4,000 ornery cattle
and one desperate man

TRAIL DRIVE

Brian Garfield

Complete & Unabridged

SIX-GUN PASS THROUGH THE MOGOLLON RIM

Dan Sweet was a tall man, a strong man, and most important, a man who had taken his own measure and lived by it. Now he had promised Ben Gaultt to drive four thousand head of beef across the blazing Arizona desert—Indian country. Sweet was not the man to make an idle promise.

But trouble was brewing; there were too many people who didn't want that beef to market. Nate Ringabaugh gave Sweet his first warning, and Ringabaugh was a man who commanded respect. Miles Littlejack had grimly fought Sweet for authority, and Owen Mingo was doing his best to whip the crew into a mutiny.

There was one man left. He was waiting. In his mind, Ben Gaultt had to be ruined, and there was only one way to do it. Dan Sweet had to die.

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

BRIAN GARFIELD was born in 1939, which makes him one of the youngest writers of Western novels in print. Ever since his first book sale at the age of eighteen, he has been pounding the typewriter successfully. A former ranch-hand, he is a student of Western and Southwestern history, an expert on guns, and a sports car enthusiast. A graduate of the University of Arizona, he makes his home in Tucson.

His previous books in Ace editions include:
JUSTICE AT SPANISH FLAT (F-106)
THE LAWBRINGERS (D-578)

TRAIL DRIVE

Brian Garfield

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ONE

TWILIGHT came in shifting layers across the mountains, sending pockets of shadow along the desert below. He rode at that hour into the single long street of Santa Rita and observed with a quick sweep of his eyes the pattern of the dusty town: adobe buildings, square and without features, and here and there a frame structure, its clapboard siding faded dry and gray by the sun. A few characteristic wooden false-fronts lifted above the town's general single-storied level, and over that line of rooftops he saw the last of the sunlight absorbed by night.

He threaded the street's confused traffic, a big man on a big dun horse, and came before a building with a high and weathered front. The words "Cafe—Saloon—Games" were painted across it in a crescent shape. He dismounted and tied his horse to the porch post; he ascended the two steps with a single long-legged stride and turned his cool, almost indifferent eyes on the town; his hand idly brushed the butt of his holstered revolver.

This was Dan Sweet, who was tall even in this land of tall men. The dust of desert travel coated his clothing and his skin. When he rubbed his square chin a heavy brown stubble of whiskers stung the palm of his hand like the bristles of a wire brush.

Across the street a long, thin shape stood outlined in the light that fell through a cafe's open doorway. That man

was hatless and motionless, staring forward across the heads of pedestrians. His face was deep in shadow but behind him the light revealed his hair as paper-white, though from his straight and alert pose he did not seem old. Dan Sweet sensed, without seeing the eyes, that the man was surveying him with a reserved appraisal; it was the same glance of respect that Sweet was bestowing upon the other; two strangers, each of whom recognized the other as a fighting man.

Presently the white-haired man put his back to the street and turned into the cafe. Against the doorway light, his buckskin costume was clearly revealed, the hilt of a knife silhouetted at his left hip and the butt of a holstered gun at his right. Then he was gone from sight.

Dan Sweet put this scene away in his mind.

In need of food, rest, a shave and bath, he turned first toward the saloon because this was where his business lay. But just now he stood without hurry on the porch, putting a cigarette together and making his careful judgments of the horses tethered nearby. Some were big, some not so big; some light, some dark, some pinto. But all of them were long-legged cattle-working horses, and all of them carried Texas-rig, double-cinch saddles on which were tied coils of well-limbered riatas of hemp or rawhide.

The ponies were all branded Circle I. S.—the Iron Springs Ranch. Dan Sweet nodded; this was the proper place and the proper time. Yet he stood still on the spot, preferring to learn a little more about the town before he moved.

Down the street, a short man left one dingy cantina and moved toward another, a nickel badge glinting dully on his coat. Sweet thought: *night marshal,* and looked elsewhere. A tomcat scurried across the street narrowly avoiding the wheels of a high-sided freight wagon, drawn by six teams of oxen, that rumbled forward out of the desert road. Coming from the other end of the street was a buckboard crowded with thick-bodied miners just off their shift from one of the silver shafts in the hills above Santa Rita.

The smell of risen dust in Sweet's nostrils mingled with the saloon odors: the scents of raw whisky and tobacco smoke and men with saddle-sweat on their clothes and bodies. From the saloon also came the murmur of talk, the clink of glasses, the jingle of spurs dragging the floor.

Standing there, his head erect, he was a rock of a man, thick through the arms and chest and yet flat of stomach and narrow of hip, and his trade had not trimmed him down to the thinness of most rangeland horsemen. Big-boned, big-muscled, he had massive hands and a solid, clearly defined set of features. He wore a wide, flat-crowned hat, a plaid shirt and buckskin chaps over his butternut pants. Buckled to his scarred Justin boots were brass, round-roweled spurs; the Colt revolver at his left hip he wore rigged for a cross-draw, high and butt forward. And it was these things, the sum of his costume, that told what he was: a working cattleman.

More than that, however, he was Dan Sweet. His hands told of a life of rough and callousing work, showing battle scars about the knuckles. His face told of confidence and alertness, and behind all that a definite statement of detached toughness watching from the corners of his flat gray eyes. His hair was thick and brown, sun-bleached at the edges where it stuck out from under his hat; his nose was whitened and widened at the center by a scar of breakage. But above all these details was that this huge man in his mid-thirties carried himself in a completely self-assured manner. Visible on him almost like a cool smile was the unhesitating certainty of his own competence—of himself as a man.

He moved just inside the doorway, and looked from face to face, seeking one which he did not find. A dozen customers and the bartender occupied the place, most of the customers cowboys, for this was a cattlemen's saloon. Undoubtedly somewhere in town there would be a saloon which similarly acted as headquarters for Santa Rita's miners.

Everyone watched Sweet, some with suspicion and some

with simple curiosity. Silence entered the room like a chill wind. A man's boot scraped. Fine wrinkles converged around Sweet's eyes; he took a drag from his cigarette and walked to the bar, his blunt-roweled Mexican spurs touching the floor.

The bartender's look was uncertain, half-suspicious. Sweet said, slightly drawling, "I'm looking for Tom Graves."

"Not here."

"Then Ben Gaultt," Sweet said. "Where do I find him?"

"Right here," answered a voice back in the room.

Sweet turned. The speaker was a thickset man with close-cropped black chin-whiskers and a patent air of authority.

He said, "You're Dan Sweet?"

"I am. Your telegram came to my ranch."

"You came fast," Ben Gaultt said.

Sweet nodded, saying nothing.

Gaultt said, "You came because you knew Tom Graves was in this part of the country?"

"That's right."

Gaultt looked away, and looked at Sweet again. "Tom Graves is dead. That's why I wired you."

Sweet's expression was unchanged. That the bearded man's words had affected him was evident only in the pause before Sweet spoke again.

"How?"

"Knife." Gaultt seemed to think the single word sufficient. His dress was town dress, a suit of concord-gray broadcloth and polished half-boots, but none of this concealed the leather-brown cast of his wind-wrinkled skin, the roughness of his hands, the cow-country drawl in his talk.

After a moment Sweet answered curtly: "Fair fight?"

Gaultt shook his head. "We found him with a knife in his back." Gaultt glanced up at the two men near him, both of whom had been regarding Sweet steadily. Then Gaultt crossed with the choppy strides of a horseman to stand at the bar by Sweet. "I own the Iron Springs outfit."

"I know," Sweet said. "Graves was working for you."

"That's it," Gaultt said, turning to the bar and putting an elbow on it and speaking to the bartender: "One apiece, Max."

The drinks came and Sweet left his glass untouched. It was part of his experience that in new territory a man did not drink with a stranger until he had decided to trust the stranger. And just now there was on Sweet's mind something far more important than the question of Ben Gaultt's trustworthiness. Sweet said, "Tell me what there is to know about Tom Graves's killing."

"There's not much to know," Gaultt said, and added, "One of my riders found him in the arroyo behind this saloon, dead. That was five days ago."

Sweet could not interpret the man's expression. He said, "You've got an idea why he was killed."

"Sure," Gaultt said. "He found out something about the whisky runners."

"What whisky runners?"

"The fine upstanding gents," Gaultt said dryly, "who make a business of liquoring up the Apaches."

"What did he find out?"

"If I knew that," Gaultt replied with quiet calm, "I'd probably be dead too." But no thread of fear showed in Ben Gaultt. He was a strong man, the owner of a short-grass kingdom, Iron Springs Ranch, fifteen miles west of this town of Santa Rita. His age was indeterminate, somewhere between forty and fifty-five. The black beard served to emphasize the determined jut of his thick jaw. His eyes were deep and black and direct, his back ramrod straight.

Sweet considered him a moment further, after which he lifted the drink Gaultt had brought him, said, "How," and swallowed a portion of the whisky neat. He nodded. "Obliged to you," and started to turn.

"Wait."

Sweet stopped and inclined his head. Gaultt said, "Don't you aim to look for Tom Graves's killer?"

"No."

"I thought he was a good friend of yours."

"He was."

"Don't you figure you owe him something?"

Sweet shrugged. "A dead man can't collect debts. Is he buried?"

"Yes. But hell, man, I'd think in the memory of a friend you'd want to do something about it. He was knifed in the back."

"That's not my concern," Sweet said.

A small anger showed in Ben Gaultt's dark eyes. "I wonder what Graves would think of this if he was around to see it. Or if it was you who got knifed, and Graves was here, alive."

"We understood each other," Sweet said, showing a frosty smile. "Were the positions reversed, he'd do the same. My business is cattle, not whisky runners. It wouldn't help either me or Tom Graves if I started out on a long manhunt. That's the Army's problem, not mine."

"That doesn't jibe with what I've heard," Gaultt said.

"What have you heard?"

"That you're a loyal man."

"I try to be," Sweet answered.

"Is this loyalty—turning your back?"

"Since when is loyalty the same as revenge?"

"Hell!" Gaultt uttered a snort. "I sure don't get you, fella."

"I guess you don't. Now, why are you so anxious for me to stay in this part of the country?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"I've got my own ranch to run up north," Sweet said. "You didn't answer my question."

Gaultt sighed. "All right. You know what I hired Graves to do, don't you?"

"He was supposed to boss your trail drive from here to the railroad at Dry Fork."

Gaultt nodded. "Four thousand long-horns. Twenty-seven days around the desert, through the mountains and across the Mogollon Rim. This is Arizona, Sweet—not Texas. It

takes a better man than I am to take four thousand head across this God-forsaken country and deliver them at the railroad with any fat on them. You've got to drive 'em through mountains, then deserts as dry as the inside of a rock, then territory claimed by two tribes of Apaches. It takes a better man than I am—and I'm admitting it. Tom Graves was the man who could have done it."

"He was," Sweet agreed.

"There's only one other man I can think of who could do the job. Four thousand steers is a lot different from the six hundred I drove into this country five years ago. And that six hundred was all I saved out of a herd of fifteen hundred I left Texas with. On this drive I can't afford to lose two-thirds of my stock. If I don't market this herd, I'm broke."

"In other words," Sweet said, "you want me to boss your trail herd."

"That's why I wired you," Gaultt said. "Get those cattle to railhead, or find me a man who can do it as well as you can."

"No man alive can do that," Sweet said. It was not a boast; he was thinking of Tom Graves.

"Then you'll take the job?"

"Why should I?"

Gaultt looked away, displaying the embarrassment of a tough man asking a favor. "I'll pay you well. I've got to move that herd from here to Dry Fork."

"You want me to do it for you just because you need me to do it?"

"That's why," Gaultt answered flatly. His eyes flashed with anger. "Does it please you to make a man crawl?"

"No. You'll never crawl."

"I'm as close to it now as I've ever been."

Sweet shook his head. "You haven't said anything yet that would make me want to take the job."

"Doesn't it make any difference to you, when it's in your power to save me or let me go under?"

"No," Sweet said. "No difference at all. Tell me why it should."

"God!" Gaultt breathed. "I reckon you're just as tough as they say you are."

Sweet made no answer. After a moment he shrugged and started to turn again. Gaultt's voice cut forward, an imperious tone: "Hold it, Sweet."

"If you've got something to say."

"I'm offering you a good job. Why turn it down? You don't have to like me to work for me."

"I don't work for any man," Sweet said, facing him. "But I might work with one. Now— How good a job, Gaultt?"

Gaultt's eyes narrowed. "I offered Tom Graves his choice of one-tenth of the herd or three thousand dollars. That's how much I need this job done. I offer you the same."

Sweet looked at the bartender and held up his index finger. When the bartender had refilled his glass he dropped a coin on the counter and sipped from the drink, disregarding Gaultt's anxious stare, looking down into the amber whisky and considering the offer.

Presently Sweet turned. "All right," he said.

Gaultt nodded, his jaw bunched. "Which is it?"

"One tenth of the herd."

"I see," Gaultt said shrewdly. "You work only for yourself. If you own part of the herd, that justified the job. Right?"

"Something like that."

"All right," Gaultt said. "That's four hundred head. Your choice."

"Four hundred if I get all of them to Dry Fork, outside the usual few losses. But if I slip a bunch along the way, I take a tenth of whatever's left."

Gaultt had not changed his level expression. Now he smiled for the first time, and said, "You're sure of yourself— and that's good. We start day after tomorrow from my headquarters at Iron Springs. The herd's gathered and ready to move. You can bunk with my crew until we start."

"I'll spend the night in town."

"As you will." Gaultt lifted his arm and summoned the bartender. After he and Sweet had tossed off the drinks, the rancher gave Sweet a quick, firm handshake, and turned back to his crew.

TWO

SWEET BRIBED the barber to open his shop and there he had a shave, haircut, and bath. He crossed the dusty street in full darkness and ate a big meal at the Dutch Cafe, after which he stabled his horse and then cruised Santa Rita's street with restive energy, finally stopping at a single-storied adobe hotel. Here he signed the register and packed his warbag to a room at the rear of the dim corridor.

His was a nondescript room with four walls of cracked adobe and the ceiling supported by round wooden beams. From the rear wall a narrow window looked out upon a vacant lot covered with greasewood and scrub-catclaw. Dust filmed the window. He lit a match on his thumbnail and used it to ignite the lamp that sat on the single table. There was a wood chair with a cowhide seat laced with rawhide strips; there was a homemade cot with a straw tick mattress and two blankets that appeared reasonably clean. No carpet covered the rammed-earth floor.

A spider walked slowly from one corner toward the opposite one. Sweet stepped on the spider, kicked it away and dropped his warbag on the rickety chair. Over the back of the chair hung a yellowed towel ragged at the edges and worn thin by countless scrubbings in lye suds.

Sweet went back to the bed and sat on its sagging edge tugging off his brush-scarred boots. Thereafter he leaned back on his elbows, enjoying the slow laziness that followed a bath and a good meal. He built a smoke and put together in his mind his impression of Ben Gaultt. To that image he added the things he suspected that Gaultt stood for—the kind of man Ben Gaultt was, a man accustomed

to power, a man who had devoted his life to roughshod enterprises. But now Gaultt's back was pushed to the wall and Sweet had seen something important in the brief meeting tonight: fear was a flame threatening to consume the strength in Ben Gaultt.

It occurred to Sweet that the reasons Gaultt had given for his fear were not altogether satisfactory. Gaultt was afraid of more than he cared to admit.

Tomorrow, perhaps, Sweet would learn the answer to that; tomorrow he would start to work, not for Ben Gaultt's sake but for his own. Four hundred head of longhorn beeves would net him at least five thousand cash dollars at Dry Fork railhead.

He thought of Gaultt again and shook his head; Dan Sweet was a hard man raised in a hard land and he did not believe in charity or sacrifice. A man was a functioning being—he functioned for his own ends; when he no longer functioned he was no longer a man. To think, to discuss, to remember, to anticipate—these things were good only as they contributed to the function, to a man's action. The purpose, the whole reason of a man was in action; no one's life had any meaning until he stepped forth and acted. A man was only great who had the ambition to be great and achieved it—he must have the impatience to act. Tomorrow would begin Dan Sweet's next action—the Iron Springs trail drive.

He stood and moved to the window. The starlit desert glimmered faintly, and he was still in that thoughtful mood when knuckles rapped the door.

He turned. "The door's unlocked."

It opened, revealing a pair of men in the hall, a pair of wholly contrasting shapes: one was thin to the point of emaciation, the other was fat with soft layers of lard dragging down his cheeks.

It was the tall one whose gaunt features drew Sweet's attention. He had seen that man before. The man wore buckskins and was hatless. His age was probably the equivalent of Sweet's, his face was the face of a hatchet,

sharp and poised, and his hair was long and silky white. This was the man Sweet had watched, earlier tonight, on the walk opposite the saloon. And the man who, as Sweet had been aware, had also watched him.

