor and started to stand and then sagged back on the bed. His color had turned a muddy gray and his chest rose and fell with his rapid breathing. "Medicine. Over there."

Carse found a packet of powders beside the lamp and dissolved them in a glass of water he poured from a pitcher. One arm circling the old man's shoulders, he held the glass to Stewart's lips and helped him drink. Presently his breathing eased and he lay back on the pillows and closed his eyes, the gun forgotten on the carpet.

"Thanks. It's hell to be so weak."

A sound outside caught Carse's attention. He stepped to the window, dropped to his knees and peered out the crack between the sill and the bottom of the shade. Seven or eight men were hurrying out of the trees. They stopped in Stewart's yard and looked around and one man headed for the front door. Another called sharply and the first turned back and they all moved on down the street toward town, searching from house to house.

When Carse looked around Stewart was watching him with puzzled eyes. "They after you?"

He nodded. "All you have to do is holler. They'll hear you."

"You've got guts, I'll say that. All right, McKay. What's this story about Amy?"

After Carse finished, Stewart was silent for a long while, staring up at the ceiling. He had thought one of two things might happen: that the old man either would disbelieve him

entirely, or that he might suffer an attack from the shock. But Stewart surprised him by saying, "You like her, don't you?"

"Well yes, sir, I do," he admitted. "I guess I never met a woman like Amy."

"I like her myself," Stewart said dryly. "And not just because she happens to be my daughter-in-law. Ever since my boy died I wanted her to remarry. She's too much woman to go through life a widow, she has too much to give. But the right one never turned up. Do you think you're that man, McKay?"

At Carse's impatient snort he held up a thin blue-veined hand. "I know, I'm an old fool rolling in clover, but give me credit for a little horse sense. I'll get back on the track in a minute. Amy must think you're something special, if she rode forty miles for a look at your ranch."

"Maybe she figured it was part of her job."

"Ever been married?"

"No."

"Stands to reason. Else you wouldn't be so ignorant about females." A crisp ring returned to Stewart's voice, as if by an exercise of iron will he were excluding all emotion from his mind, and stripping the problem down to cold harsh facts, facts that could be dealt with in terms of everyday experience. "Now, what kind of a skunk is this Spain? Can we dicker with him?"

"He's killed four people already. No, you can't do business with him."

"Fifty thousand dollars?" Stewart shook his head. "We don't keep that kind of money in Valley Union. Never have."

"That's what Amy told him. He said you'd raise it somehow."

"Must be a lunatic to think he can hold a woman for ransom like some—some pirate. I'll send a posse in there—"

"Where'll you get your posse? Out of this mob? Ortega's dead. There isn't a responsible lawman in town tonight."

"Are you trying to tell me that two men can stand off a whole community, aroused as this one is?"

"If a lynch bee is what you want, just turn that bunch loose. They'll get Frankie, sure. But Amy—I know Frankie Spain, Mr. Stewart. You don't. And I'm telling you he'll kill her first."

The old man fell silent again, worrying his lower lip with his teeth. "If I send a telegram, have the money shipped in from one of our member banks, it might get here by Monday."

"That's how many days? Three. He won't hold off that long. He can't. Too many people are involved now." Carse shot a glance at the window shade and wondered if the sky was beginning to lighten. Frankie had given him a twenty-four-hour deadline. But a new thought, which he had not voice to Stewart, began to haunt him. Frankie, being Frankie, as shifty and treacherous as a chinook wind, might not, for a number of reasons, wait even that long.

"Amy!" Stewart said her name with a kind of groan and covered his eyes. "Amy."

"Mr. Stewart—" He felt a towering urgency, but he was at the mercy of this old man's judgment, his wisdom and self-restraint. It was only human for Stewart to lash out and strike back in fury at an enemy he had never seen. He had to convince him. "Mr. Stewart, we're strangers, you and me, with just one thing in common now—Amy. I think I can get her back. I'm askin' you to take me on faith, give me a little help."

"What's that?"

"I'm going back for her. Alone."

"How're you going up against a pair of killers like that single-handed?"

"The way things stack up, can you think of any better way?" Stewart made no answer and he went on, "There's only one man I know well enough to trust. Tom Judd. I'd like Tom to back me. Can you get word to him without putting the whole pack on my tail again?"

Once again Stewart was silent in the big bed as he stared at Carse with a disconcerting fixity that lasted several seconds. Then he said heavily, "You're asking a lot, you know that. Amy's like my own child, McKay. At my age I'm not likely to have another." He sighed. "I'll get Judd. Anything else?"

"A horse. A gun."

"Help yourself." With his chin Stewart indicated the .45 on the floor. "I won't need it. A horse—I keep mine in the shed out back. Used to ride him every day. He's probably hog fat by now." The old man's voice quavered and trailed off, but the tawny eyes blazed out fiercely.

Carse paused an instant in the doorway. "She thinks you're the greatest man in the territory."

Stewart made a tiny grimace that might have been pain or pleasure. "Get going, son. *Vayo con dios.*"

He stuffed the gun in his holster, groped his way back down the stairs and into the kitchen, where the smell of bread brought saliva to his mouth. He hadn't eaten since noon yesterday and that a sorry mess of beans. Finding a fresh-baked loaf he tore off great chunks with his teeth as he let himself out the back door and crossed the silent empty yard to the shed. Stewart's horse, a chestnut geld, was fat from lack of exercise. It seemed to take him endless minutes, fumbling about in the semi-dark, to locate bridle, blankett and saddle.

By the time he finally rode out into the cottonwoods the eastern sky was turning a lustrous pearly gray. Dawn would overtake him in less than an hour. He glanced up at the yellow rectangle of Stewart's window, then turned the chestnut into the bottoms and socked home his spurs.

* * *

Upstairs in the back bedroom Seelah Stewart was struggling to wake his housekeeper-nurse. Mrs. Rabb was a heavy woman and she shifted only slightly, like a bag of grain, under his frantic shaking. He pinched and slapped her cheeks without success. Fool woman must be drugged, he thought, and emptied a pitcher of water over her face. She stirred and muttered and went on snoring. Near the end of his strength, trembling with fatigue, he tried pouring whisky down her throat as a last resort.

She coughed and sputtered and opened her eyes and when she finally managed to speak she sounded as though her mouth was full of taffy. The gist of her talk was that she was terribly sorry, she must have dozed off, and that Mr. Stewart was to climb back into bed like a good boy and behave himself; otherwise she would have to fetch the doctor.

Since this was precisely what Stewart wanted, he plied her with hot black coffee, until she was fairly articulate and steady on her feet. Then he tried to make her understand. "I am *not* having on attack, woman!" he roared at her. "But I will if you don't pull yourself together."

She began to sniffle and he said in a gentler tone, "Now,

now, Mrs. Rabb. You know where the doctor lives. Tell him it's an emergency. Tell him—" Wild stallions, he knew, could not drag Mrs. Rabb through the doors of the Palace Saloon, nor any other. So Doc Baudet would have to be the errand boy. "Tell him to find Tom Judd, the gambling man."

"Yes, sir, Tom Judd, the—"

"Have him send Judd over here on the fly and keep his mouth shut. Get along with you now, and hurry. There's a good soul."

After she had gone, puffy-eyed with sleep and tears, he climbed wearily to his room and turned out the lamp. It was almost dawn. This had always been his favorite hour of the day, when a freshness crept over the land like a promise of rebirth for all the world. But this morning a heavy foreboding lay on his tired heart. He knew men and he believed he had some skill in assessing character. Had he judged McKay correctly? Had he, in placing Amy's safety and perhaps her life in this man's hands, made the right decision?

For the first time in years Seelah Stewart got down on his knees to pray.

* * *

She had slept fitfully during the night, dozing off and then starting violently awake at some imagined sound. The only sounds, however, had been those of coyotes or occasional gusts of wind moaning around the window casing. Neither man had entered the house nor come near the door, but lying in the dark, expecting any moment to hear a footstep outside, had been a nightmare experience. At the first gleam of dawn she rose from the bunk, washed and combed her hair, thinking wryly that even under these circumstances a woman had some scrap of vanity. There were only a few bits of mesquite left in the woodbox, only a few beans in the coffee grinder, but she started a fire in the stove and set a pot on to boil.

She examined the interior of the small one-room house once more, trying to fit Carse into this framework. It had a Spartan neatness of which she approved, an air of solid masculine self-sufficiency and, what she particularly liked, a shelf of books that included several dog-eared volumes of history and biography. Not really a bad room at all. Too

dark, of course. It needed another window, a few splashes of color. Amy caught herself at this game and smiled inwardly, conscious of a warm little glow at her own conceit. Already she was rearranging his furniture.

A managing woman, her mother once had called her. Well, no woman would ever manage Carse McKay. He might be lonely, oversensitive about his past, but Carse was his own man, independent to his boot soles. It was unbelievable, she reflected, that three days ago she had never heard his name. But then, she had never heard of Frankie Spain either.

The smell of smoke brought him to the door now and he peered in at her with the meaningless grin she so detested. "Morning, Amy," he said. "Got your beauty sleep, I see."

"The coffee's almost ready," she said in a tone as neutral as she could make it.

"How about fixing us some breakfast?"

"How do you want your beans? Cold or warmed over?"

"Is that all we got left?" Frankie laughed. "Now ain't that like our friend Carse? Short on grub, short on cash, short on luck all around. What for you mess with a man like him?"

She looked steadily at him in the doorway, a fleshy handsome man with blue-black jowls and thick wavy hair, and compressed her lips. The gun hung butt-foremost in the low slung holster on his hip. Could she distract him for an instant, she asked herself. No. If, by some miracle she did wrest the gun from him, there was the other man, Pike, somewhere outside, probably watching from the rise.

"Is Carse the best this country's got to offer?"

"Why do you dislike him so? Because he saved your life once?"

Frankie gave another laugh, but it had a grating edge. "Is that what he told you? There's lots of people I don't like, Amy. But I could get to like you."

"No you couldn't. You won't live that long."

"That's no way to talk. Once I get that money I'm gonna live forever. You don't think Carse'll stop me, do you? He'll do what I tell him. That's why I sent him. I know the kid inside out."

"Then there's nothing for you to worry about, is there? Except how to spend the money."

"I have that figured out too."

"Isn't it a shame," she said coolly, "that you have to give

part of it to your friends. If you shot them you could keep it all."