The white-headed man stepped through the door. He was trailed by his fat partner who shut the door and leaned back against it with a foolish grin.

The white-haired man said, "I'm Nate Ringabaugh."

Sweet inclined his head in careful acknowledgment.

Nate Ringbaugh said, "It's floated around that you're trail-bossing the Iron Springs drive."

"That right."

"Wasn't smart."

"Wasn't it?"

Ringabaugh shook his head. His cheeks seemed perpetually sucked-in. He ran long and delicate fingers through his mane of fine hair, as though self-conscious of it. Sweet watched him with calculated indifference and after a moment Nate Ringabaugh said, "I think you're in the wrong game, Sweet."

"Your opinions," Sweet observed, "don't interest me at all, my friend. I intend to trail that herd to market. If you intend to try stopping me, think again."

Ringabaugh's answering smile was cool. "Is that a threat?"

Sweet lifted his head. "I'll cut you down if I have to. Is that what you want to know?"

Ringabaugh shook his head again. "I'll let that remark die, Sweet. Push on and we'll forget you ever made it."

"No," Sweet repeated. "What's your stake in this?"

"Just friendly advice."

"Sure," Sweet replied dryly.

"You're only hurting yourself if you throw in with Ben Gaultt."

"What have you got against him?"

"Just say I don't think much of him," Ringagaugh said without emotion.

"Don't you?" Sweet murmured, watching the thin man with narrowed glance. Ringabaugh showed a rigid smile.

The short, fat man behind him was still leaning against the closed door and now that man said, "It's sound advice, Sweet. You'd be smart to take it."

"Who are you?"

"Jack Emmett," the short man said, as if the name should mean something.

"I never heard of you," Sweet said.

"That's all right," Emmett drawled. "Now you know me, so now we're friends. Take a friend's advice—stay clear of the Iron, Springs outfit. The only thing you'll ever buy is a mouthful of grief with Gaultt."

Sweet said, "Why should I listen to you two?"

"We know what you're getting into," Nate Ringabaugh said, "and you don't." Ringabaugh's smile had widened a little; it was plainly meant to be reassuring and disarming, but there was a bleakness filling his hollow eyes. He said, "I might make it worth your while just to forget you ever met Ben Gaultt, and ride back to your place in Antelope Valley."

"How worth my while?"

"What's Gaultt offering you?"

"You know everything else," Sweet murmured. "You can figure that one, too."

Ringabaugh's frigid grin tightened. "Take a little care, Sweet, with loose remarks," Ringabaugh said. "Don't think because I talk soft that I'm a soft man."

"All right," Sweet said. "You're tough. What about it?"

The smile died on Ringabaugh's face. His temper was plainly crowding his self-control. He kept his voice even: "I'll give you a thousand gold dollars just to ride home to Antelope."

"An easy job," Jack Emmett said, grinning, stretching back his lips.

"I only accept pay I've earned," Sweet answered. "What makes it so important for me to quit Gaultt?"

Ringabaugh shook his head. He did not answer directly, but said, "You think you're pretty tough—but I'll tell you

this much. No man alive will get that herd through to Dry Fork."

Sweet smiled gently. "That's no argument. The worst failure of all comes from want of trying. Make it clear where you stand, friend. Am I going to have to fight you?"

"I'm the least of your worries," Ringabaugh answered in a soft tone. But his eager hatred grew bright in his eyes as he said, "I'll spit in Ben Gaultt's face while he dies, Sweet."

"Tell that to him," Sweet said. "I'm not his nurse."

The fat one, Jack Emmett, took a pace forward. "That mean you're backing off?"

"No. Trailing cattle is my job, not guarding Gaultt. I didn't hire on to fight his personal battles."

"All right," Ringabaugh said abruptly. "I can see you won't quit. But let me give you one other piece of advice: Stay away from the girl."

"What girl?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Sweet kept his glance indifferent. "Why bother me with this?"

Ringabaugh shrugged in an offhand way. "Just thought we might save you some grief. But I see now you'll have to learn the hard way, I'm afraid. Well, I'll say this much—you're not tough enough, Sweet."

And Ringabaugh turned to the door, almost pushing Emmett out of his way, and disappeared into the hallway.

Jack Emmett shot one brief malicious look at Sweet and followed Ringabaugh. Sweet crossed to shut the door, and then turned out the lamp and sat on the bed frowning, drawing his legs stiffly onto the blankets and sitting up against the wall, looking out the dusty window and puzzled by Ringabaugh and Ringabaugh's friend Emmett. They were two different types of men. Ringabaugh appeared to be a smart man with courage and pride; Emmett was clearly no more than a hired tough. The reason for their visit and the threat they had delivered was not altogether clear. Ringabaugh had mentioned a girl, who might be the

key to the tall man's anger, but Sweet knew nothing of any girl at Iron Springs.

After a time, he let his body go slack and decided to let questions wait until tomorrow at Iron Springs, where he might find answers to them. He rolled back on the bed and was about to turn in when a small scene caught his attention.

Through the window, across the weed-strewn lot, he saw two horsemen meet and sit their saddles, talking in excited haste. One, by the fat slouch of his body, seemed to be Jack Emmett, Ringabaugh's man. The second man was deep in the thick night's shadows and Sweet watched for five minutes while these men spoke and then Emmett lifted his hand, while the other man wheeled and drummed away across the flats toward the hills. Nothing was recognizable about the man's shape or horse, but his shirt seemed to have a metallic glitter.

Thereafter Emmett turned his horse about and rode past the edge of Sweet's vision. The other rider, receding, held Sweet's attention. Ringabaugh's boss? Someone working for Ringabaugh? A spy from Iron Springs? There was, of course, no available answer. But the scene seemed to be darker than the night itself; it came to Sweet that an undercurrent of intrigue rode this Border country by night, carrying dangerous things hidden below the surface that he had not yet found. When finally he went to sleep he kept that alert suspicion at the edge of his mind.

THREE

Owen Mingo was a gray-haired, slightly shriveled man who wore a perpetual obscure smile on his dry-cracked mouth. In a young man's business—working cattle—Owen Mingo was old, forty-seven. Always, in his outwardly indifferent glance, there was irony. Most of his fellow-riders were not quick enough or did not care to catch it, but it was there.

Hard bright heat lay across the Iron Springs valley. A faint wind made a dry rustle in what few trees there were. The herd milled, a single mass of red-brown cattle, lowing now and then with a single voice. A horseman galloped forward and reined in sharply beside Mingo. The cowboy was Russ Gaultt, the old man's son.

Russ sat his saddle while his horse's hard breathing filled the air, a sign of the harsh treatment Russ gave his mount. Russ had long blond hair and a face filled with youthful arrogance; he struck the flat of his hand against his thigh and said, "The old man got a new ramrod."

Mingo sat wáiting while Russ Gaultt's restive glance flitted over the herd. The cattle near them moved about just enough to raise a thin fog of dust and hang it suspended in the air. Finally Russ said to him, "A gent name of Dan Sweet."

"Ah," Owen Mingo breathed.

Russ's eyes came around quickly. "You know him?"

"No."

"Then why that noise?" Russ demanded.

"I've heard of him," Mingo said. His accent was Southern and precise, as though he had come from a background of some education.

"What have you heard, Mingo?"

"Don't use that tone with me."

"I own this place, dammit. I'll use any tone I please."

Mingo said, a little tired, "You don't own this ranch—yet."

"Sure," Russ answered softly. He scanned Mingo severely; his voice became a lash: "What about Dan Sweet, Mingo?"

"He's a very hard man, they say," Mingo said, in his deliberate, unhurried voice. "He may be just hard enough, my young friend."

"Hard enough for what?"

"Hard enough to deliver these cattle to Dry Fork," Mingo answered quietly.

Russ looked at him sharply, and looked away. Mingo

said, as if amused, "That doesn't seem to make you happy."

Russ's cheeks pulled thin. "How can a puppet be happy, Mingo?" He lifted his reins, sank spurs in his pony's flanks and drummed away at a dead run around the herd and uphill toward the tree-shaded yard a half-mile distant—the buildings of the Iron Springs outfit.

Owen Mingo sat his saddle with his hands folded across the saddlehorn, watching Russ wheel away. The outwardly blank expression of his eyes held a glimmer of dry amusement.

The wide brim of Mingo's hat shadowed his features. Presently he smiled faintly and drifted to his left so that he came up next to a young rider whose most noticeable feature was the pair of revolvers hanging in tied-down holsters. This was young Pete Santell; Mingo doubted that Pete Santell was more than nineteen. But Pete was quick and brash and a bully and, in spite of his boyish insolence, Pete was tough.

Owen Mingo allowed himself to smile again because he knew that Pete would not understand the contempt behind the smile. He said, "Had your man for breakfast, Pete?"

The boy's hot glance slapped against Mingo. "Maybe you ain't old enough to get away with that kind of remarks yet, Mingo."

"Only joking," Mingo murmured, and gestured up toward the ranch headquarters on the hill above. "Gaultt's hired a new trail boss, I understand."

Pete nodded.

Mingo said idly, "I hear he's a tough ramrod."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Mingo shrugged. "Nothing. An observation, is all."

Pete leaned forward on his saddle. His words had a dry rustle. "You think I'm scared of this Sweet gent?"

"Did I say that?" Mingo's tone was innocent.

"Damn it, Mingo, all you ever do is hint around. Why don't you ever come out with what you mean?"

"Maybe I don't mean anything," Mingo said softly. His

eyes turned uphill toward headquarters. "Some men are born in lucky times, Pete, and some men aren't."

"Meaning?"

"Take Ben Gaultt for example," Mingo continued, his voice soft and lazy. "You know how Ben Gaultt made his fortune, Pete? He came back to Texas after the war and he went into the brush and made up a nice big herd of cattle for himself. They were there for the taking—they had no brands. He put a herd together and sold it and made a fortune. Now, if you'd been old enough then, or if I'd been in Texas, we could have done the same thing, Pete. But we weren't—and now he's got a big house on the hill, and you and I've got a saddle apiece, a few blankets, a bunk and thirty-five dollars a month, Funny, isn't it?"

"What's funny?"

"What luck can do for a man. Ben Gaultt was lucky. He hit the right place at the right time. And now he thinks that gives him the right to walk all over everyone who hasn't had the same kind of luck. It gives him the right to pay us no more than thirty-five dollars and found. It gives him the right to send his son and his niece off to fancy schools while you and I don't even have enough money to afford families. Or at least, he thinks he's got that right. And he does have the right—as long as we allow him to have it."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Why," Mingo said, "you think about it a while, Pete, and maybe you'll see." Once more he smiled his vague little smile; he turned his horse's head and went back to his post at the edge of the herd.

Nate Ringabaugh appeared to be the kind of man who would fight at the drop of a hat. That appearance was accurate enough, but it left out one thing: Nate Ringabaugh was also shrewd.

Ten hours of steady traveling brought him, a while past dawn, from the town of Santa Rita across the mountains to the edge of the Santa Rita Desert. He paused on the last

hill summit to look out across the glare of that plain of sand, toward the indigo mountains rising in the distance; then he put his horse downhill through a series of cross-canyons and little dry hills until presently he arrived in a bowl of land surrounded by a perimeter of rocks. This, for the moment, was his camp; and here he found Jack Emmett, who had arrived shortly before him, and the rest of his six-man crew.

Most of them were dressed in tattered store clothes or in prairie buckskin; most of them were unshaven and all of them were filthy. Ringabaugh's glance traveled across each face and stopped on Jack Emmett; he saw the fighting streak along Emmett's mouth and when he stepped down, handing his horse to a grim-faced man, he looked again at Emmett's implacable expression and grinned a little, walking with long-legged stride to the dead campfire. A half-empty bottle of forty-rod whisky stood there and he upended it at his lips, allowing the raw heat of it to sear his throat and bite his stomach warmly.

Jack Emmett waddled forward and stood with his feet planted wide, thumbs hooked in his belt, over which his loose paunch hung like a full sack. Emmett rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth, in a crude sort of hint, and in answer Ringabaugh handed the bottle to him.

Emmett drank and put the bottle down. When he spoke, a little rivulet of unswallowed whisky ran down from the corner of his mouth. "Find out anything?"

"Nothing new," Ringabaugh said. "Gaultt's herd is due to pull out tomorrow morning."

"We got plenty of time, then," Emmett said. "First we got to get rid of that." He pointed vaguely across the camp toward a slat-sided wagon. A canvas tarp was lashed down over the wagon bed. Beneath the tarp were tight-packed cases of cheap whisky, like the bottle at Emmett's feet.

"I've made a deal for it," Ringabaugh said, referring to the whisky.

"You always do."

"Sure. But it won't be for four days yet."

"Plenty of time," Emmett repeated. "Four days from now Gaultt won't even be across this desert."

Ringabaugh shook his head. He turned so that he was looking up toward the distant hills that hid Iron Springs Valley from him, a distance of some thirty miles. "Sweet will cross this desert in a day and half," he said.

"Hogwash," Emmett muttered. "Not with four thousand head."

"He'll do it," Ringabaugh insisted. "He's a born drover, Sweet is—and I can tell you something else. He's got the smell of smoke on him. Don't ever underestimate him, Jack."

"One man," Emmett said, "one bullet. Don't take no more than that to cut him off short."

The sudden white of Ringabaugh's cheeks made his sunken eyes seem darker. He swept fingers through his long white hair and shook his head gently. "You couldn't whip him once in a hundred tries, Jack. Leave that customer to me when the time comes."

"Aagh," Emmett said, putting it off with a gesture. "No man's that tough. He ain't got eyes in the back of his head."

"No," Ringabaugh said sharply. "But when it comes to Dan Sweet, I want it clean, Jack." His head reared back and he turned, studying one by one the idle, savage faces loafing around the camp. "Make that clear to these wolves, amigo—no one touches Sweet. If I find him out in the hills shot in the back, I'll make it my business to kill the man who did it."

Emmett's slack face showed puzzlement. "What's getting into you?"

"Just leave him be," Ringabaugh muttered darkly. He could not tell this man what was in his mind: he could not tell a man so simple and shallow as Jack Emmett that once, long ago, Nate Ringabaugh had been a man with pride—and that now he saw, in this stranger Sweet, a man whose pride was as great as his own had once been.

"A man like that," Ringabaugh breathed in a whisper meant for no one's ears, "a man like that deserves a clean break."

"What?"

"Nothing." Ringabaugh shook his head irritably. His eyes traveled the horizons and turned toward Emmett. "We've got no fight with Dan Sweet. It's Ben Gaultt I'm out to wreck, Jack—and wreck him I will. I'll see him fail, I'll see him crawl, I'll see him die."

"Hell," Emmett said complainingly, "there's other things on this desert besides Ben Gaultt. Listen, Nate—you been figuring how hard it is to pass off a herd of four thousand rustled cows as your own? That takes a powerful lot of brand-blotting."

"I don't intend to steal Gaultt's herd."

"What?"

"Let the Indians have the damn steers," Ringabaugh said abstractedly. He wasn't looking at Emmett; he was engaged deeply with his thoughts. Across the barren campground he heard his crew's quarreling voices and suddenly he snapped around. "Shut up!"

Two or three sullen glances answered him; they were all toughs, men of the shadow-trails and unwilling to take orders. But they took orders from Ringabaugh because he was a better and a tougher man than they, and they knew it. Now their eyes fell away, and Ringabaugh was standing with his head bowed when Jack Emmett broke the long silence.

"What the hell's wrong with you?"

Ringabaugh, emerging from his thoughts, turned dead still. He said, "Don't ever presume to talk to me like that, Jack."

And the sting of his angry scrutiny catapulted Emmett down from his cocksureness. Emmett shuffled his feet. "Damn it, we can get a good price for that beef."

"Get it, then. But leave me out of the picture. I'm not a cattle rustler."

"You're a whisky peddler. Where's the difference?"

"I didn't steal the whisky that I peddle," Ringabaugh said quietly. "I bought it. You see the difference?"

"Still breaking the law, ain't it?"

"Different kind of law," Ringabaugh said. "A man that minds his own business generally keeps from getting hurt, Jack."

"I didn't mean no offense." There was an odd light in Emmett's eyes. "But I don't get it. We're taking the same risks peddling this hooch that we'd take if we were cattle thieves."

"I take what risks I choose to take," Ringabaugh said. "I get prodded into nothing. I'll wreck Ben Gaultt, amigo, but I'll do it in my own way and in my own time. If an Indian wants to buy goods off me, and he's got money to pay for it, then I'll take the profit where I can get it. If the law's in my way, then that makes the law wrong. But stealing's something else again."