"Now there's a banker for you. Always two jumps ahead." He shook his head in mock admiration. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"Do you suppose your friend Pike has thought of it? Or maybe he knows *you* inside out."

"Why, he trusts me, Amy. Everybody trusts Frankie Spain. You did. Matter of fact, you still owe me two hundred dollars."

"Your wife's shopping money?" That struck home. He stretched lazily in the doorway but she saw the flush along his jawline. She knew only that Verna had been shot, but not how or by whom, and her mind held the picture of a nervous, overdressed woman who smelled of cloves and cheap perfume. "If she trusted you, then I'm sorry for her."

She picked up the bucket and stepped forward, but as she reached the doorway he suddenly lowered his arm and blocked her way. She stood motionless as the blood surged into her face, feeling the pressure of his forearm against her breast, and said with all the contempt she could put into her voice. "Stand out of my way."

"Don't get uppity with me, you little bitch. This isn't daddy's bank."

Behind her the coffee boiled over on the stove with a hissing sizzle, but she did not turn back. She saw the threads of gray in his hair, the pores in his coarse-textured skin, the moist red mouth so close to hers, and she was conscious of a revulsion almost like nausea. Still she did not move, willing her knees to support her, and the aroma of scorched coffee thickened in the room.

Then a whistle sounded, Pike's whistle. Frankie dropped his arm and swung around into the yard.

Her cheeks flaming, she stumbled outside and around the corner of the house and leaned against the wall. The bucket bail slipped from her fingers and she drank in great gulps of cool morning air. Deliberately she made herself dip from the barrel and replace the lid, using up time until she felt in control of her hands and legs once more. Pike was ambling down the path at his swivel-kneed camel gait and she looked beyond him into the basin.

At this early hour a pastel multicolored light touched the folds of the hills and the timber-tipped peaks behind, soft-

ening their harsh contours. Even the flats, as barren as she knew them to be, had a quality of enchantment and beauty. Somewhere up the rocky slope a canyon wren trilled, and she thought, no wonder Carse loves it here. Water to make it bloom was part of his dream that only now was she beginning to perceive with all her senses. Water. A dam. A flume. A thousand dollars. Dear God, she prayed, let it be Carse now.

"It's a kid," she heard Pike telling Frankie. "Some kid on a mule, ridin' up the trail."

"A kid!" Frankie scowled up at the hillside. "For chris-sake now what?"

Amy's throat constricted as bitter disappointment swept over her. She had hoped against all reasonable hope that it might be Carse returning. It was much too soon to expect him. But that he would come back for her, somehow, she never let herself doubt.

"Want me in the barn like last time?" Pike said drily.

"You watch the girl—I'll handle this one."

Under other circumstances she might have smiled when, a minute or so later, a boy appeared on the skyline astride a flop-eared, mangy-looking mule. Gawky legs and arms flapping, he jogged down to the ranch and tugged off his hat in tongue-tied embarrassment at the sight of her. Red-haired and freckled, wearing a pair of cutdown pants held up over his bony shoulders by rope suspenders, he looked so much like Tim Halloran that Amy felt a stab of anguish.

He pulled his eyes away from her toward the two waiting men as Frankie said, "You live around here, sonny?"

"Yes, sir. Over there a piece." His voice cracked and he flushed in still deeper embarrassment. "I'm Danny Halloran."

"Howdy, Dan." Frankie turned on his grin. "Light down and sit a while."

"Thanks, but I can't. My Pa—" His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Is Carse around?"

"Not right now," Frankie said easily. "We're friends of his. Anything we can do for you?"

The boy's glance took in his gun, the rifle canted across Pike's arm, and shifted to the doorway of the house. Amy could hardly breathe. Tim Halloran's body, covered by a tarp, lay in the tool shed. His mare was tied in the barn. "My Pa," he started again, "didn't come home last night. Ma sent me looking for him."

"And you thought he might be over at Carse's place, did you?"

"Yes, sir. He came here all right. I followed his tracks."

"That was smart of you, Danny," Frankie said. "Is your Pa named Halloran too?"

The answer came more slowly this time. "Yes, sir."

Frankie laughed and winked at Pike. "I reckon we met a Halloran. Wasn't that the fellow here yesterday?"

A dull stain crept up in Pike's cheeks, and he shook his head in a circular motion that might have meant yes or no or anything.

"You saw him?" the boy said. "Where'd he go when he left?"

"Now that's a question. He—"

"Stop it!" Amy knew her voice was close to breaking, that she was on the verge of tears, but she could not bear another second of this. "He's teasing you, Danny. Your father—he—he rode into Rincon yesterday. With McKay. On business."

"Pa did that?" The blue eyes were skeptical, challenging her. "What business, ma'm?"

"Bank business. About the loan for your dam on Massacre Creek." She found it easier to embroider the lie now that she was launched. Please, she thought; believe me, Danny Halloran. Believe me and go away. Please! "Mr. McKay needed your father's signature on some papers before they could get the money."

"You mean we're really gonna get the money? For the dam? But Pa says—"

"Your Pa was—is—that is, he won't be back—until tomorrow." She forced her lips into a smile. "You go home now and tell your mother not to worry. Everything is going to turn out all right." He hesitated and she added quickly, "Hurry now. She'll be anxious."

The boy glanced aside at Frankie, as if for confirmation, frowning slightly, and said, "Yes, ma'm." He dug a bare dirty heel into the mule's ribs, tugged at the rope halter and rode up through the rocks the way he had come, holding himself very straight. Partway up the rise he turned and called back, "Thank you, ma'm," as though remembering his manners.

Then he vanished over the rise. Amy swallowed and pressed the back of her hand to her forehead before she could bring

herself to look at Frankie. He grinned and said, "That was fast on the draw, ma'am. Yes, ma'am, real fast."

"You'd have shot him." She said the words in a monotone that was altogether damning.

"Frankie—"

She had all but forgotten Pike. He stood off to one side, the rifle across his arm, and watched them with his mournful eyes.

"Go water the horses," Frankie told him. "I'll spell you on the hill after we eat."

"You water 'em." Pike gave the bucket a kick and water went spilling over the dry cracked earth. "I'm through."

"Through? Through what?"

"That kid. He knew you was lying. He didn't believe a word."

"By Jesus, you gonna let some snot-nose boy scare you?"

"It ain't just the kid. It's everything." He sighed and fondled his yellow neckerchief. "Let's pull out while we can."

"Pull out?" Frankie stared. "What about the money?"

"It all went sour, Frankie, from Pony Reese on down. You comin' with me?" He waited for several seconds, his face without expression, then tramped off toward the barn.

"Pike!"

Pike reached the door of the barn before he stopped and turned. Amy's nails dug into her palms, and a scream rose in her throat like a bubble about to burst.

"You can't go now, Pike," Frankie said. "I need you here."

Pike shook his head. "Not me, you don't. Better ride along."

"Why? Why you quitting me now?"

"Why?" Pike tugged at his kerchief and frowned thoughtfully, as if giving the matter judicious weight. "You sure you wanta hear why?"

"I said I did."

"I tell you why, Frankie," he said in his slow measured way. "I had me a jugful o' you and your crazy talk. You and Cassidy and the Wild Bunch and all the jobs you pulled. And now you're off to South America! Maybe Verna believed that crap, but you and me know better. Hell, Butch Cassidy wouldn't give you the time of day."

Frankie's mouth twisted into a curious little smile. "Kind of late, ain't it, Pike boy?"

"It's always gonna be too late for you, Frankie. Killin' that nigger don't make you a big man. Nor that one-eyed

sheriff. Nor that farmer yesterday. You're not a has-been, Frankie. You're a never-was. And I don't want no more to do with you."

"Man enough to kill you, I reckon."

Pike held the rifle motionless. "You can try."

They stood that way for what seemed to Amy an eternal moment and then with a motion so swift she had not been aware of any motion at all, Frankie was firing from his hip. Pike levered the rifle as he fell, a bullet in his throat, and Frankie shot twice more before Pike's body struck the ground. The last she saw before she fainted was a gush of crimson spurting over the yellow neckerchief.

* * *

The trail up the San Luis had never seemed so long. Once he turned into the narrows above Rincon, Carse pushed Seelah Stewart's chestnut to the limit. It was an uphill pull most of the way, sandy and winding through the canyon bottom and dusty where he short-cut across the open flats. The horse, fat and out of trim, tired rapidly, and his spurs were bloody long before they reached the Anchor turnoff.

He stopped to rest and debated whether to turn aside to the ranch and cut a fresh mount out of the remuda. Somebody was there. He had seen a light night before last. Probably old Ramon, the wrangler, who knew him by sight if not by name. But there would be explanations, delays. He decided to see it through on the chestnut.

The sun was well up now and the molten heat of another day began to seep across the land. When he mounted again he realized how close he was to total exhaustion. Hills and mountains shimmered mirage-like on the horizon and reflected sunlight beat up at him dazzlingly from the soil. He knew men who claimed they could sleep, or at least doze, in a saddle, but he was not one of them. He had ridden seventy-odd miles in the past few hours, another forty the night before that, with only catnaps in between, and he felt as though he'd aged a year for every mile.

He did not dwell on what lay behind in Rincon, nor the possibility that Tom Judd might be on the way with help. Nor did he think ahead to the situation at Massacre Basin. He had to get there first. And then— And then he still would face the longest day of his life.

There were no fresh tracks on the upper trail beyond those he had made himself. The floor of the canyon, where it cut through the sandstone bluffs on a north-south axis, lay mostly in shade, and he drove the horse at a reckless all-out gait. Once he surprised a doe and fawn at a pool and they bounded off through the brush with white rump patches flashing. A cluster of gaunt Anchor steers scattered and broke as he pounded by. Some distance below the mouth of Massacre Creek he could make out a pattern of circling specks in the sky, and when he neared the junction he had to climb off again and lead the balky chestnut past the body of the horse he had shot last night. Crip's body lay where it had fallen on the bank.

Carse considered this with cold practicality. No buzzards had come down yet, but by noon they would be hovering in swarms, a beacon to anyone who knew their habits. There was nothing he could do about it now. After all the killing this country had seen the past two days, Crip could wait on his burial a few more hours.

He had a long drink at the creek, a drink that might have to last him for some while, and then a clinking noise from the canyon caught his attention. Gun drawn, he ducked behind a boulder. Seconds later a scarecrow figure rode into the clearing astride Tim Halloran's mule.