"How do you figure to say what law's right and what law's wrong?"

"I've got respect for my own judgment," Ringabaugh answered, and strode abruptly toward his horse. He tightened the cinch and mounted with an easy upswing of his lank body; he trotted forward and stopped beside Emmett and spoke down: "Get the wagon moving. I'll meet you at Dragoon Tanks across the desert sometime tonight."

"Where you going?"

Ringabaugh smiled quietly. "Think back to the remark I made about minding your own business, Jack." He touched the gun at his hip and rode toward distant Iron Springs Valley, feeling the advancing sun hot against his shoulders.

FOUR

IRON SPRINGS RANCH sat up at the head of a long grassy valley centered in a rugged chain of timbered mountains that marched darkly straight south to the nearby Mexican

Border. Fifty thousand acres of grassy round hills provided graze for Gaultt's herds. Here and there a clump of mesquite or paloverde rose above the flowing surface of the grass.

The Springs proper fed a deep basin of water, some two hundred yards across, surrounded by a wide circle of tall cottonwoods and mesquites, creosote, ocotillo, and shrubs. Set on a hill overlooking the Springs was the loose scatter of structures comprising the ranch headquarters. The main building was a two-storied adobe, thick-walled and with small, high windows. It had a good command of the countryside and was a fortress against raiding Apaches who still swept at intervals through this part of Arizona. Around the big house with its galleried veranda and planted shade trees, were scattered the barns and the tackshed and numerous corrals and pens; the creamhouse near the Springs; the cookshack and bunkhouse closer to the main house. The yard was an expanse of earth pounded firm through the years by many hoofs.

Around this yard just now, sweltering in the early afternoon sunlight, the men of Ben Gaultt's crew worked at chores in preparation for the long drive. One man braided rope; another stood by a red-hot forge with tongs and the farrier stood by him, hammering fitted horse shoes onto animals brought up one by one from the corrals. Another man stretched watersoaked hemp rope against a pitching post. Others gathered in scant spots of shade to clean saddles, bridles, and boots with saddlesoap.

In the shadow of the cookshack one young man sat alone, gaunt-cheeked and narrow-eyed, cleaning his two revolvers with ramrod and oiled patches. An older man sat in the tackshed doorway mending his clothes with slow care, the needle rising and falling in his hand.

Down below, visible between buildings on the flats beyond the Springs, was the vast herd. Dust from milling hoofs carried this far and hung silver in the air. Several horsemen circled, riding herd.

Dan Sweet sat hunkered on the steps of the bunkhouse

and regarded the man who stood above him in the shadowed doorway: a tall and sinewy man with a long, dour face and a head of bright red hair. This man had once worked for Sweet on a trail drive up the Nueces; his name was Hank Flood.

Flood was speaking now, in a softly drawling voice that made him sound as though he cared for nothing in the world. "The one by himself cleaning his two guns is Pete Santell. He's young and he's got a good deal to learn—he thinks he's tough and he thinks he's fast with his guns. Watch him."

"I watch everybody," was Sweet's low-voiced answer. He was a massive block crouched in the shade. He turned his glance toward Pete Santell and noticed a young face with a lip curled slightly back, bent attentively over the dismantled guns.

Sweet said, "A two-gun man shouldn't take both guns apart at the same time."

"Just so," agreed Hank Flood in an equally mild tone. "There's a lot of things Pete don't know yet. One of them is when to keep his mouth closed. But he's a good man with a horse—he's a good cavvy wrangler."

"Let him stick to that, then. I don't want any would-be gunfighters doing target practice on the trail. Tell him that."

"Me tell him?"

Sweet glanced up. "You're segundo for this drive."

"Hell," Flood said uncertainly. "You're passing over a man's head. Miles Littlejack ain't going to like that too much."

"Who's Miles Littlejack?"

"Iron Springs foreman," Flood said blandly.

"Is he the man I'm going to have to lick?"

"He's the man you're going to have to lick." Flood's face moved and he added dryly, "If you can."

Sweet only grunted. Flood said, "Ain't it funny, the way a man takes over a foreman's job somewhere and right away he's got to lick somebody to prove he's boss? Happens every time."

"It makes sense," Sweet said. "I wouldn't work for a man who wasn't better than I am."

"Workin' for Ben Gaultt, ain't you?"

Sweet's eyes rose to study Flood's face, but there was nothing there to give away the red-headed man's thoughts. Sweet said, "I'm working for myself. A part of the herd is mine when we reach Dry Fork."

"If we reach Dry Fork."

"We'll do it."

"Sure," Flood said, and changed the subject quickly. "I've been segundo here up to now, and I reckon if we get back from Dry Fork I'll be segundo again. But on this drive you're the boss and it might behoove you to put Miles Littlejack in my place."

"I run my own crew," Sweet said. "It doesn't run me." He stood up from the steps. "Let's have a look at Miles Littlejack."

"That's him bending horseshoes in the smithy."

Sweet nodded and stepped forward. Flood caught up as they advanced and said, "You aim to pick a fight with him?"

"I want this settled before we start the drive."

"Well," Flood observed, "I'm glad I won't be carrying your sores for the next two weeks. Littlejack ain't as tall as you but he's got meat on him. He's slick and he's hard—watch out for his left hand, hey?"

Sweet's thanks for the advice was a swift glance; after that he walked into the shade of the smithy's open front and stood with his arms folded across his wide chest and his head lowered so that he looked out from under his hatbrim at Miles Littlejack.

Beside anyone else, Littlejack would have looked big. Beside Dan Sweet he looked like an average-tall man with a barrel chest. His arms had a girth as great as most men's thighs. He stood by the forge shirtless with sweat making a wax-shine on his torso. His head was bullet-round and when he turned to glance at Sweet, his face was

also round, without visible angles except for the slits of his eyes.

"I'm Dan Sweet."

"So you are," said Miles Littlejack. "And you ain't a man to avoid things."

"No," Sweet agreed. "I want Hank Flood as segundo on this drive. It's your privilege not to like that idea, but make yourself clear. I'll whip you if you want me to."

Littlejack's head rolled back and his laughter echoed strong and hard against the air. "Why," he said, "you're the kind of man that's worth fightin', my bucko. I like me a good fight." Littlejack's head tilted. "D'you?"

"No."

"Then," said Hank Flood at his elbow, in a very mild and dry voice, "I think you picked the wrong job."

Sweet made no answer. Miles Littlejack was still grinning. "Let's move outside away from the horses, my bucko."

Sweet put his back deliberately to Littlejack, walked an even fifteen paces to the exact center of the yard, and turned once more to face the smithy, from which Littlejack was just now emerging after wiping his hands carefully dry on a cloth. Sunlight glistened in ripples on Littlejack's smooth, muscled flesh.

Hank Flood came up, a tall and thin shadow of a man with his hatless brick-red head bright in the day, and Sweet peeled off his shirt and handed it to Flood, revealing thereby the wide flatness of his own powerful, pale body. His chest was massive. Flood stepped away, looking upon the scene with withdrawn, dour interest; and now, already, Sweet saw men dropping tasks around the yard, walking forward to watch what was plainly about to commence.

These riders of the crew formed a loose semicircle well back from Sweet. He stood at the center of its radius, watching Miles Littlejack walk slowly forward. The pleasure on Littlejack's broad face was not sadistic; rather it was the pleasure of a strong man who anticipated activity and success. Littlejack stopped a pace away and extended his hand, open. Sweet studied the man's face, put his own

hand forth and let Littlejack give his hand a strong squeeze. Then he backed up a foot. Littlejack did the same and settled his feet flatly and lifted his guard, and Sweet said to him, "Have at it, Littlejack."

Littlejack advanced, cautious at first, flat-footed. Sweet stood still and when Littlejack was within reach he sent a direct right-hand blow toward Littlejack's ribs, which brought Littlejack's guard down; and immediately drove his left fist against the side of Littlejack's jaw.

Littlejack's flesh was slick with sweat; Sweet's fist slid away. Nonetheless his blow was hard enough to rock Littlejack's head back, and with the opening Sweet swung two powerful hooking blows against Littlejack's midriff, sending a small pair of flat echoes out to slap around the yard.

Littlejack backed off quickly, gaining his balance, standing still a moment with his guard lifted while he studied Sweet. The cowboys standing around in their spectator circle said nothing, but Sweet could feel the pressure of their attention.

"This," said Littlejack, "is going to be fun, boys." And lunged.

Rushing forward, Littlejack's right fist was coming up, and Sweet turned to let it slide past his shoulder. Then he remembered what Hank Flood had said about Littlejack's left. He put part of his attention on it, and when he saw it coming he blocked it with his arm and wheeled away, dancing for balance, and coming around just as Littlejack turned on him.

Littlejack moved forward with canny precision; Sweet stood fast; and for a moment the two of them stood trading blows. The smacking of flesh on flesh slapped like a flat of a cleaver against a side of meat. After a time, during which both men suffered blows through their guards, Sweet realized he would not beat Littlejack this way. He backed up and sidestepped and advanced again to come in toward Littlejack's shifting flank and catch up before Littlejack had time to turn fully around and meet his attack. Sweet had both

hands extended and gained a quick, tight grasp on Littlejack's wrist. It was his intent to wrestle the man and put his own superior weight to advantage, but he had forgotten the sweat-film on Littlejack's flesh. Littlejack twisted easily within his grasp and got in one sharp blow to the ribs before Sweet let go and re-established his guard.

Sweet heard the in-and-out gasps of his own hard breathing and the rasp of Littlejack's. Littlejack's grin was pasted against his teeth and the smell of sweat rose strong and biting. Someone in the circle of onlookers spoke excitedly. Sweet's attention was a cone narrowing upon Miles Littlejack's shifting movement. Their feet stirred eddies of puffy dust; they walked circles around each other and plunged, grappled, and stood locked; they broke apart and slugged it out and backed away. Sweet felt the pain along his ribs and he saw a thin trickle of blood at Littlejack's nose. Littlejack backed up two paces and laughed aloud, and pushed forward once more.

Watching Littlejack's left, he saw it coming and caught it with his open palm and threw a hard counterattack at Littlejack, swinging his own left slugging hard against Littlejack's cheek.

The blow struck solid and Littlejack's head snapped back. Sweet snapped an uppercut, with his shoulders behind it, at the underside of Littlejack's jaw and watched Littlejack fall. He stood over Littlejack with his arms hanging relaxed while Littlejack rolled over and got half way to his feet and sat that way, crouched. He spoke in a small voice that had laughter riding behind it: "My belly hurts. I guess I must be gettin' old, bucko."

"No," Hank Flood said good-naturedly, "you just met a tougher man, Miles."

"So I did," Littlejack said. After a while he stood up, slowly and stiffly, and stood rocking a little on his heels. His grin split his face again and with the back of his hand he wiped blood from his lip. He said, "You trusted me not to jump you by turning your back on me. I liked that. You trusted me when you shook my hand. I liked that, too.

But you licked me—and that's what I really like you for."

"You're not licked by ten miles yet," Sweet said.

"No. I been hurt a lot worse, and won the fight. But I can tell who's going to win this one. No point in bustin' the tar out of both of us just to prove what we both already know."

"Good enough," Sweet said. "You're third, then—under Hank Flood."

"Mister," Littlejack said, "I'd ride drag the whole trip, workin' for you." He dusted himself off and turned back to the smithy, walking with a slight stoop to ease his battered frame.

The respect Sweet saw in the faces around him was enough to tell him the issue was settled. He was accepted as boss. That put one obstacle behind him. The men turned back to their chores—all but one. That was young Santell, the dark-haired hand with two revolvers worn low on his hips. Pete Santell was a young man obviously still threshing around in search of solid ground. His lip was curled in a leer and he said, "I wonder if you're as good with a gun as you are with your fists."

Hank Flood's head snapped around toward him. "That's a small pot to stake your life against, Pete. You'd hate to find out."

"Maybe," Pete said insolently.

Sweet was buttoning up the shirt Flood had handed him. He stopped and his eyes gripped Pete Santell's. After a while Pete's gaze slid away and he turned and walked off with a cocky bounce in his step.

"A nice play," Hank Flood said approvingly. "You don't talk his kind out of anything."

"I know." Sweet finished tucking in his shirt and walked to the water trough by the big barn. He splashed water over his head and scrubbed his face; he replaced his hat and stood up, and he was standing relaxed, with his big shoulders raised and his fingers under the back of his belt, when he caught sight of a figure moving out on the porch of the main house, and he stood wholly still.

Standing on the porch was a tall girl, a girl with hair as glossy black as a crow's wing, falling carelessly over her neck and shoulders. Her lips were full, rich and composed and her eyes gleamed brightly even at this distance. On her full round body she wore a white shirtwaist and long gray skirt and she had a composure that she seemed to dare anyone to break. Her face was lean and her features sharply defined. Her glance traveled across the distance between them and locked with his, level and steady.

Without taking his eyes from her, Sweet said quietly to Hank Flood, "Who's that?"

"Harriet Gaultt."

"Gaultt's daughter?"

"Niece. Her folks died on the trail—Indians. Gaultt brought her out here three years ago. She lives her own life, strictly as she pleases—she stays out of his way and he out of hers. She runs the house and she owns one third of that herd of cows down there, the part that belonged to her folks. She knows the cattle business better than most cowboys. And one other thing—she laughs at men, but she don't smile for them. There's never been a man able to make her smile."

"You're a romantic fool," Sweet muttered. But his eyes had not left the girl's face. She stood motionless on the porch, matching the evenness of his appraisal. Sweet's fists were stiff and sore from the fight with Littlejack. His ribs throbbed a little; he thought of that while he watched the girl.

Flood said, "Forget what you're thinking. She's caked in ice."

"You sound like a man talking from experience."

Flood didn't answer. Harriet Gaultt turned abruptly and went down the porch steps, walking directly across the dusty yard, and spoke immediately to Sweet in a voice rich and full: "Littlejack and Pete Santell. Pretty, Mister—really sweet."

"I am. Dan Sweet."

"I know," said Harriet Gaultt. Her expression was a

little mocking. "Welcome to Iron Springs, Mr. Dan Sweet," she said, and turned away as abruptly as she had come.

Sweet did not move until the girl disappeared into the big barn and, some time later, came out leading a saddled horse, which she mounted with long-limbed gracefulness. She reined around and trotted up to where they stood; she ignored Sweet completely, speaking to Flood: "Tell Cooky to save supper for me if I'm late."

"Where you going?"

Her tone was indifferent. "Riding."

"Listen," Flood said, and hesitated. Sweet noticed the warmth of Flood's eyes, looking upward at the girl. Flood said, "Watch out, will you? Ringabaugh's toughs may be around."

"Oh?" she said in a faraway manner; she wheeled and rode from the yard at a canter.

"You've got calf eyes," Sweet muttered.

"Sure," Flood admitted. "Why not?" He was grinning in a private sort of way, but the levelness of Sweet's expression wiped Flood's private amusement away and he shuffled uncomfortably. He said, by way of clearing the air, "There's a few other things you'll run into maybe you didn't expect."

Sweet regarded him with polite interest. Flood went on: "One's Owen Mingo. Mingo's one of our hands. He got himself a pile of book-learning somewhere and he likes to spout off a lot of big ideas that don't mean much of anything. I keep him on because he's as good on a cutting horse as anybody else. But he talks language I don't understand sometimes, and I'm not too sure I trust him. That's Mingo over there—the gray-headed fella readin' in the shade."

Sweet nodded. "Go on."

"Another one you'll find out about quick enough is Ben Gaultt's boy, Russ. He's twenty-two years old but I'd never believe it by looking at him. If you think Pete Santell's a fool it's because you ain't met Russ Gaultt. Russ is the old man's blind point—either the old man don't know what

Russ is, which is hard to believe, or he lets the kid go right ahead making a fool out of himself and doesn't bother trying to grow the kid up. Maybe he gave up a long time ago. I'm telling you this because Russ will be along on the drive—and so will the girl."

Sweet's attention came down on him. "What?"

"Yeah," Flood breathed. His face was very dour. "I bitched about it, too. I told the old man it wouldn't work and I told Harriet it wouldn't work. Men on a trail drive are bad enough off without having to look at a pretty woman all day long and know that they can't have her. But she won't back down, and if you know her you don't even try talking to her. She owns every third cow down on those flats and she aims to see them get to market."

Sweet shook his head; but he said, "What else?"

"The one other thing you ought to know about is Nate Ringabaugh."

Sweet nodded, recollecting the white-haired man's visit and the threat Ringabaugh had left behind in the air. "What's his part of this?"

"He's an Indian trader," Flood said, dryly. Sweet's glance showed a further spark of interest and Flood added, "No, I don't know as Ringabaugh had anything to do with Tom Graves's killing. I don't even know for sure that he peddles whisky to the Apaches." Flood said it in a way that left no doubt as to his opinion.

"Who's Jack Emmett?"

Flood's glance whipped across him. "So you've met him, too? Well, Emmett's just a shadow for Ringabaugh. He watches Ringabaugh's back. It needs watching."

"What's Ringabaugh got to do with this drive?"

"He don't get along with Gaultt."

"Why?"

"I'm not rightly sure. I've heard different stories."

"What's Gaultt's story?"

"Gaultt says a few years ago he caught Ringabaugh selling a wagonload of whisky to the Chiricahua Apaches. Gaultt took him prisoner and turned him over to the Army.

Ringabaugh got out of the pen a year or two back and last fall, when we tried driving a trail herd to Dry Fork, the herd was stampeded to hell and gone by Indians and we lost a man in the stampede. A couple of the boys swore they saw Ringabaugh with the crowd that did it. We never got any of that herd to market. That's why it's so important to make it through with this one. Since last year's washout, we're pretty slim on rations around here. We can't prove Ringabaugh started that stampede, but it all seems to tie in with him. That's why Gaultt needs a hard man to run this drive—a man as hard as Nate Ringabaugh. That kind of man ain't easy to find. Ringabaugh's as tough as they come."

Sweet grunted. "What connection does Ringabaugh have with Harriet Gaultt?"

"What?" Flood's eyes opened with surprise.

"Forget it," Sweet said.

Flood's grin was not wholly one of humor. "Sure. You get crazy ideas now and then, don't you?" He built a cigarette in his calloused hands and murmured, "This drive's going to be fun to watch. Glad I'm coming along."

"By the time we get to Dry Fork you won't be glad. You'll be dirty and saddlesore and full of a bushel or two of dust grit. You'll be tired to your bones and you'l hate the sight of a cow or a saddle."

"I been on drives before," Flood said gently.

"Just so. But a Texas drive isn't an Arizona drive, Hank. Oil your guns."

FIVE

HARRIET GAULTT'S hair fell about her shoulders, as untamed as the wild energy that blazed in her eyes. In midafternoon she rode beyond the edge of Iron Springs Valley into the mountains; she crossed the foothills at a steady clip and entered the shadowed stillness of mountain pine timber. Once she stopped on top of a summit and looked back,

seeing the copper and white plain roll away to indigo horizons; she inhaled deeply and went on, wearing an open smile that never came to her face except in these solitary moments. Presently she entered a gorge. The canyon walls rose almost sheer, at either side, half-hidden from her by the cool shadows of the massed timber, and its pine smell filled the air.

Her face became almost somber, but the smile still lay in suggestion behind the composure of her long lips; her expression was set in that manner when she reached the head of the verdant canyon and saw a horseman advancing from the rough country beyond, and stopped to wait for him.

Ringabaugh crossed the bald summit and drew rein beside her in the shade of the pine perimeter. For the moment Ringabaugh only sat ramrod stiff in his saddle, watching her unblinkingly; and Harriet felt a small resentment.

She said curtly, "I got your message—here I am. What do you want?"

"To look at you."

Color rose to her cheeks. "And for that you asked me to ride all the way up here? To hell with you, Ringabaugh." She lifted her reins.

Ringabaugh's hand came forward. "Wait." He gigged his horse alongside hers and leaned far enough out of his saddle to grasp her horse's bridle. His head turned and he looked up at her from that tilted position.

"Dismount," he said.

"I'm not afraid of you."

"I don't want you to be afraid of me."

"Then let go my horse."

He made no answer. After a while, holding his glance, she shrugged and dismounted, walking a few paces back into the trees and turning to look at him. "Is this what you want?"

Ringabaugh lifted his leg over the saddlehorn and jumped down. He stood by the two horses looking at her.

Nothing in his eyes inspired fear; she did not see animal lust there, but only a definite interest and some sort of concern.

Harriet said, "I don't have to put up with this."

"No," he agreed. "You don't."

"What do you want, then?"

He shook his head. "In a minute," he murmured. His eyes were steady and a little sad.

"I don't know why I came up here," she said.

"I know why," Ringabaugh said. A faint wind ruffled his white hair. He advanced with long strides and stood with his arms folded and his head lowered, looking up at her from under his eyebrows.

"I wanted to talk to you. I want to warn you not to ride on that Dry Fork trail drive."

She laughed in his face.

"That's a pretty bald confession. Why? What's going to happen to the herd, Ringabaugh?"

"I wouldn't know," he said. "But I'd hate to gamble that it gets to Dry Fork."

"And you brought me all the way up here just to tell me that?"

He started to turn, then faced her once more. "I want to tell you something about Dan Sweet."

Her eyebrows rose. "Go ahead."

She found his hesitation curious. Finally he said, "Now and then you think of me. I see it in your eyes—I know it because you came up here today. Otherwise, you would have ignored my message."

She shook her head. "Get to the point, Ringabaugh."

His eyes mirrored a bitterness that might have had its origins in regret. He said, "Do you ever wonder what makes me stay in this country where everyone knows my past and nobody forgives it?"

"I hadn't thought about it that much."

"One thing keeps me here," he said. "The face of a woman. Your face. Wait—stand still. I don't expect that to mean anything to you. Up to now I've kept to myself out in the hills. Now and then I see you ride by, or in town. I

haven't bothered you because I figured you didn't want to be bothered. Before this I wasn't worried because I knew there wasn't a man within a hundred miles that was worth a second look from you. But then Tom Graves showed up and all it took was one look to tell me he was as good a man as I am."

"So you killed him."

"No. I didn't touch him. I've got an idea who put the knife in Graves's back, but I'll keep my mouth shut until I can prove it." He paused, searching her face, and Harriet nodded. She said to him, "I shouldn't, but I believe you."

"Doesn't make much difference," he said. "Graves is gone. But Dan Sweet isn't. Dan Sweet's the kind of man who can get a second look from you, and a third—if he wants it."

"That worries you?" she said.

"Sure. But not the way you think. I'm worried about you—not about me."

"What does that mean?"

He spoke slowly. "I'm forty years old and I've seen a lot of trails. I know what kind of man I am and I know a lot of things about other men's minds. There are things I can see in Dan Sweet's face that maybe you can't see. He's a damned good man, Harriet—probably a better man than I am. But he's got one weakness that will be fatal to him."

"What weakness?"

"He's too proud. He never learned how to roll with a punch. I'll tell you this much about him, because I've seen it in other men and I see it in him, and I want you to know it. Dan Sweet won't live long. Somebody he steps on will put a bullet in his back like they put a knife in Tom Graves. Sweet hasn't got a chance. He'll break, because he doesn't know how to bend."

"Why tell me this?"

Ringabaugh's cheeks pulled thin. "Because I think it would be a mistake for you to break down that magnificent

wall you've built up, and let Dan Sweet in. You can't hold him. You'll only get hurt. I don't want to see that."

The strange thing was that she believed in his sincerity enough to make no retort at all. She only watched him with silent gravity, her expression inscrutable.

Finally she said quietly, "I wish I'd known you a long time ago, Ringabaugh."

"I've known you a long time."

"And I've never seen you before," she answered. "I've seen an image and a reputation, but I haven't seen you. I didn't know men like you were alive in this world."

"Dan Sweet," he said, "is a man like me. I'm a pariah and he's not; I'm not proud and he is—but we're alike, Sweet and I. And that's what makes me warn you against him. I know what will happen to him."

"I hope," she answered very softly, "that it never comes to a fight between you and Sweet." Confused, she pushed past him to her horse and mounted. She broke away at a canter and threaded the trees, riding with unthinking abandon and never looking back.

SIX

A SOLEMN AIR, almost like a premonition, lay over those at the ranch dinner table while the Indian housemaid came and went, clearing the table. Sitting over coffee, Sweet leaned back in his chair and considered the three faces around the table: Ben Gaultt, Harriet Gaultt, young Russ Gaultt. Russ was as blond as his father and cousin were dark. His face had the unlined stamp of youth and it was, as Hank Flood had suggested, difficult to believe he was out of his teens. His movements were quick with rash impatience; his eyes flamed with a sourceless resentment that struck out against anything in reach. He wore a green shirt of ornamented brocade and a black string necktie and his long blond hair was slicked close to his skull, parted near the middle.

But it was not Russ who held Sweet's attention. Harriet made a point of glancing at him now and then, and made an equal point of looking away in a cool display of indifference. Her lips were heavy enough to be willful; her eyes were mocking. Her black hair shone with little blades of reflected light. There was a full roundness to her upper body and her arms were firm and strong. Once her glance came about to lie against him steadily, but there was no particular expression beyond the suggestion of insolent mockery; she neither moved nor spoke to him.

Ben Gaultt was talking, his short beard chopping up and down with his speech: "Between here and Thomas Wells we should have no trouble. That's two days through open grass country on an easy grade. After that it's fourteen miles across the narrows of the Santa Rita Desert to Dragoon Tanks—and on that sand it will take two, maybe three days."

"A day and a half," Sweet said with imperturbable mildness.

"I've made that drive before," Gaultt replied by way of polite correction.

"I crossed it on my horse, coming here. We'll get across it in a day and a half."

"Very well," Gaultt said, inclining his head. "Past Dragoon Tanks we will be in the mountains and that will be slow going, too. I think it best to cross the Crazy Man at Saterlee's trading post, and strike dead north as far as the knees of the Yellows. We can drive them west through the foothills from there to the Massacre, cross the Massacre at the ford at Spanish Flat, and go up the river as far as the Georges Canyon. Then we'll strike across the desert to the Mogollon, fording the Smoke and going up through Hays Pass. From the top of Hays Pass it's an easy two days across a grass plateau to Dry Fork."

"Is that the route you used last year?"

"We only got as far as the bend of the Smoke. Nate Ringabaugh stampeded the herd there." Sourness tinged Gaultt's words.

"Several weaknesses in the plan," Sweet murmured.

"From the Massacre River to the next water is two full days' drive."

"We made it last year."

"I don't believe in depending on luck. The Apaches are up in force this year and they take a dim view of trail herds crossing their lands. They may take a notion to poison Hatchet Springs. There's no water within a day's drive of there. We'll take less of a chance if we cross the desert from Spanish Flat, which is a matter of twelve hours' trailing, and pick up the Smoke farther down, at Tilghley's Ford—and follow the Smoke to the Mogollon Rim. It's twenty miles longer and the Smoke cuts through some bad country, but as long as the herd has water we'll be in better shape to hold it together."

Gaultt seemed about to offer argument; but after glancing at Harriet he subsided and only said, "As you wish. The herd is in your hands."

Harriet was watching Sweet. "If you think the Indians will try to poison Hatchet Springs against us, what's to prevent them from poisoning Dragoon Tanks, just four days from here?"

"Dragoon Tanks is a flowing-water spring," Sweet said. He matched her businesslike tone. "Poison would wash out of it in an hour. But Hatchet Springs is a stagnant pool fed by a small trickle. Poison lasts for weeks in that kind of water."

Russ Gaultt, who had kept silent up to now, said caustically, in his irritating high-pitched voice, "What makes you so damn sure you can pull the herd through?"

"I'll pull it through," Sweet said.

Ben Gaultt cast a blank look toward his son. Sweet did not wholly understand the indifference Gaultt showed toward his son; but it was not Sweet's affair. Ben Gaultt said, "Nate Ringabaugh and poison springs are only part of our problems. As you said, the Apaches are up—they've raided a number of small outposts and they've wiped out an army detachment. We've got to push through the passes between the Arrowheads and the Yellows, and that country, even if

it isn't technically reservation land, is claimed by the Chiricahua Apaches and they resent passage across it. They may do more than dump poison in waterholes. And there's one other threat we've got to keep in mind. It's the end of August now. Sometimes winter doesn't come to the Mogollon Rim country until October, but sometimes it's early. We're pushing against time. If Hays Pass is snowed in before we get through it, we're done—just three days short of Dry Fork. I'd intended to start the drive five days ago, but Tom Graves disappeared and I had to put my men out hunting for him. When we found him he was dead. We've suffered that delay and it may just be the thing that will break me."

"We'll make it," Sweet said calmly.

Russ's blond head shifted toward him; he saw an angry shine on Russ's smooth face. "I wish I knew what made you so damn sure. I've never liked an arrogant man."

"Maybe that's because you haven't got the capacity to become one," Sweet answered. Seeing that his answer had confused the boy, he smiled a little and stood up. He dipped his head to Gaultt and Harriet and left the room.

He went to the bunkhouse and stood in the doorway, a powerful block in silhouette, until the stillness of his stance brought everyone's attention to him.

"It's eight o'clock," he told them. "Any man who chooses to visit town tonight needn't bother to come back. I don't want any man dragging tail tomorrow."

He swept their blank faces and went on: "We'll head the herd up before daylight and start moving at first light. This will be rough—and if anybody doesn't like the idea, he'd better draw his pay now. I'm not in the habit of dragging men along who don't pull their share. I don't pay for laziness or incompetence and you'll find no pity in me for men who can't keep up."

They watched him with reserved, narrowed eyes. He said quietly, "I want it understood right now that during this drive I am the boss and the only boss. You will take your orders from me, through Hank Flood, and you will

bring your questions to me. Don't accept any orders that contradict my orders. That holds for the Gaultts; don't run to them for help. They haven't the authority to give you help. They're under my orders as much as you until we reach Dry Fork. I want this clearly understood."

A man looked up, a delicate-featured old man with thinning gray hair. Flood had pointed him out today as Owen Mingo. Mingo said in a soft way, "You set yourself up as a dictator?"

"I do."

"What gives you that right?"

"A man has no rights given to him," Sweet said. "What rights he has are rights he's willing to defend. I take what I can hold. If you don't want to work for me on my terms you're free to draw your pay."

"No, I'll stay on," Mingo said. His eyes were yellow. "Someone's got to stick up for the men's wants."

"Let them stick up for their own."

"They deserve a spokesman," Mingo replied.

"A man doesn't deserve a thing he won't fight for by himself," Sweet said, never losing his calm. "I pull my own share and I expect every man to do the same."

Owen Mingo's seamed face was sharp. His eyes were deep yellow and without firm bottom. He sat back on his bunk in the deeper shadow. At that moment Miles Littlejack stood up from the card table and swung to survey the room with hard eyes. Littlejack's thick muscles bulged through the cloth of his shirt. "You boys will quit or obey orders," he said. "I stand behind Mr. Sweet."

"No matter who it hurts?" Owen Mingo said.

"That's right," Littlejack said. "Just remember you'll answer to me, Mingo."

Sweet stepped forward, recognizing looks of uncertain respect and flat dislike on the men's faces. He moved through the room as though unconscious of these men's resentment and he stopped by a bunk where young Pete Santell was spinning one of his two guns in his fist.

Sweet said, "Carry whatever extra weight you want to.

But if I ever catch you firing an unnecessary shot along the trail, I'll tie you to a wagonwheel and lash the shirt off your back." At once he wheeled and left the place.

It was his intent to make a bed in the barn; he did not wish to associate closely with the crew, and beyond that, he wanted to leave them free tonight to air their complaints among themselves without the need of being surreptitious. He wanted, as much as possible, that his power be unquestioned after the herd moved onto the trail.

He stood outside the bunkhouse in cool starlight, hearing someone's boots stamp forward through the bunkhouse, and presently Hank Flood's long figure left the door and closed it gently behind. "I don't reckon they'll trust me either tonight," Flood said, grinning a little. "Listen—keep your eye on Mingo. He means more trouble than a dozen Apache bucks." Flood turned off toward the tackshed.

Sweet moved around the end of the building and walked beyond the edge of the yard to a point from which he had an unobstructed view of the entire herd spread out on the flats. Two nighthawks rode slow circles around the softly lowing cattle. Four thousand steers—a trainload of steaks to feed the Army, to feed the reservation Indians, to feed Midwestern and Eastern cities; four thousand head of surly animals to move across treacherous country, all the while fighting time, fighting weather, fighting Indians, fighting the threat of Nate Ringabaugh and his toughs. Four thousand head of cattle to earn an income for Dan Sweet.

Unquestionably it would be earned.

He was standing on the hill watching the cattle when a lean and supple shape detached itself from the shadow of the main house and came through the night. Harriet Gaultt crossed the grass hillside toward him with sure steps and did not pause before she reached him. "I take it you just gave the men a dressing-down," she said.

"That's right."

"You're pretty tough," she said. "But I noticed that you didn't try to talk me out of going with the drive."

"Would it have done any good?"

"No."

He smiled a little in answer. After a while he said, "I expect you to pull your weight with the crew."

"I'll do my share."

He nodded. Starlight glanced off the girl's sheen of black hair. She said, "Look out for Mingo. He's dangerous."