"Danny!" He holstered the .45 and stepped out.

"Carse?" The boy pulled to a halt and his eyes lighted up. "Am I glad to see you! Where's Pa at?"

He felt the lump gather in his chest. "Your Pa?"

"I been looking for him. Then I saw those buzzards down here and got to thinking—"

The voice that was no longer a boy's, but not quite yet a man's, faltered and died, and Carse stood looking at him, mute with misery and compassion.

"The lady at your place told me he rode into town with you yesterday. But she acted kind of funny."

"You talked to her? When?"

"This morning early." Danny related the conversation. The two men with her, he said, had acted funny too, like maybe they didn't want him around. Scary-like, was how he described them. And now the blue eyes were pleading with Carse to tell him it was all right, that nothing could ever happen to the big booming man who had been Tim Halloran.

Carse drew a long deep breath. "Danny—"

"What were they lying for, Carse? I followed his tracks into your yard. I know that old gray's shoes. But she never come out."

"Danny, you're goin' on fourteen now, big for your age—"

"He—he's—dead?" The word trembled on his lips.

Carse nodded. How did you tell a thirteen-year-old that his father had been shot because he tried to help a friend? How did you soften the blow? For one thing, you pretended not to see a tear, hastily knuckled away. You did not comfort him by stepping forward and putting an arm around his shoulders. You tried to treat him as if he already were the man he must become, suddenly, years before his time.

"But Pa, how—"

The voice soared dangerously, and Carse said, "We'll get to the how later. You're the head of the family now, Danny. Your mother and the younger kids 'll have to lean on you. Me too. I need your help."

Danny's head bobbed.

"Here's what you do. Hit for home as fast as that mule can travel. Round up the family and take 'em over to Swede Larsen's. Stay there, all of you, Swede's folks too. Don't let anybody wander off. I'm counting on you."

"They killed him, didn't they? Those men?"

"One of 'em did."

"And you're going back? I'm going with you, Carse. I got to!"

"Listen to me, Danny. The first thing a man learns—a real man—is not what he wants, but what's wanted of him. You have a job to do."

"Which one was it?"

"The big black-haired fellow. In a way I'm the reason he's here in the basin. So it's my job to get him out."

"You're going after him—with a gun?"

"If I have to. Danny, tell your mother—" For Danny Halloran the ride home would be long and cruel and lonely, the longest ride a boy could make, and there was no way to ease it. "When you get there you'll know what to tell her."

Danny turned away and said in a muffled voice, "Then what? Sit around and wait?"

"That's it. Wait. Waiting's the hardest part sometimes."

Carse stared at his rigid back. "See you *mañana*. Luck, Danny. Now git."

After the boy had disappeared around the next bend of the canyon he pulled out Seelah Stewart's .45 again. It was an old single-action Cavalry Model with walnut grip and a 7½ inch barrel, no gun for speed and fast fancy draws. This was a work gun, heavy enough not to jerk off target on percussion, and tolerably accurate up to fifty yards. Probably Stewart had never shot anything deadlier than a rattler with it. He hadn't filed down the front sight or tinkered with the hammer or honed down the main spring, all sure marks of the gun slick. Frankie Spain, who packed a hair-trigger, short-barreled .44, would have snorted at this ancient thumb-buster.

Carse checked the working parts with meticulous care—pawl, pawl spring, cylinder notches and stop spring and bolt—and cleaned them with a rag, then reloaded. Setting up five pebbles on top of a boulder, he backed off some twenty paces, drew and fired until he emptied the cylinder. The gun threw slightly to the left. He corrected for that on the next round and hit three out of five. Then he gave the barrel a final cleaning and climbed back into the saddle with the scream of the ricochets still ringing in his ears.

The buzzards had taken fright at his shooting, but now they were circling back and a wingtip shadow flicked across his upturned face. He pulled down his hatbrim against the sun's glare and tied down the bottom of his holster by looping a leather whang around his thigh, and adjusted his shell belt. For an instant a jaw-aching stomach-clenching fear held him motionless beside the creek. He'd never gone hunting a man like this, knowing he would find him. He wasn't any gunslinger. But he thought of Tim Halloran, and Amy, and the others, and the fear crawled back into some dark hole of his being.

It was still there, ready to squeeze out again like a loathsome worm, but the anger was stronger now. "I'm coming for you, Frankie," he said aloud in the stillness of the canyon. "I'm coming. Just a little longer."

Little puffs of dust spurted up from his horse's hooves as he topped out on the rim into Massacre Basin and left the rock of the canyon behind. A swirl of dust to the west marked Danny's homeward progress. Carse passed the turnoff and rode straight across the flats at a steady lope. Every curve

and dip of the land was familiar to him and yet he had a feeling of strangeness, as if he were an alien looking upon a new country for the first time. The Jubilee Range seemed larger, looming nearer, than he remembered, and the basin itself seemed more compressed and shut in by the ochre-colored hills. He saw it now as it really was, not as the future paradise he had described in his letter to the bank. It was just another sun-baked godforsaken pocket that tantalized a man and mocked his hopes in the end.

I am a stranger, he thought. I don't belong here. It took me three years and Frankie Spain to find that out.

The trail led him to the crown of the rise and he stopped to peer down at his ranch, feeling the sudden acceleration of his heart. It lay silent and deserted looking under the pale brassy sky. No one hailed him from the house or the barn. Nothing moved across the yard. His gaze traveled slowly down the boulder-strewn slope and up the hill behind. Surely Pike or Frankie, whichever one was on lookout, would have spotted him by now. The quiet seemed to grow with an ominous quality, and a wildly irrelevant notion crossed his mind: Today's the Fourth of July.

Once again his eyes searched the hollow and the encircling hillside; then they returned to the house. The door stood open. His water bucket lay overturned beside the barrel at the corner. Taking mental count of the horses that should be in the barn, he arrived at the number of four. Even at this distance, not more than a hundred yards, some sound of them should reach him. He shifted his weight in the saddle and studied the barn more carefully. Only then did he notice something black and stick-like protruding from the open doorway. He slid off the chestnut and dropped his reins to the ground.

Loosening Stewart's .45 in his holster, he stepped down the trail. Thick dust muffled his footsteps and the banked heat of the earth struck up through his boot soles. Three quarters of the way down he halted, his blood racing as two quail exploded underfoot with drumming wings and skimmed away. He still heard nothing from the barn and he stood irresolute and puzzled, with sweat beading his face, then moved on a few more paces. One spur clinked against a rock and his breath caught at the sharp metallic noise. Here the trail swung wide around a granite outcrop, and

from this angle he had a straightway view of the barn door. Then he recognized the object which had mystified him.

It was a man's leg, encased in a black boot.

"Amy!" Panic rose in him like a gale wind. "Amy!"

He was running, stumbling down the trail and through the boulders and out into the flat of the yard toward the house, shouting her name. The curtains were drawn and a faint acrid tang of coffee hung in the air. Something glittered in the dirt at his feet and he bent and scooped up two empty cartridge casings—.44's. As he straightened he heard a sound, half moan and half cry, that made his flesh crawl, and Amy tottered to the door.

Her hair tumbled loose about her shoulders and she stared at him with pain-clouded eyes that looked enormous in the chalky pallor of her face. There were smears of dried blood on her cheeks and with one hand she clutched the ripped bodice of her dress against her breast. Her mouth opened weakly, as though she could scarcely breathe, and a shudder took her. "Carse! Oh Carse!"

She came against him, shaking with great convulsive sobs that racked her body.

Everything fell away: the door behind her, the house, the ranch yard; everything melted away as though it had evaporated in the sun, leaving him suspended in space. Too late, he thought. Oh God, I'm too late. But she's alive.

He held her and the world began to slide back into focus. He could smell her hair and feel the violent tremor of her shoulders and hear the deep tearing sobs. "Amy—" he started to say, but nothing came out. He swallowed air. "I'll help you back inside."

"No!" She struggled against him. "Not—not in there! I—I can't—"

He turned her bodily, so that he was facing the trail over her shoulder. Even now, with his mind a chaos, he had to think, to plan ahead. "Where is he, Amy?"

"He—he—"

A gasp shook her; she could not speak, and for a minute or two he waited, letting the force of her agony spend itself while he watched the yard and the slope beyond. As though there were two of him, joined like Siamese twins, one half could see the nape of Amy's neck and the other half could examine every boulder and shadow on the hillside. And

when her weeping began to subside he asked again, "Where is he?"

"He's gone."

"Where?" She shook her head. "Which way? Did you notice?"

"No. I was—inside. He turned the other horses loose. Then I heard him ride away."

Still she did not look at him and he cupped her chin in his hand and lifted her face. "Did he say anything before he left?"

"He and Pike . . . after the boy left they quarreled. Pike wanted them both to go. He shot Pike. I fainted and he must have carried me into the bunk. And then—"

She stopped. She couldn't go on. She closed her eyes and turned her face against his shirt. After a long silence she said faintly, "And then—Carse, do you know what he said to me? He said—" She shivered. "He said, 'If I can't have the money, I might as well have you.'"

She was trembling again and he gripped her arms hard, choked by fury. Frankie, he thought, Frankie, you've done it all now. You've robbed and you've killed. You dirtied everything you touched. And now you've raped a woman, this woman. Dying's too good for you. "Amy, Amy." There was a scalding in his throat. "How long ago?"

"I don't know. It was all so horrible. Maybe an hour."

He ached to soothe and comfort her, as he would a hurt child, but nothing he could say or do would wipe it out. Ever. "I'll take you over to Larsen's, soon as you feel up to it."

"Carse." She made a little pushing motion against his chest and backed away. "I'll be all right. Now you're here." Her mouth quivered and then firmed. "I'm not the first woman it's happened to."

"You better lie down. I'll get something."

"Just so I don't have to go back inside."

He stepped through the doorway and grabbed a blanket, propelled by a sense of racing urgency, but he took a moment to look over the disorder of his room. Bedding tangled on the floor, pots overturned, books scattered. She'd fought him, and she'd lost, and reading that story in this house made him sick and rigid with rage.

When he came out he found her by the water barrel. Some color had seeped back into her cheeks and she was dabbing at her face. She looked at him gravely and smoothed

back her hair with her palms. "I don't need anything," she said. "I'm ready to go now."