"Everyone's warning me against Mingo," Sweet said, and shook his head. "Mingo's harmless."

"You're wrong."

"To be dangerous a man must have courage," Sweet said. "Mingo's got none."

"He works in roundabout ways—he doesn't need courage. He's got a kind of slyness to make up for it."

"Perhaps," he said indifferently.

The girl eyed him curiously. "Tom Graves threatened to quit if I didn't stay behind."

"I'm not Tom Graves."

"Meaning you won't quit?"

"Just so," he said. "I don't quit."

"No," she murmured thoughtfully. "I guess you don't. I thought Tom was a friend of yours."

"He was," Sweet said.

"You've just implied he was a quitter."

"I didn't imply it," he said. "You did. Tom wouldn't have carried out that threat to quit."

"I know," she answered. Her lips were pursed a little; her eyes smiled almost insolently.

Sweet watched her steadily. "What's your connection with Nate Ringabaugh?"

If the question startled her, she did not show it. Her attention had been on the herd milling below. Now it came around to him slowly, and she said in a distant way, "What makes you think there's a connection?"

"Something Ringabaugh said."

"I see," she said.

She apparently intended to let the conversation die, but

Sweet revived it. "You don't want to answer my question, then."

"I don't see why I should answer it," she replied. Her smile was wistful. Her eyes flicked him once more and she seemed about to say something else, but she only turned and walked back toward the yard.

SEVEN

DUST ROSE in a high and broad cloud in the wake of the great herd. Men rode coated with a silver-tan film. Those men who rode the drag tied their bandannas across their mouths and noses, but that had little effect to keep the dust out of their nostrils. Their eyelids gritted when they blinked and their skin became so dry that ropes and reins slid through their hands loosely, and the lined-out herd of cattle moved on like a snake flopping its belly over the hills. Horses clattered along with their eyes three-quarters shut. With cattle shuffling here, trotting there, the herd expanded and contracted at intervals along its length. Now and then a wayward steer shot out of the herd, and immediately a cowboy rode after the animal, wheeled around it and drove it efficiently back into the bunch. Calling now and then at the cattle, lazily twirling rope loops or the ends of long reins, men rode beside the herd like flankers by a marching column.

In that manner they traveled the first day, with the grassland lifting them up and down over gentle hills, gradually climbing an easy pitch. Behind them lay a broad trampled trail, dust still suspended over it in a hesitant pall. Swing riders guided the herd's flanks, and the cattle flowed as a slow, liquid mass across the undulations of the land. Pushed by the drag riders and guided by the point riders and pinched by the swing men, the long drive went on. The sun hammered down through the dust against horses, cattle, men and earth. Four thousand cattle northward.

Before sundown they wound into a shallow, wide bowl

of earth and circled the herd to hold it there for the night; it was not wise to push a herd too far or too hard during its first day of travel.

The chuckwagon pulled up on a flat piece of ground surrounded by mesquite and paloverde scrubs. The cook turned his horses over to the wrangler, young Pete Santell, and then opened the wagon's tailgate and began to build his fire nearby. The cook was thin, as though he never ate his own product, and dour. By the time he had his dutch ovens warming in beds of coals and his great pots boiling over the fire, the herd was bedded down and the crew, all but the first-guard nighthawks, were riding in one by one for supper.

Hank Flood dismounted stiffly, unsaddled his horse, put it in Santell's rope corral, and came toward the fire. Flood's red hair was matted dark with sweat and dirt. He dropped his saddle and blanket on the earth, thus choosing a place for his bed, and tossed his hat down; he removed his chaps and gunbelt and left them with the saddle and ran fingers through his damp hair while he watched men ride in, singly and by twos.

Dan Sweet appeared from the rope corral lugging his heavy Texas saddle. Behind him the remuda kicked up a wide puff of dust, horses settling down. Sweet dropped his saddle near Flood's and advanced with no trace at all of the day's wearying work on his face. His shoulders were straight. Flood said to him, "I've got two or three herd leaders picked out. Another day and I'll know the lead steer when I see him. That will make things easier."

Sweet nodded. His glance swept the crew and Flood saw the big man's eyes stop on Russ Gaultt. Sweet said, "He didn't pull his weight today," and turned away, whereupon Flood, knowing exactly what was required of him as segundo, made a path to the point where Russ was spreading his blanket. Flood stood with arms akimbo looking at Russ's dusty blond head and said, "Rake the campground for snakes. Use a shovel."

Russ looked up with dust-cracked eyelids shading his sharply resentful glance. "Why a shovel?"

"To kill snakes."

"Why not a shotgun?"

"No shooting."

"Hell," Russ said. "Who are you to give me orders, Flood?"

"Take orders or go home," Flood said flatly. He turned half around and then remembered one other thing; he paused and spoke over his shoulder: "You'll ride drag until further notice."

He walked away, hearing no reply. A moment later when he looked back he saw the boy in his bright red shirt walking away from the chuckwagon with a shovel and an expression full of malice. A moment later Owen Mingo approached Russ and Flood saw them fall into a conversation. Their glances lifted occasionally and shot across the camp to strike Dan Sweet, and moved on toward Flood. Flood saw Russ's thin lips curl back in a defensive sneer, and then Russ's eyes slid away. Flood frowned, putting the scene back in his mind.

Presently all but two of the nineteen-man crew were gathered around the chuckwagon eating with silent, hearty gusto. Habitual insults passed back and forth between the cook and some of the men. Dan Sweet sat back a distance from the fire, aloof, his back to the bole of a mesquite trunk and his legs bunched under him. All the while Sweet ate, Flood noticed, his gray-eyed, half-shuttered attention surveyed the men of the crew with practiced care, one at a time. Off at one side in the deepening indigo shadows of dusk were the three Gaultts. Russ ate with the shovel leaning against his leg—it seemed a gesture of defiance. Once Flood saw Harriet's even glance travel across the camp to strike Sweet, and pass on insolently. The girl wore Levi's stuffed into her boot-tops and a man's cotton shirt and she was filmed over with dust from head to foot. Nonetheless she could excite a man's hungers and plainly she knew it; equally as plainly she did not care. When her

glance touched him, Flood watched hopefully for a break in her expression, but it did not come; she swept past him as though he were not there. Flood was accustomed to this, yet it hurt him. He wondered what it would take to break the girl's implacable, ironbound reserve.

After a short time Ben Gaultt got up to scrape his plate and turn it over to the cook, and thereafter stood like a granite block with his arms folded, looking over the hats of the hunkered-down men toward the herd. Moan-lowing came across the field in a series of rising and falling murmurs. The nighthawks on horseback were tall ghostly suggestions in the falling dark. The big campfire leaped up and down with yellow spurts and balls of smoke. Flood put his plate away and squatted near Sweet, rolling a cigarette, and shortly thereafter Ben Gaultt came up with his second cup of coffee and crouched down, making a small triangle with Sweet and Flood. Ben Gaultt said, "A clean start. You know your business, my friend."

"I do," said Sweet.

"That's why I hired you," Gaultt said. He rubbed his beard with one hand and gestured with the cup of coffee. "Some of the boys are a little stiff, reared-up so to speak. What did you tell them last night?"

"I told them to obey my orders," Sweet said. His quiet voice laid no particular emphasis across his words. "I'll tell you the same thing."

"Me?"

"On the trail I'm in command. I don't want a situation set up where the men can run crying to you or anyone else. One man gives orders. I'm that man."

Gaultt's enigmatic glance came around to Flood, as though seeking confirmation. Flood said nothing. Gaultt sipped coffee and sat down lower, crosslegged, and after a moment lifted a cigar from his vest pocket, bit off the end and spat it out. Flood glanced across the camp and happened to see big Miles Littlejack standing with his legs spread, bent over with his hands on his knees and his attention on the ground before him. It seemed to be an

anthill. Littlejack worked his jaws and spat mightily and then straightened, grinning, coming back toward the fire. "Got four of the little buzzards," Littlejack said with satisfaction, and sat down beside Owen Mingo.

Ben Gaultt straightened out his legs and lay propped up on his elbows. His head tilted back until he was looking at the sky directly overhead. "They tell me you whipped Miles yesterday. You don't seem battered. That makes you a pretty hard fighter."

Sweet made no reply. Flood smiled a little in recollection.

Ben Gaultt said musingly, "I remember a hard man I knew in Texas once. Worked on my old man's outfit. Supposedly he was a wrangler but what my old man really hired him for was to take care of moonlighters—rustlers. There was a good deal of cattle thievery going on down there then, in the thickets. This fella was just about as tough as he said he was, too. He was the kind of man who'd make a quick decision and stick to it till the day he died."

"Sometimes," Dan Sweet murmured, "a man has to do that."

"Maybe," Gaultt said. "But one day this gent made a bad decision. I remember his name—Trevo. Trevo decided a young fella named MacAviney was one of the rustlers. Well, maybe he was. I'm not sure enough to say. But Trevo, this hand of ours, he caught MacAviney on our grass one night, riding along alone, and hanged him to a tree."

"Quick justice," Hank Flood observed.

"Sure," Gaultt said. "Texas justice. Well, it seems that the next day young MacAviney's folks came by and made it known to us that if we didn't fire Trevo, they'd shoot him down next time they saw him. My old man didn't fire Trevo, though—my old man trusted him. And Trevo seemed tough enough to take care of himself."

Gaultt tapped ash from his cigar and let out a long breath. "Trevo was wrong. Four of them ganged up on him and lynched him."

"Think of that," murmured Flood.

Sweet's face turned toward Gaultt. "I don't like a man

who talks in circles," he said. "Are you trying to give me a warning?"

"No," Gaultt said. "Just something to think about." The end of his cigar was a red button in the night; firelight washed his face faintly. "I remember a time I went into a saloon in Waco with half a dozen of my friends and we got in a fight with a crew from over the other side of the river. We licked the tar out of 'em and tore the saloon to shreds. I still wear a scar from it. That was fun." Gaultt stood up, tapping sparks from the cigar. "I wonder whatever happened to those days," he muttered, and walked away.

Soon after that, finding no conversation in Dan Sweet, Flood also crossed the camp, stopping for a last cup of coffee at the fire and then swinging about. He was ready to give out orders to the crew for the nighthawk shifts, but then he noticed a studied shape standing in the dim stillness beyond the chuckwagon, and something prompted him to go that way, toward Harriet Gaultt.

Ben Gaultt's talk had instilled in Flood a faint feeling of nostalgia and now, walking with ambling stride through the night, he felt strongly content and healthily lazy, for no particular reason he could name. He rounded the wagon and stood within a few feet of the girl, not looking at her but looking out at the dark shadow-mass of the herd. Harriet stood with her back straight and her head thrown back.

Flood talked as though she were a completely impersonal receptacle for his observations: "I've been pushing cows from one spot to another ever since I was three feet high. Sometimes I wonder what the hell I'm doing it for."

"What else would you do?" Harriet said, not looking toward him.

"I don't know."

"You're helping to produce something," she said. "You can be proud of that much."

"Proud?" he asked, and frowned. "What of?"

"You're a good man, Hank," she murmured, and walked past him, pausing to touch his arm and glance up into his

face. There was no expression on her face. Starlight washed her features. Yet the sight of her direct glance stirred Flood and he was still standing there when the girl disappeared around the wagon.

Flood's lips moved, forming silent words: "I wish she was mine—damn, what am I doing on this trail? A cowboy's got no future." For a while he remained motionless, staring at the drifting nighthawks on guard, with all the questions of his life massing together into puzzlement inside him. Then he turned back and went toward the fire.

Dan Sweet sat comfortably against the bole of the tree with his long, powerful legs stretched out before him. Lazily, he watched the crew turn in and listened to Hank Flood giving orders for the night guard shifts. Young Pete Santell walked in bowlegged from the remuda and ate his late meal in silence. Once Pete's eyes, squinted and biting with impersonal anger, came up and struck Sweet and lay on him a moment before passing on. When Pete walked away from the chuckwagon he rested his hands on the butts of his two revolvers.

The dark of night grew deep and when the crew had settled down in blankets and the cook had his dishes washed and the fire was a dying red glow, Sweet was still in the same pose lying against the tree, smoking a cigarette and devoting his thoughts to the long trail ahead.

There was an enigma in Nate Ringabaugh, who had struck him as a tough man, a worthwhile man—if a little cynical—whom circumstance had made an enemy. There were few enough men in this world worthy of admiration, and Sweet felt that possibly Nate Ringabaugh was one of those men. He wondered where Ringabaugh was tonight.

With everyone turned in and the camp quite still, Sweet saw a strange thing: he saw one man, young Russ Gaultt, rise almost stealthily from his blankets, put on his hat and boots and gunbelt, and walk without spurs away from camp toward the rope corral, lugging his saddle. Ten minutes later Sweet heard the clop of a horse's hoofs com-

ing away from the remuda and on that sign he rose and walked toward the sound.

Russ's horse came up and Sweet held out his hand.

Russ seemed startled. He reined in sharply and sat in mute uncertainty until Sweet said dryly, "Not tired enough to sleep?"

"Something like that."

"I see."

"Thought I'd scout the trail up ahead," Russ said.

"Kind of you," Sweet observed.

"Well, damn it, I got a stake in this herd too, don't I?"

"If you say so. You're riding drag tomorrow."

"I know." Russ seemed to be holding back a great many things. His tone was almost lifeless.

"You'll be tired enough tomorrow night," Sweet said. "I'll do my own trail-scouting. Get some sleep."

"I can't," Russ said quickly. He lifted his hat and showed the disorder of his matted blond hair. He swept his sleeve across his forehead and talked in a subdued rush. "Look—I've got something to think out. I just want to ride out awhile and think. I'll do my share of the work."

Something was odd here, but for the moment Sweet decided to let it pass. He nodded brusquely and turned back to his bed, hearing the horse start up and walk away behind him. Funny, he thought; he put his head back against his saddle and then remembered to take off his boots, and so he sat up to tug them off. He was lying back again when a high, narrow shape advanced from the darkness. That was Hank Flood, and Flood hesitated a minute, then hunkered down. Flood's face was in full shadow but the set of his head and shoulders told Sweet he was frowning.

Flood said, "Was that Russ?"

"Yes."

"Strange thing there," Flood said. "Russ has a habit of going off in the middle of the night. Never lets anyone know where he's going, never tells anyone where he's been."

"He said he had something on his mind."

"Maybe," Flood murmured. "Maybe." His head turned. "I don't trust him."

"Would he sell out his own father's outfit?" Sweet said.

"I guess not," Flood answered. "Still—"

"Don't let him slack off," Sweet told him.

"I'll work the pants off him," Flood said. "It will do me good to see honest sweat on that kid. Listen, it might be a good idea in the morning to cut out the lame steers before we start. This is still Iron Springs grass and we can leave them here."

"No. Cut them out of the herd once we get under way. We're in no game to be wasting time. I want this herd lined out on the trail by five o'clock—I want to make Thomas Wells at the edge of the desert by early afternoon."

"You want a lot, don't you?"

"Is that wrong?"

"You're a damned optimist," Flood muttered. "I figured to make night camp at Thomas Wells."

"We'll water them there and push a few miles out into the desert. Night after tomorrow we'll camp at Dragoon Tanks across the desert."

"That's pushin'," Flood said.

"I know what a man's limits are, and what a herd's limits are. I don't go beyond those points."

"Hell," Flood disagreed, "you'll run every ounce of tallow off them."

"We seem to have the choice between a few pounds of fat and four thousand head of cattle. I want to beat the first snow to Hays Pass—and I suspect we don't have much more than three weeks to do it."

"Where'd you get that information?"

"A hunch."

"Hunches have sources."

"Probably," Sweet agreed.

"All right. It's your outfit to run. I'll roust the boys out before four. When this drive's over I'm going to sleep a week straight through." He lifted his lean frame to its full

height and turned away, stopping by the fire to toss a log on the coals. Sweet lay back, tipped his hat forward over his eyes and made himself sleep.

EIGHT

IT WAS STEADY, driving work to cut out the lame steers from the herd on the move; and it became an even more wearying job to keep the herd moving after a brief taste of water at Thomas Wells in the hot afternoon. There was no instant when a cowboy was allowed to stop and relax. There was always another steer to put back, another space to clear at the rim of the tank, another ornery critter to chase through the brush. It was four o'clock before the long herd lined out northward into the wastes of the Santa Rita Desert.

Sweet judged the cattle with care. He sat his lathered horse by the passing herd and decided it would not harm the cattle to keep on the move an hour after dark. Having decided, he trotted around to the cavvy, handed his reins to Pete Santell, and picked out a fresh horse for the remainder of the afternoon.

That night when they made camp Sweet heard quiet quarreling talk run around the camp, grumbling. Ben Gaultt gave him an uncertain look and he caught the guarded flash of Harriet's eyes, but no one spoke to him that night except Hank Flood, who only came by for the following day's orders.

"Keep pushing," Sweet said to him. "I want to shove across the sand narrows to Dragoon Tanks by nightfall." And Flood gave him a look which said he had better be sure of what he was doing; but Flood said nothing, and the camp settled down into a silence that clearly had its back up. The men were beginning to feel the edge of Dan Sweet's driving energy.

At dawn the drive was moving, a massive herd stretched out in a long line. Loose sand made hard going for horses

and cattle alike. The advance was slow and the stink of men's sweat mingled with the thickness of risen dust. In the late afternoon, with no break in the pace, the cattle smelled water ahead and then their rate of travel quickened. And at the exact moment when the last red rim of the sun disappeared over a mountain notch westward, the lead steer reached the edge of Dragoon Tanks, which was a wide series of pools sunk in the course of an underground river.

"Water them," Sweet said, "and bunch them on the grass up on that hill. Double the nighthawks—this is the fringe of Chiricahua country."

After the meal, consumed in a charged silence that Sweet could not miss, the men rolled in, bone-weary, and Miles Littlejack sat by the fire honking unsuccessfully on a harmonica. Uphill around the massed herd the nighthawks rode slowly, singing their quiet songs. A thin rind of new moon was up but not enough to cut the velvet black of the night. Not a single cloud showed on the curve of the sky.

Hank Flood came over to Sweet and said, "You can't hear it, but they're mad."

"I can hear it," Sweet murmured, listening to the camp's silence.

"They may bust up soon. Nobody's ever pushed them like this."

"Are you complaining?"

"No," Flood said with a faint grin. "I've been over the trail with you before, remember? But a lot of these boys ain't used to a driving man like you."

"They'll get used to me," Sweet answered drowsily. "We'll move at dawn again. This is close to Apache country—you'd better post an extra man on a high point of ground. Change the guards at three-hour intervals and pick men you can trust to stay awake."

"The rate we're going," Flood said with polite dryness, "there won't be a man like that in camp in another day."

"Then you and I will take the watch."

"I'll put Littlejack and Pete Santell and Idaho on tonight."

Sweet nodded. "In the morning we'll water the herd again before we head them up. The next good water is a day's drive from here."

"A hard day's drive," Flood said. "Last year we didn't make it in one day."

"Don't talk to me about last year," Sweet chided him gently.

"Sure." Flood turned away, his dissatisfaction plain, and went toward Miles Littlejack. Littlejack's harmonica stopped whining and Littlejack listened to Flood talk for a moment, then turned and strode uphill with his rifle. Ben Gaultt, who all the while had been near Sweet, came up and stood flat-footed with the expression of a man who had mulled a problem at length and had come to a definite decision.

"It won't do," Gaultt said. "You're driving the men beyond their capacity, Sweet."

"No one's complained to me."

"They have to me. They're afraid to talk to you."

"Then let them suffer," Sweet said calmly. "No one forced them to come on this drive."

"They're loyal men," Gaultt answered. "But they don't all have the constitution of an ox, like you do. Look at Mingo—he's not a youngster."

"Then he should get himself another job. My job is to get this herd to market. I'm doing it. It won't profit you or me to coddle these men. They've been cowboys all their lives—they know the life they've chosen. They didn't pick it for ease."

Gaultt watched him steadily. In the dim light, Gaultt's heavy black beard jutted resolutely and his chunky body held a stance of stubborn argument. "You're crushing them, Sweet. I'm talking for your own benefit—don't you push them too far."

"Are you afraid of something like a mutiny?"

"If you keep on this way, the idea's not too far-fetched, is it?"

"Then let it come," Sweet replied. "But let them do their own arguing. They've got tongues—they don't need anyone to speak for them."

"I took it on myself," Gaultt said. "Nobody asked me. It's in the best interests of this venture that we keep the men in shape. They'll be no good for trailing or anything else if they're worn down to the nub."

"You have a poor opinion of how much a man can take. I'm not pushing them beyond their limits."

Gaultt rammed his hands into his pockets. "Damn it, Sweet—"

"Either I'm bossing this drive," Sweet interrupted quietly, "or I'm not. Which is it, Gaultt?"

Gaultt watched him. Anger bubbled beneath his glance but presently he shook his burly head and turned away.

A horse drummed up from the herd and stopped at the roped-in remuda. A few minutes later its rider, Harriet Gaultt, walked toward camp carrying her small saddle over her shoulder by the horn, cowboy-fashion. She stopped by Sweet and let her saddle down, looking at him with a speculative glance.

"I just made a rough tally of the herd," she said.

"Rough?" he said. "You were at it two hours."

She smiled. "So you noticed, after all."

"It's my job to notice everything."

Her head tilted; she said quizzically, "Why do you pretend to be so callous, Sweet?" And then she shifted back to her original subject. "I counted about forty-two hundred head. How many do you think we'll get to Dry Fork?"

"As many as we can."

"Why, mister—where's your confidence?"

He smiled. "Some things a man can't predict. But I'll get this herd through."

"If you stay alive long enough."

He looked at her cold, beautiful face and smiled again. "Ever since I agreed to boss this herd, I've received one

roundabout warning after another. Why don't you think I'll get through alive?"

"Odds," she answered quietly. "Big ones."

"Well," he observed, "I've been threatened with Chiricahua Apaches and White Mountain Apaches and Nate Ringabaugh and Pete Santell and Owen Mingo. Which one are you talking about?"

Instead of answering, she made her own observation. "You seem to find your enemies fast enough."

"I like to know who I'm going to have to fight."

"Sure," she said. "Well, Sweet, you know more about Apaches than I do. As for Nate Ringabaugh, I don't think you have to fear him as much as you may think. Pete—hell, anybody can see what Pete is. And Owen Mingo—Mingo's just a man padding around like a dog waiting for scraps. He's got some mean little notions wrapped up in his head. But you haven't found your real enemies yet."

"No?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you that."

Sweet felt the bite of the night air; a taut, dry anger lay around him like an aura, anger against the unseen menace that laughed at him and threatened him without ever showing its face. He had bought into more than he had expected—that much was clear.

The night condensed around him and faint moonlight fell softly on the girl's upturned face. Her eyes lay on him deliberately—she seemed alert to every little change in his expression. Over the dragging stillness he suddenly remembered a woman in San Francisco, thought of her face and voice and then forgot her.

He said to Harriet Gaultt, "What's between your uncle and Nate Ringabaugh?"

"I don't know." The statement was plain and, he decided, honest. She said, "All I know is that it goes back a long way, to Texas and the War."

"Ringabaugh couldn't have been more than twenty then."

"That's right," she answered. Her quiet stare disturbed him; it was a look that went far beyond the idle talk she

made. Finally the girl broke the long silence by saying softly, "It's odd—a man warned me to be on guard against you, Sweet. He was right."

"Why?"

She shook her head and turned away. She picked up her saddle, gave him one more uncertain look, ruffled by something kept secret in her mind and went away.

He stood and built a cigarette and reflected that Harriet Gaultt was a woman who worked like a man and talked like a man, and yet had the power to stir him as no other woman had done in a long time. Her rough façade was a defense. In his brief encounters with her he had observed that always she used great care to guard her secrets, and he wondered just what those secrets were. There was a current of mystery underlying these days that he did not fully understand. Some dark truth hidden somewhere in the past enfolded a great many of these people: the three Gaultts, Nate Ringabaugh, and perhaps Owen Mingo. He could conjecture but he could not know. And so, all he could do was to face each day as it came and fight through to the end of it. But he knew that these first days had been in the nature of a lull. Soon someone would light a fuse—and he did not know from which direction the explosion would come. But there was one thing, as he looked across the camp at a figure settling down in blankets, that Dan Sweet knew with sudden certainty:

He wanted Harriet Gaultt.

NINE

JACK EMMETT traveled with great care through these mountains. He had good reason to ride with caution.

These were the 1870's and in Arizona thus far the Army was no match for the Apache. Where the blue-clad pony soldier was armed with an archaic single-shot Springfield carbine, the Apache like as not owned a new repeating Winchester; where the soldier was weighted down with

McClellan saddle and blankets and gear and wagons and artillery, the Apache carried only himself; his horse was bareback and his clothing now in summer was only a breechcloth, and he lived off the land. Overnight an Apache band could travel eighty miles. In that time the Army patrol might, with luck, cross fifteen or twenty miles of jagged country. And, of course, the Apaches vastly outnumbered the troopers.

There were Jicarilla Apaches and Chiricahua Apaches and White Mountain Apaches and Mescalero Apaches and a few other smaller tribes, but Emmett wasn't troubled by most of them. The Jicarillas were too far north and the Mescaleros too far east, and most of the others were on the reservations at San Carlos or Fort Apache. What Emmett had to worry about were the bucks under Geronimo and Nachez and Mangus—a few hundred angry, roving renegades who would have no mercy on Jack Emmett if they crossed his path, even though from time to time he had traded with them.

Emmett knew how and when to trust an Indian, and now was not a time for trust. He was in Chiricahua country without license; he had to cover his trail and keep constant watch on the horizons.

Emmett was a grossly fat man with beady eyes; he sat his horse with slack limpness and his mind traveled intricately through dark labyrinths of private, secret anger. Now he crossed a barren hump of land and rode down through a meadow strewn with fist-sized rocks. There he paused half-way down the hill to peer narrowly ahead into the shadows of a marching line of stunted trees that followed the course of a trickling stream. Nothing stirred. He felt unsafe, but this was a habitual feeling; he touched spurs to his horse and trotted loosely forward into the trees.

After another careful survey, he watered the horse and turned downstream and, just after nightfall, came to a narrow notch. The river traveled through this notch and the two mastlike rocks enclosing it formed landmarks easily vis-

isble for miles. Here Emmett stepped down near the water, keeping his horse's reins at hand. He had a swallow of whisky from a bottle in his saddlebags, turned a full circle on his heels to investigate the dim shadows around him, and settled down on his haunches to wait, tilting back his sweat-stained hat.

At this point of rock he was some twenty miles due north of Dragoon Tanks. He guessed that the Iron Springs herd was somewhere within five miles of this spot. He considered building a cigarette, but turned down the notion as too risky. And so, while the night grew darker and cooler, he sat motionless, a lump of a man hunkered down with his rifle in one thick hand and his whisky bottle in the other.

The creek trickled with a soft gurgle; wind hummed quietly in the trees and then, after a long time, he saw a stub-antlered antelope drift down to the bank a hundred yards upstream and lower its head to drink. Emmett did not move. The antelope drank, then lifted its head alertly, turning it from side to side as if keening the air for signs of imminent danger. Then, abruptly, the antelope wheeled and ran humping away, the signal spots of alarm showing white on its rump.

That was a signal not to be ignored. Something had spooked the antelope. Emmett put his bottle down quietly and grasped the rifle in both hands, peering intensely through the dark. Moonlight fell softly shining on the earth and in that uncertain light he saw, presently, a moving object coming forward through the notch toward him—a man on horseback.

Unable to recognize the man at this distance, Emmett sat perfectly still while the rider came forward, emerged from the notch and stopped. The rider's hand lifted and swept off his hat; the rider mopped his brow with a sleeve, and the matted, straw-yellow hair identified the man for Emmett. That was Russ Gaultt.

Reassured, Emmett stood up and said conversationally, "Over here—over here."

"Emmett?"

"That's right."

Russ Gaultt put his horse forward cautiously and in time dismounted next to Emmett. "I been looking for you for three nights. Where in hell have you been?" Gaultt complained.

"Couldn't get away from Ringabaugh's camp," Emmett said. "Don't worry about it."

Russ watched him with troubled impatience. "That's easy for you to say. What if my old man finds out too soon? What if something goes wrong? I'm caught right in the middle of the Iron Springs camp, while you're out here, free in the woods. Don't tell me not to worry."

"Nobody's going to find out about what we're up to," Emmett said gently. Then he added, with sly amusement, "Not unless somebody talks."

Russ's head shot up; he said in a tone laced with anger and panic, "You open your mouth and so help me, I'll kill you, Emmett."

"Easy," Emmett murmured. "Would I bite the hand that feeds me?" His fat lips spread into a smile, but the smile disappeared quickly. "I figured I'd better warn you about something."

"Warn me?"

"Keep your damn voice down," Emmett snarled. "You know how far sound carries in these hills?"

"All right—all right. What have you got to warn me about?"

"Ringabaugh."

"Ringabaugh?"

"Yeah," Emmett said dryly. "I think maybe his feet are getting cold."

"What's that mean?"

"I don't know," Emmett admitted. "Ringabaugh don't know about you and me."

"I know. What of it?"

"I figured he had it in for your old man."

"He does," Russ said.

"Maybe," Emmett replied. "But he's been acting strange lately. Listen, what's between him and your old man?"

"I don't know," Russ said. "Something a long time ago. He never talks about it."

"Neither does Ringabaugh. But I'd feel a lot surer of where we stand if I knew what was going on inside Ringabaugh's head."

"You've worked for him long enough," Russ said. "You ought to be able to figure him out by now."

"I ought to," Emmett said. "But I can't. I thought we could count on him to help us break your old man's outfit. Now I ain't so sure."

"Why?"

"It's like Ringabaugh just went to a prayer meeting or something," Emmett said. He crouched down, picked up his bottle and had a swallow. "All of a sudden he says he wants no rough stuff. He told us not to meddle with Dan Sweet and not to meddle with that girl, your cousin. I wish I knew what was going on. But we can't count on Ringabaugh any more. It's up to you and me now."

Russ turned a restless semicircle, walking around with his hands rammed in his pockets and his head bowed in thought. "Can you get in touch with one of the Apache chiefs?"

"Maybe. But I won't risk my hair to do it."

"Maybe we can use them. If we offer the Apaches a good herd of fat cattle, it might be they'll jump at the chance."

"Sure," Emmett said. After a moment he observed, "You seem to be cutting your own throat, kid. Ever think of that?"

"Break the old man," Russ answered with almost feverish energy, "and I'll have the ranch. I can build it up again."

"Don't be too sure," Emmett muttered and lapsed into silence.

"My old man treated me like a piece of furniture ever since I was born," Russ said tightly. "I don't think he's ever

noticed I was around. Lots of times he pretends I'm not even there. I can't take any more of that."

"Maybe he's got a reason to ignore you," Emmett suggested.

"What reason?"

"Beats the hell out of me. Maybe Ringabaugh knows the answer."

"How would he know?"

"I get the feeling," Emmett said quietly, "that Ringabaugh knows a lot of things about Ben Gaultt."

"Aagh," Russ said impatiently, dismissing it. "Listen—see what you can do with the Apaches. I'll meet you three nights from now at Six Falls, near Spanish Flat."

"All right," Emmett said imperturbably, and turned to his horse.

Harriet Gaultt was in her blankets, still awake, when she saw her cousin Russ carry his saddle from the roped-in horse herd. She frowned at that, wondering where he had been. Russ did a lot of riding at night and it troubled Harriet but there had never been any closeness between them and she did not feel that she could ask him. She had decided long ago that Russ was a strange one. Dark streaks ran through his thoughts, setting him apart from the others of the Gaultt family; he was unlike any of them. Unsteady restlessness was his plainest characteristic. Beyond that she was unsure of him, and that was an odd thing, for usually Harriet was an accurate judge of men.

Across the camp Russ settled down for the night, speaking to no one. The camp was dead quiet. The faint clop of cattle and horses' hoofs out at the herd was distinct in her ears and up on top of a small bluff she saw the silhouette of a man on guard with a rifle—Dan Sweet, taking his turn at the post.

Harriet kept her eyes on that blocky outline until the whisper of quiet talk drew her attention. She turned her head and saw two men deep in conversation near the fire: Owen Mingo and young Pete Santell. Young Pete seemed

excited and angry. His arms churned with impatient energy to emphasize his talk. Sight of that troubled Harriet and she was still frowning when Mingo stood up, paused to say some final word to Pete, and walked forward stooping. She had not yet decided whether Mingo's stoop was a result of age, of hard work, or just an act.

When he passed close on his way to his blankets, Harriet rose on an elbow and said softly, "Mingo."

He halted obediently. "Yes, ma'am."

"Sit down."

Mingo crouched down, his wrists dangling over his knees, and regarded her with his habitual ironic amusement—a look that had disturbed her before and disturbed her now.

She said, "I should think you'd value your sleep."

"The boy needed someone to talk to."

"Sure he did," she breathed. "Who do you think you're fooling, Mingo?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You've got something up your sleeve," she said. "For a long time now you've been firing Pete Santell up. What are you doing to him, Mingo? Encouraging him to pick a fight with Dan Sweet?"