Her voice was quieter and the shame had faded from her eyes, but there was a tremor in her hands. The terror was still there, close to the surface, he knew, like his own creeping fear. "Wait in the shade," he said and spread the blanket against the wall. "I won't be long."

"Wait?" Her body stiffened. "You're not leaving me—"

"Just looking around. Couple of minutes, that's all."

He hadn't deceived her. Her eyes flew open and her lips shaped a name. "He's not here, I tell you! I heard him ride off. Take me away now, Carse. Please! He's gone."

"Sure he is."

"Don't go after him. I—I can't stand much more."

If he looked at her, if he touched her softness now, he was lost. He wanted to get her away, out of this place, Christ how he wanted to! But not yet. Not yet. And every second his feeling of danger grew and spread like prickly heat rash across his chest.

"Let him go, Carse. He'll be caught."

He couldn't explain his feeling to her, this itch of premonition. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe. But he'd known Frankie Spain too long. "You rest a bit," he said and kept his eyes away from her. "Be right back."

Moving out from the house, he paused and glanced at the tool and storage sheds, at their hand-cut boards which the sun had warped and weathered to a tobacco brown. The storage shed was padlocked. Tim Halloran's body lay in the tool shed under a wagon sheet. The filaments of a spider web glistened like silver flagree across the door's upper corner. So no one had gone in or out since sunup. The outhouse he dismissed as most unlikely.

Slowly he approached the barn. Pike had fallen partway through the open double doorway on his side, one leg doubled under him, the other stretched out into the sunlight. The rifle lay inside several feet beyond his outstretched fingertips, as though he'd made a final desperate effort to reach it. As Carse stepped nearer a swarm of flies arose with an angry buzz. The story here was easy to reconstruct. Pike had gone for his horse. Frankie had cut him down.

Then what? Frankie must have saddled his own horse and run the others out the door in the opposite end. Carse squinted into the dark interior. The original owner, or per-

haps some long-gone tenant, had added a sort of hay mow, empty now, and a couple of shoulder-high partitions for stalls. He always had intended to tear it all down and build a new barn. But now, as he started to ease gingerly past Pike's sprawled body, he realized that some detail had been altered, some object was out of place.

He backed off and peered at the gear on pegs along the wall: ropes, bridles, hackamores, nose bags, the big hay fork. What was he looking for? He didn't know. Frankie had cleared out an hour ago. But why had Frankie cleared out? Because of Pike? Because he'd lost his nerve? Since he'd waited all this time, why hadn't he hung on a few more hours. Somehow that didn't fit. If there was any one commodity Frankie had a plenty of, it was nerve.

His gaze shifted over the hillside again and to the chestnut silhouetted on the rise, then to the far slope behind the house. There were gulches up there deep enough to conceal a horse. And the house had only one door and window, facing south. So a man *could* ride off, circle around through the hills, then slip up on foot from the blind side and wait, wary of a posse. A man could do it, a man might do it, for one last crazy impossible chance at fifty thousand dollars. A man like Frankie.

He considered a pair of birds who were cheeping and pecking at droppings in the barn doorway. The swarm of horseflies had settled back on the body. Nothing wrong there. I'm the crazy one, he told himself, imagining Frankie behind every rock. Frankie's gone, running for his life. Forget him for now. And then the dull gleam of the rifle barrel caught his eye again.

The rifle! That was it! The rifle didn't belong there on the dirt runway. It should be with Pike, or near him. A Winchester didn't move itself. It shouldn't be in the barn at all. A man in Frankie's boots would never leave a rifle behind. A rifle and a horse were two things Frankie couldn't be without. But he *had* left it. Left it in plain sight. Why?

Suddenly the blood was pounding against his eardrums.

The Winchester was bait. For him. To draw him into the barn. Hadn't he almost walked inside to pick it up, unthinking? So Frankie must be inside too. Waiting, watching through a crack. Right now. This was Frankie's little dodge to protect himself against surprises or a doublecross.

It was pure Frankie: slick and sly and tricky, because Frankie never trusted anyone but Frankie Spain.

"Carse!" Amy's voice was anxious, strained.

He waved a frantic hand behind his back, flagging her to silence, and backed off another step or two. He wanted more distance, twenty yards if possible. Distance would be his only advantage with Seelah Stewart's ancient hardware. At twenty yards the three inches of extra barrel length would give him the barest edge. His brain computed this and he called sharply, "Frankie!"

Silence. More silence. Not even a faint hum of wind. He stared at the brown cracked boards and the spit dried on his lips. Which crack, which knothole? Or was he wrong? Maybe Frankie had outsmarted him again. No, he had to be in there, eye glued to a crack, grinning at the peep show, enjoying himself.

Back another step. Two. Three. Then stop. Not too far. He calculated the distance and rubbed the knuckles of his right hand along the rivets of his Levis. "Come on out, Frankie."

The two birds broke off their pecking and skittered away. A triangular shadow kited across the yard. Buzzards, he thought; they've spotted Pike now. He kept his eyes on the barn.

"I'll give you five, Frankie." He counted off another second. "One."

He heard no sound, saw no play of shifting light patterns. Frankie seemed to materialize in the doorway, his big body framed in a rectangle of shade like some portrait on a wall. He stood with the graceful negligent ease Carse knew so well, hat tipped to the back of his head, blue-jowled and smiling, the crimson track of Amy's fingernails still livid across one cheek. "Real foxy, kid," he said. "Did you figure that out all by yourself?"