"Now, Miss Gaultt," Mingo said in a wind-soft voice. "You know better than that. Pete has a good many good qualities that most men are too impatient to cultivate. But I see the seed of good in him, and I'm willing to help him when I can. Is that wrong? As for encouraging him to pick a fight with Sweet, you're wrong there. Pete wouldn't stand a chance against Sweet."

"That's right," she said. "He wouldn't."

"Then why would I want to encourage him?"

"To provoke an incident," she said. "You don't like Dan Sweet, do you, Mingo?"

"I expect," he answered dryly, "that I still have the right to dislike a man now and then. Is that all, Miss Gaultt?"

"No." Her chin was propped in her hand and, looking up into his face, she felt distinctly the ironic hostility of

his mock-obedient look. She said, "What's your game, Mingo?"

"What do you mean?" The amused tiny upturn of his lip corner seemed more and more like a smirk.

"I mean there's something on your mind. I want to know what it is."

"Why?"

"Because," she said frankly, "I think it might be something dangerous."

"Dangerous to whom, Miss Gaultt?"

"That's something else I want to know," she replied evenly.

Mingo's lips pursed and he squinted a little, changing the angles of his face, making the seamy lines of age stand out more clearly in the soft half-light. He said, "You own part of this herd we're trailing. That puts a wall up between us. I didn't inherit two thousand head of cattle, Miss Gaultt."

"Neither did I," she answered. She felt anger, but kept her voice low and calm. "I inherited a couple of hundred scrawny beeves and since then I've worked harder than most of the men on this crew, Mingo. I've made something out of it—I've earned it. How old are you, Mingo?"

"Ah," he breathed, and his bleak eyes showed hints of secrets buried in despair. "I'm a thousand years old, ma'am."

"And nothing to show for it," she said, not unkindly. "Is that my fault, Mingo? I'm half your age and I own a cattle herd—and you own nothing. But don't blame me for that. Look inside yourself, Mingo. You're a shrewd man."

"I thank you for that," he said drily. Then his lips formed into his withdrawn smile of habitual secret amusement. "There'll come a day, Miss Gaultt, when men like me won't be pushed back at every step. Do you think we like toiling up a long, hard sweat all day every day, just for the privilege of making thirty-five dollars a month and found?"

"So that's it," she said.

"A man deserves a day's pay for a day's work."

"That he does," she answered. "I didn't ask you to take this job, Mingo. Neither did anyone else. You can quit whenever you want."

"Quit—and starve?"

"That depends on your own abilities," she said. "Don't blame a man just because he's better than you."

Mingo shook his head. "I have yet to meet a man," he murmured very tautly, "who is better than I, Miss Gaultt." Thereupon he rose stiffly and turned off toward his blankets, leaving Harriet more concerned than she had been before.

His last statement frightened her. Mingo was sincere—she had learned that much, despite his shell of irony—and Mingo was blind; and it was that combination of blindness and sincerity that made Mingo so dangerous. Mingo really believed that the world owed him a living. That was the premise underlying his whole system of thinking, and it was, Harriet knew, a bad premise. Mingo was a sad and bitter man because he had not learned that each man had to fight his own battle against the world; he had not learned that the greatest joy of life was in fighting that battle. Happiness was not a right—it was a reward that had to be earned. Mingo's mistake lay in blaming others or the world for what he had not earned.

She lay back and stared up at the night, and presently her head turned to one side so that she was looking up the hill toward the crouching, granite figure on guard high up on the bluff—Dan Sweet, with his rifle pointing into the air, ever vigilant, ever a fighter. There was a man who had tasted the real joy of life. She lay that way, her thoughts a little confused, with her drowsy glance on Dan Sweet's distant silhouette, until at last she slept.

TEN

INDIGO SPLASHES swept the sky. The red glow of dawn had not yet begun in the east but the camp stirred. Rattles and clanking sounded from the chuckwagon and the creak of

saddle leather and the jingle of bit chains traveled the air, the crew saddling up.

Sweet came down the hill with his rifle and said to Hank Flood, "No sign of Apache yet."

"Maybe we'll be lucky."

"Don't count on luck," Sweet answered, and joined the chuckwagon line for his breakfast.

No one spoke to him, and as long as he remained near the crew they did not talk among themselves. Now and then he caught a guarded, hostile glance probing him. They did not like being pushed. In a way that was good, for a man who was angry was a man who was on his toes. Sweet's gray eyes moved slowly from man to man, and presently he was satisfied; he saw their hostility and their weariness but he knew that none of them was anywhere near breaking. If the time came when he saw danger signals in their glances, he would slack up. He had no interest in destroying men. But it was his job to get the greatest efficiency out of each of them, and so he kept pushing.

With the quick breakfast over, he said, "Mount up."

That was when he saw it coming; and he saw it as a put-up thing, not a spontaneous eruption of anger. A moment before, Pete Santell had been across the camp deep in conversation with old Owen Mingo—and now Santell was coming forward with a belligerent scowl, his hands swinging near his matched guns. Santell stopped precisely two paces away and stood flat-footed, glaring at Sweet in a stubborn anger that nobody could possibly miss. It was obviously the start of a game that was as old as life itself. Sweet had seen it many a time; he had a distaste for it but at the same time he held a whetted respect for it. All around him he heard, like a quick intake of breath, the sudden complete stillness as the men of the crew all stopped in mid-action to watch this.

Rage lay tight upon Pete Santell's face. His hands opened and closed rhythmically. Behind Santell, Sweet saw the pull of excitement on the men's faces. Sweet kept his eyes

leveled against Santell while he spoke to the men, his voice precise and hard:

"I said mount up. All of you."

"No," Santell said quickly. His head jerked back. "I guess not." His breathing quickened and his mouth curled back from his teeth in a strange, tense smile.

He said, "We've had about enough, Sweet."

"Speak for yourself," Sweet told him evenly.

"All right. *I've* had enough. Nobody likes to be walked on, Sweet. I figure I've got a bone to pick with you. So does everybody else in this camp. But I'm the one with the guts, so I'm the one that's doing it."

Guts. All right, Pete had guts. He had courage, but no convictions to go with it. Sweet's attention, like a cone, narrowed down so that his senses shut out all that was unimportant, and what had been a crowd of silent men became now, for him, an emptiness. Six feet separated them; Sweet had his careful look at Pete Santell and knew that this time there was no chance of bluffing Pete down. A mass of accumulated rage flowed into Pete's eyes and Sweet knew that the moment had to be right now.

Sweet took a swift forward step and whipped his arms out, batting Pete's hands away, spinning the revolvers loosely from Pete's holsters and tossing them ten feet away into the dirt.

Pete jumped. Sweet's quick motion had surprised him completely; now color flooded his cheeks and his jaw ridges turned white. "Damn you," he snarled and he wheeled away, heading after one of the revolvers.

Sweet stood fast, drawing his own gun without hurry and putting a single bullet into the ground beside the revolver that Pete was diving for. Sweet said gently, "Stand still, Pete."

Pete froze, his back to Sweet.

Sweet said, "Turn around."

When Pete obeyed, Sweet holstered his gun and let his eyes move coolly away, surveying the crew. His glance

stopped on Owen Mingo and he said very mildly, "Get a rope, Mingo, and bring it here."

The echoes of Sweet's single gunshot still seemed to chatter faintly. Horses stirred in the rope corral. Owen Mingo's dry, sardonic eyes met Sweet's and slid away. Then the grizzled puncher walked stiff-legged to his horse and untied the coiled rope from the saddle. Without a word Mingo came forward with the rope.

Sweet spoke in a low tone. "Spread-eagle him on the back wheel of the chuckwagon, belly to the wheel."

A dozen men stood around. None of them spoke, none of them moved. Pete Santell's bright, defiant eyes flashed but he kept silent.

"Go on," Sweet said.

Owen Mingo nodded as though confirming some private suspicion, and turned away, motioning vaguely with his arm and following Pete to the chuckwagon. The cook, who had been leaning against the wheel with one foot up on the hub, stepped back; otherwise there was no movement in camp. There was no wind. Heat from the rising sun pulsed along the ground and, heavy-footed, Sweet walked through the scatter of men to the front of the chuckwagon and took down the whip from its socket there.

Mingo was tying Pete Santell to the big rear wheel; Pete had his face to the wagon and his back to the air, and sat on his knees with his chest and belly bowed over the hub of the axle. Sweet walked over and checked the ropes at Pete's wrists and legs. He looked briefly at Owen Mingo, who stood by with an enigmatic face, and then Sweet put his fingers inside the back of Pete's collar and ripped the shirt off Pete's body.

He handed the whip to Mingo; he said, "You put him up to this, my friend. You can finish it for him. A dozen lashes—and make them strong."

Mingo stood passively with the whip hanging from his hand. "No."

"Do you want a taste of the same?"

"I won't do it," Mingo said.

Sweet put the flat of his hand against Mingo's narrow chest and pushed; Mingo backed up two paces and Sweet followed close. "Do you know what would have happened to him if he'd drawn his guns on me?"

"I had nothing to do with it," Mingo said. The dry smile was all gone. His voice was becoming a whine and his eyes rolled wide.

"Pete would be dead if he'd drawn on me," Sweet told him. "He's lucky. Mingo, I've never liked a man who pushed somebody else out front and let somebody else fight for him. You're that man. It wasn't Pete who started this thing—it was you. Now you've got your chance to finish it."

"I won't whip him."

"Twelve lashes," Sweet said quietly, "or I'll pound you into a pulp, Mingo."

Mingo's eyes drew close together and a little of his amused slyness returned. "Is that quite fair, Sweet? I'm almost twice your age."

"It wouldn't bother me if your arms and legs were crippled," Sweet answered. "Take your choice, Mingo—you've asked for it long enough. I've had enough of your pussyfooting."

Mingo's head tucked in defensively. Plainly, Mingo was becoming aware that his pious words would have no effect on Sweet. He had squeezed himself into a corner and his only way out of it was in action. His eyes dropped to the whip loosely held in his hand and he turned to look at Pete Santell, whose head was twisted to watch all this with obvious fear.

Mingo said softly, "Where's your soft point, Sweet?"

"You'll never find it," Sweet said. "You haven't got much time left. The herd moves in ten minutes. Make up your mind, Mingo."

Mingo nodded slowly and lifted the whip over his shoulder, squaring off to face Pete's back.

Pete's head turned toward the wagon and Sweet saw Pete's muscles stiffen. Mingo's arm swung back with the

whip; and that was when Ben Gaultt walked sturdily forward.

"Hold it. This is a little raw, Sweet."

"Stay out of this," Sweet told him.

"I can't. I won't let you whip my men."

"This isn't Iron Springs," Sweet said. "We're on the trail. They're my men or they're your men. Which way do you want it, Gaultt?"

Gaultt's head lowered and his gaze brooded on the empty ground. The armpits of his shirt were dark with sweat. Back across the camp, Miles Littlejack stood rubbing his back against a tree, like a bear, twisting his shoulders and grimacing while he moved against the bark. Sweet saw Hank Flood's hard bright eyes; he saw Russ Gaultt's oddly pleased look of anticipation; he saw the breathless question riding in Harriet's silent look, which rested not on him but on Mingo and on her uncle; and finally Ben Gaultt's round head turned steadily and he walked back to his horse, his expression as fixed as a fact of arithmetic.

Then Sweet said, "Whip him, Mingo."

Mingo's expression was completely blank. His thin arm shot forward and the lash came from behind him with a sharp crack. It was apparent that Mingo was no stranger to the lash; its tip sliced a thin ribbon of flesh neatly from Pete Santell's exposed back. Pete hunched and stiffened but made no sound. The whip-slice turned scarlet. With no emotion whatever on his features, Mingo drew the whip back and hurled it forward again, and again. Twelve times the whip fell and each time it drew blood.

Deep silence clothed the camp. Every man stood with lips clamped; some of them averted their eyes and some watched in round-eyed fascination. Mingo coiled the whip without hurry into a small circle and turned toward Sweet.

He said very quietly, "Does that make you happy?"

Pete Santell was sagged against the wagonwheel hub, his body jerking; plainly he was sobbing but he made no sound.

Sweet said, "Put the whip away, Mingo."

Mingo walked forward, passing Pete without glancing down, and put the whip handle back into its socket by the high seat. He turned abruptly to face Sweet and said with sudden high anger, "In my mind that was your back I was slicing, Sweet. And I'll see the day yet when you crawl." Mingo walked stiffly to his waiting horse, mounted slowly and rode away toward the herd without looking back. His shoulders were lifted defensively, defiantly.

Every figure but one remained still, and the one who moved was Harriet. She came forward and stood facing Sweet, her expression unreadable. Sweet swung around to face the crew and said evenly, "All of you get to work."

They moved with the sullen slowness of resentment; they mounted their ponies and rode away, some of them glancing hotly back at Sweet, and presently he was left alone on the spot, with only the cook by the tailgate, Ben Gaultt by his horse, Pete tied to the wheel—and Harriet, standing close, watching him with a level stare that he couldn't make out.

When the dust of departing horses had settled, she said to Sweet: "I didn't know you'd go through with it."

"In my mind," he answered, "that was Mingo's back—Mingo and everything he stands for."

She nodded. "I was beginning to think it was something like that. Well, I can't call you wrong, Sweet. May I clean up his back and bandage him?"

"Go ahead," he answered, as though he had lost interest in Pete Santell. He put his back to the girl curtly and then wondered why he had done so; he walked alone with his thoughts to his horse and was about to climb up when Ben Gaultt said, "I'm not disputing your command, Sweet, but I didn't like that."

"Your privilege," Sweet said; he put his foot in the stirrup and swung aboard, neckreined his horse around, and rode off at a trot.

ELEVEN

SCOUTING THE TRAIL, Hank Flood was several miles out in front of the big herd, crossing a mountain pass in the deep center of the range. His critical eyes studied the terrain, the grass, the intermittent sources of water. Overhead the sun was brass-yellow and around him the air was sharp with high altitude clarity, making every sight finely defined and bright of color except where forest shadows provided an obscure overcast.

Flood broke out of the pass onto a long mountain meadow rich with deep grass and spotted with aspens. While his eyes sorted out all this information and put it away in the map he carried in his head, his mind was occupied with a number of thoughts that rose, lingered, and drifted on one by one. Though he was not yet thirty, his wrinkle-furrowed skin seemed stamped from old, dry cowhide.

He smelled leather-sweat and heard the rustling of leaves before the wind; he found a wide trail along the edge of a ridge and proceeded along it, his mind busy with unanswered questions. There were a great many things he did not know, things he wanted to know, and it was more than just a matter of curiosity. Flood felt that he must learn about men like Mingo and Ben Gaultt and Sweet and Ringabaugh and Russ Gaultt, and about a woman like Harriet. He felt that he must know these things in order to know the composition of his own nature, the causes of his own actions and the reasons for his existence.

And so he rode forward, alone and silent, a long thin man on a deep-chested horse. He had enough wisdom to be able to ask such questions of himself. He wondered what it was that drove a man like Dan Sweet; what it was that at times seemed to make a coward of bold Ben Gaultt; what it was that guided Russ's restlessness and prompted Pete Santell's belligerence; what it was that had built a cold shell around Harriet. What made Miles Littlejack able to amble

heavily and surely forward, content and without uncertainties; then there was Nate Ringabaugh, a man of principle and talent, yet an outlaw. Flood wondered, too, what was behind Owen Mingo's sour dissatisfaction and sly intrigues, all in the avowed name of doing good. And he wondered, perhaps more than anything, what made Hank Flood a cowboy and kept him a cowboy; he knew he would never become a Nate Ringabaugh or a Ben Gaultt or, particularly, a Dan Sweet—but he wanted to know why.

Thinking of these things, he found that the ridge he was traveling came to a dead end at a steep talus slope, and so he turned, retraced his path and presently found a new trail, leading gently down the side of the ridge and through a wide flat canyon, flanked by heavy shoulders of timber. A creek bubbled along the canyon floor, bordered by a line of shrubbery and trees.

Good night camp, Flood thought, and added aloud in a low tone, "At the rate Sweet's pushing, they'll get here half an hour after sundown." He nodded. "It'll do." He swept off his hat, ran fingers through his sweat-matted hair, replaced the hat and neckreined the horse around, heading at a brisk pace back the way he had come.

When he topped the ridge and turned toward the pass he saw something that made him stop the horse dead-still in its tracks. Far below, in a low pocket of rock-rimmed earth, two riders were meeting. Flood could not possibly recognize either rider at this distance; but he was sure he knew one horse—Harriet Gaultt's—and he had the odd feeling that the other belonged to Nate Ringabaugh.

He sat staring until both riders, having come together, turned abreast into the shadows out of sight.

Flood shook his head, said, "No—I must have guessed wrong—what sense would there be in that?" And rode toward the pass.