Carse stared at him, and the sun was a red hot blister on the back of his neck.

"Where's Crip?" Frankie said. "Where's the money?"

Carse said nothing, waiting, waiting, and the seconds stretched on. Time stopped, reversed itself, and for an instant he was back in an Idaho schoolyard, he and Frankie, surrounded by a ring of goggle-eyed kids, and Frankie held a busted bottle by the neck. *I'm gonna brand you*, Frankie was saying. *Nobody does that to me*. And then time

clicked again and he was in his yard in Massacre Basin and Frankie was grinning at him from the barn doorway, as though they were playing a game.

"You bring the money like I told you?"

He held his eyes on Frankie's eyes, not letting them drop to his holster. Take your time, Frankie. Time's on my side now. I always could beat you at waiting. You're there and I'm here, and only one of us is going to walk away. So don't be in a hurry to die, Frankie.

"Won't talk? You're not mad at old Frankie, are you, kid?" He laughed and impatience crowded into his voice, but the knowledge lay bleak and sour behind his eyes and the muscles bunched around his mouth. "I'll tell you this much," he said. "Your girl was pretty good but I've had better."

He saw Frankie's shoulder dip suddenly, saw his hand slash downward for his gun butt. The slam of Frankie's shot and a spurt of dust to his feet were simultaneous, before Carse cleared his holster. Frankie's second shot tugged at his sleeve and ricocheted off the wall behind, and then Carse had the .45 out and up hip high, leveled like a long black finger. Thumb grip, hammer click, pull right, trigger squeeze, all in one blurred blink of eternity, and the gun roared and bucked against his palm.

Frankie stumbled back against the door jamb. His body slumped and then with a terrible spasm of energy he righted himself and jerked forward. The gun slipped from his fingers and he seemed to shake his head, as if attempting to ward off this final disaster. One hand crept toward the small black hole in his shirt and the life faded out of his open eyes.

Carse looked down and then very slowly turned, and with an old man's unsure step walked back toward his house.

* * *

Tom Judd and three men Carse didn't know had ridden in shortly afterward. They listened to him, saw what had to be done and went about it in tight-lipped silence. They were finished now and ready for the longride back to Rincon.

"Carse," Judd said, "no need for you to come in with us today. I'll take care of things in town. You rest up and ride in tomorrow."

"It's over, Tom. All done. They don't need me in town."

"I know how you feel," the gambler said. "After last night. But who were they? A bunch of drunks, a sorehead like Boise Brown. They'll forget it."

"No they won't. And I won't." He thrust out his hand. "Thanks for everything. I'll see if Amy's ready."

She was standing before the door of the house, eyes down-cast, pale, hands clasped at her waist. At the sound of his step she raised her head and met his sober gaze. "Judd will get you home," he said. Then he added in a lower tone, "He doesn't know about—that. Maybe he guessed, but Tom's no gossip."

"I'm not worried about gossip," she said. "What about you?"

"I'll have to see Mary Halloran first, help her with Tim's burial, and then—"

"And then?" Her blue-green eyes were direct and challenging, as they had been that night before the dance. "And then it's in your mind to drift on somewhere quietly, saddle up a horse and leave all this behind you. Isn't that so?"

"Massacre Basin." His voice sounded bitter.

"Leave your neighbors, your friends, the years you've spent here, your dam. Everything."

"What friends? They tried to lynch me last night. Half the town. A man can't live with that."

"A few hours from now," she said, "every woman in this county will know what happened to me. Oh, they'll find out. And I'm not like you. I can't ride off and disappear. I have to live with it." She put a hand on his arm. "It won't be easy. But one thing I learned from this, Carse: people can stand a great deal more than they imagine."

He was conscious of her touch, of the noonday silence and the burning heat, of the four men watching curiously beside their horses. "If I stay," he said, "every time you see me, or heard my name, you'll be reminded of today. And every time you'll get to hate me a little more."

"Hate? I will hate you if you go. More than hate." And then, unaccountably, she smiled up at him and her fingers dug into his flesh. "I'm going back in that room now. I'm going to make myself look at that bed. And I'll remember."

"Amy, don't!"

"Oh yes. Because if I don't, if I turn my back and walk away. I'll leave a ghost in there. I don't like ghosts, Carse." Her head tilted and she said softly, "Coming? Or going?"

She released his arm and turned. Her back straightened and she drew a long uneven breath. She hesitated, then pushed open the door and went in.

After a second he threw back his shoulders and, smiling to himself, followed her into the house.

THE END
of an Original Gold Medal Novel by
Hal G. Evarts

It was impossible, McKay told himself. Frankie Spain couldn't be here in Rincon, not after those twelve long years.

But what McKay had just seen was pure Frankie: slick, sly, tricky. And if it really was Frankie Spain, McKay knew he ought to back off fast and keep away. Frankie was part of the past that McKay hoped he'd left behind for good when he came to Massacre Creek. Frankie was trouble, real trouble, always had been, and McKay didn't want to borrow any more.

Every instinct in his body told him to forget what he'd just seen. Every cell in his brain told him that to go after Frankie now was pure suicide.

So McKay pivoted right in the middle of the street and went streaking straight for Frankie Spain.