Ringabaugh's white hair gleamed; his eyes were deep tunnels; his lips were formed into an idle half-smile; his teeth glistened. Harriet stood resting her shoulder against

a tree trunk, slapping her riding quirt against the palm of her hand.

She said, "Your man might have got shot, bringing me that note."

"That's his lookout, not mine," Ringabaugh replied. "He was willing to do it. I didn't force him."

"You sound like Dan Sweet."

His smile grew slightly wider. "Do I?" And then his mouth turned straight and spare. But something in his glance made a little spiral of heat rise in her stomach.

Ringabaugh said, "You like to believe in things, don't you?"

"What makes you ask that?"

He shook his head. "Forget it."

"No. What do you mean?"

"I mean you're trying to measure me up to Dan Sweet."

"Am I?" she asked, very quietly.

"I think you are. You've made Sweet into a high mark that you measure everyone against. You've made yourself believe in him. It's no good to do that."

"How do you know?" she asked. "What put us on that subject? Every time I see you, all you do is talk about Dan Sweet."

"He stands between us. I can't help but see him there."

"You could be wrong," she said.

"I could be," he agreed. "But I'm not, am I?"

That made her laugh. She coiled the quirt around her hand and said, "How can you be jealous over something that's not yours, Ringabaugh?"

"Easy." That was the sum of his quiet answer; he added nothing to it except the steadiness of his eyes, probing hers. He stood six feet away with his hands rammed into his pockets, motionless, very tall and very lean, all yellow buckskin except for his eyes and his white hair and his black gun. "I said it to you before, and I'll repeat it now: You didn't have to come. Why did you?"

"Because you interest me," she told him. She was watching for his reaction but she saw none. She gave

him a small look of triumph and slid down until she was sitting with her back against the tree; she put the quirt down and pulled off her gloves and said, "Make me a cigarette, will you?"

He obeyed and walked forward, crouching to hand her the cigarette; he lit the cigarette, then straightened and stepped back respectfully; it drew a soft glance of quick kindness from her. "I came for a particular reason, to know something. I want to know what's between you and my uncle."

He hunkered down on his haunches, picking up a dead twig and breaking it into little segments. The westering sun cast odd shadows across his face, making it seem older and craggier than it was. Ringabaugh said, "It's strange that you'd ask that."

"Why?"

"I don't mean it's strange of you to ask it," he answered. "But it's strange for me to hear it just now. You see, I've been asking myself the same question."

She didn't fully understand him; she said, "Go on."

"I've found out certain things recently," he said, seemingly changing the subject. "There's a certain man in your camp who's out to ruin this drive, out to wreck your uncle."

"Mingo?"

"No," he said, "not Mingo. Don't ask me his name."

"All right," she said simply.

"This man who's out to get Ben Gaultt has a partner in my own camp. They don't think I know about it."

"How did you find out?"

"The fact is," he answered slowly, "the man in my camp talks in his sleep. Funny how an accident like that can change a man's life."

"What do you mean?"

"It got me to thinking," Ringabaugh said. "Your uncle thinks I was the one who stampeded his herd last year and almost broke him."

"Yes. He does."

"It wasn't me," Ringabaugh said. He said it in an off-

hand way; he was, plainly enough, not trying to convince her of it. "I was there, watching, but I had nothing to do with it. It was Nachez's idea."

"The Apache?"

"That's right." Ringabaugh had broken the twig into fine fragments and now he explored the earth until he found another twig and then resumed: "Up to now I haven't had a hand in any moves directed against your uncle."

"Yet you've stayed in this country. Isn't that because of him?"

"It is. When you started this drive a week ago I had it in mind to stampede the herd, drive it over a cliff, finish the thing."

She considered him gravely. "You're trying to tell me you've changed your mind?"

"I have," he admitted. "What I learned forced me to do some thinking, and when I carried the thinking far enough I found out that I had no reason to hate Ben Gaultt, though he's got a reason to hate me. I don't know if he's sure of that reason."

"What is it?"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh. I can't tell you that. But I can tell you this much: I've split up my crew and sent them all away. I was about to leave the country myself but then I decided against it, because of what I found out that night when Emmett talked in his sleep. The fact is, it all boils down to this—I owe Ben Gaultt something, after all the threats I've made against him. I can't leave until I've done what I can to keep Emmett from destroying him."

"Why does Emmett want to destroy him?"

"Emmett's just a hired man," Ringabaugh said, and stood up restlessly. "Always has been and always will be. He's got courage but no brain, no imagination. He's working for someone in your outfit."

"The man whose name you won't tell me. Ringabaugh, why in hell do you have to be so damned mysterious?"

He smiled a little once more. "I'd rather not tell you

even that much. It's a long story and it goes back a great many years."

The cool wind spurted past, brushing her cheek. She watched this tall man stand silent, and for some reason she felt a distinct regret, and wondered what was the cause of it.

Ringabaugh lit a cigarette and studied its glowing tip, and said nothing for quite a long while. She saw a bitterness in him and thought that his bitterness, perhaps, was the cause of her feeling of regret, and looked away. When she returned her attention to Ringabaugh she saw that his brow was knitted, and the set of his face made her suddenly say, "Frowning like that, you look just like Russ."

For some reason, he reacted strongly to her idle comment. His face turned rigid, devoid of all expression; he turned deliberately away and dropped his cigarette which he had only just lit. He ground the cigarette out under his boot, and his gaze focused on his waiting horse. But then, as if to cover up his disclosure, he turned back to her and laughed softly.

"That's interesting," he said. "Am I supposed to take it as a compliment?" But the lightness of his tone was not carried over in his eyes; she saw the aftermath of shock burning there, and knew that somehow, accidentally, she had struck something deep inside him.

A triangle of sunlight fell through the top of a tree upon his face; his eyes were bright and hard. He said, "I want to ride back to your camp with you."

She sat up. "What?"

"I want to join your outfit," he said. "If I ride in with you, at least they'll keep off me long enough for me to tell my story."

She considered him shrewdly; she said after a while, "All right."

She stood and walked toward her horse. To do so she had to pass close to him; she stopped and put her hand against his arm, knowing she was touching a body that might soon be dead.

He gave her a curious glance and turned quickly, tramping his shadow into the ground when he walked to his horse.

TWELVE

THE LONG strung-out herd moved forward in slow, scuffling confusion, somehow maintaining a steady gait through the sandy canyon. The ground was littered with small rocks; there was a loud clatter of hoofs and a high milling wheel of dust. Dan Sweet, his skin sun-blackened and his eyes half-covered by the lids, rode at the point with Hank Flood at his side. Flood said, "Up through that pass and down the side of the ridge beyond. There's water and grass enough for the night."

"Good enough," Sweet answered, and looked back across the tops of bobbing horns. The chuckwagon had cast a tire at a rocky turning several miles back; it had taken an hour to fit the spare wheel to the axle and pin it tight, and only now was the wagon catching up—Sweet could see its dust far behind. The smell of the herd's mass of kicked-up sand drifted thickly across the windless air. When he looked at Flood he saw that Flood's eyes were bitterly bright; something was on Flood's mind. And then, abruptly, Flood spoke:

"You're pushing hell out of them. They're remembering what you made Mingo do to Pete Santell with that whip. It's the kind of thing that festers. I'd take care, was I you—listen, how do you know you're right? How can you be so certain?"

"How do I know I've got two hands to work with?"

"You take it on faith, I guess."

Sweet laughed softly. "Faith, Hank?"

"Well, you admit you've got faith in yourself, don't you?"

"No."

"What?"

"I don't need faith in myself," Sweet said. "I know myself. That's not faith—it's knowledge."

"What's the difference?"

"Faith is accepting something without evidence."

"Then what evidence have you got that you're right?"

"I'm alive—I am myself," Sweet answered. "Don't look for the reasons for your life in me, Hank. Look in yourself."

"I try, sure enough," Flood muttered. His words were almost lost in the drum of hoofs. He wheeled abruptly to bring a wandering steer back into the herd, and when he returned his frown was troubled. "I don't get this yet," he said earnestly. "None of it. Damn it, I wish I knew how to be sure of myself, like you are."

"You've got to ask the right questions to get the right answers," Sweet told him.

"What questions?"

Sweet shook his head. "You've got to find those out for yourself. Otherwise it's no good." He watched Flood evenly for a moment. For himself, he knew the questions, and he knew the answers: the questions asked about a man's importance, and the answers were his own. To fulfill the purpose of his life a man had to do two things: he had to act, and he had to believe in the meaning of his life. He had to see that there was a point to his struggles. The point, and the meaning, was his own identity, his dignity, even his pride.

Flood said, "Riders coming—who's that?"

"I see them," Sweet answered, and kept his unblinking attention on the two horsemen advancing over the hill. And presently, emerging from their own cloud of dust, the riders became recognizable as Harriet and Ringabaugh.

When Sweet glanced at Hank Flood he saw an odd expression on Flood's face, as though Flood were confirming a suspicion and at the same time becoming angry at his own knowledge.

"Stay here," Sweet said, and reined aside. His glance lay against Harriet and Ringabaugh; he cantered forward

toward the hillside and presently clattered to a halt on the stony ground.

Ringabaugh and Harriet, both hatless, came up in a swirl of powdered dust and stopped by him. Ringabaugh displayed a kind of brooding indifference. "Good afternoon," he said.

Still puzzled, Sweet touched his hat in acknowledgment and looked at Harriet, who showed a great gravity while her eyes flicked uncertainly from Sweet to the white-haired horseman in buckskins.

"He wants to join our outfit," Harriet said.

Sweet turned coolly toward Ringabaugh. He said nothing; he studied the man with grave care, and after a moment a thin change crossed Ringabaugh's features, a surface sign that most observers would have missed. Sweet did not miss it. He knew that Ringabaugh was quietly lifting his guard like a dog bristling against a faint unfamiliar scent.

Up here above the herd's dust the wind carried the sharp, raw scent of the wild country. Ahead and all around them the mountains rose abruptly, black, bold, and tall. Ringabaugh sat tall and poised, showing a rigid smile that lengthened very slowly. Both threat and request, appeared on Ringabaugh's face.

Sweet said, "All right."

There was no visible relaxation in Ringabaugh, but the challenge left his eyes.

"No questions?" Ringabaugh said.

"No. No questions."

"Conditions, then."

"Just so," Sweet said. "I demand absolute loyalty."

"I'll obey your orders to the letter."

Sweet nodded. A moment later a tight smile crossed his features. "You've got courage, coming to me and expecting me to listen to you. Courage or foolishness. And you're not a fool. Once you said to me you'd spit in Ben Gaultt's face when he died."

"That was a hundred years ago," Ringabaugh said.

"Nothing's changed."

"Nothing but my mind. I'm a wiser man than I was then." The straight line of Ringabaugh's mouth had not eased. Sweet was filled with an intense curiosity which he kept hidden. And Ringabaugh's smile changed. He said, "I know. There's no reason in the world for you to accept me in your camp."

"That's right," Sweet said.

The long herd clattered slowly past them a hundred yards below. A light gust of air brought the scent of Harriet's hair past Sweet; she said to him, "Then why do you decide to accept him?"

"I trust my judgment." His eyes had moved to the girl now and lay against her, hard and even brittle in spite of those hungers that sight of her created in him. She wore a gray shirt and denim trousers and dust caked her face, but the rich warm tone of her flesh and the depth of her eyes and the heavy blackness of her hair were enough to make dust and the colorless costume of no consequence. And just then Sweet flicked a fast glance at Ringabaugh and saw something new in Ringabaugh, something that Ringabaugh covered quickly, but not quickly enough for it to escape Sweet's notice. Ringabaugh had been watching the way Sweet looked at Harriet; the strain of that observation had scratched Ringabaugh's nerves. It showed as a restive sign in the darkness of his eyes.

That's it, then, Sweet thought, seeing Ringabaugh look at Harriet.

But it was not his affair to meddle. The girl was free to make her own choice. Sweet felt an indistinct regret as though another door were closing before him, but he knew he had never opened the door himself. Now he had forfeited the key, it seemed.

He said to Ringabaugh, "I think you know what you'll have to face down there. All of them know your reputation."

Ringabaugh nodded. "I don't intend to pick any fights." Then he smiled again; he had an agreeable smile when

he chose to use it. "It must be hell on you not to ask me why I'm here."

"You've got the right to keep that to yourself," Sweet said.

"Even if my reasons are dangerous to you?"

"If they were you'd make it known to me."

"Yes," Ringabaugh said softly. "I expected you'd be able to see that. But I'll tell you, anyway—I've told Harriet and you ought to know this, too. I've scattered my crew, but one of them's still hanging around somewhere—Jack Emmett. Remember him?"

"I do."

"Emmett's tied up with a man in your camp. I'm not free to reveal that man's name. But their plan is to wreck the drive." Ringabaugh's smile, coming and going at intervals, returned now and he said, "No, it's not Mingo."

"I'd have known that without your saying it. Mingo hasn't got the practical intelligence for it."

"True enough," Ringabaugh said. "I found this out a short while ago and it made me change my thinking about Ben Gaultt. I won't tell you why. I don't feel any pity for him and I'm no rescuer come to protect him. But I owe Ben Gaultt something and maybe I can pay off the debt by seeing that this herd gets through to market."

"And after that?" Harriet said.

"After that?" Ringabaugh shrugged his wide shoulders vaguely.

Sweet said, "Since you've told me this much, I'll ask you a question."

"Go ahead."

"Do you know where the attack will come from?"

"I think Emmett's trying to round up some of Nachez's renegade bucks. I don't know when they'll hit us."

"All right," Sweet said. "Pitch your roll in the chuck-wagon and join the drag riders. We're camping beyond the pass."

Ringabaugh made no objection to the unpleasant job Sweet assigned to him; he only nodded and gigged his

horse forward, stopping by Sweet and meeting Sweet's eyes. His hand moved slowly forward and he shook Sweet's hand. He looked once at Harriet, then cantered downslope toward the herd.

Harriet was smiling when Sweet returned his attention to her. Neither of them made a move to ride away.

Harriet said finally, "I don't think we'll regret this."

"Don't you?"

She laughed. "Don't play games with me, Sweet."

"We can use his gun, if it comes to that," Sweet said.

Once more laughter bubbled in her throat. "That's not what you were thinking."

"No," he said. "Are you his woman?"

"You asked me that once before."

"And you didn't answer."

"Well," she said, "I'm not his woman. Does that suit you?"

"I guess so," he said, smiling a little, and beginning to turn away.

"Wait."

He reined in. Harriet said, "Is that all there is to it, Sweet?"

"No. Do you want me to spell it out now?"

"Go ahead," she said.

His manner was calm. "Why," he said, "I want you. Is that plain enough?"

"Plain enough," she answered gravely. "I've seen it in your eyes but I wanted you to say it."

"Why?"

She made no answer of any kind. Sweet said, "It's not my nature to force anyone into anything."

She laughed again. "Tell that to Pete Santell—tell it to Mingo."

"They both had free choices to make."

She nodded. "Don't worry about it. It's not *my* nature to be forced into anything, either."

"I know."

"This," she said, "is a hell of a place and a hell of a time for a declaration of love, Sweet."

"I didn't pick it."

"So you didn't," she said. She smiled at him and suddenly wheeled her horse away, drumming toward the drag end of the herd, which was just now rolling past.

Emmett rode nervously downhill, fingering the reins of the packhorse he was leading behind him. His friends—the men of Ringabaugh's crew—were scattered to kingdom come, and now Jack Emmett was alone in Apache country and he didn't like the feeling it gave him.

The full moon put a yellow-white wash on the land, all upthrusting limestone spires and bluffs and cutbanks—badlands, Chiricahua Apache country. Emmett was going down this trail at a stiff pitch straight into the heart of the Indian land and his nerves were none too steady.

At a tepid waterhole they picked him up—four Apaches mounted bareback on long-legged horses, plainly stolen from a Mexican ranch below the Border. Lean, square-jawed riders with a dark sheen on their skins, they put him in the center of the bunch and rode forward, never speaking. He recognized one of them, though he could not remember the man's name. They took him through a notch of rock and down a narrow, high-sided canyon. The walls crowded in against him and moonlight was shut out by the high cliffs so that he rode by ear and by feel only. Once he rolled a cigarette but one of the Indians said something curtly and he tossed the cigarette away unlit.

The packhorse dragged against its lead-reins. They broke out of the mouth of the gorge and presently came upon the *rancheria*—the Apache camp. Kids and dogs made a racket in the night; a woman was moaning somewhere in a blanket-covered lodge. A group of mounted bucks breasted the head of the gully and ran forward clattering, whooping victory cries, with the carcasses of two antelope suspended upside-down on poles between them. Emmett traveled toward the center of the camp with his back braced against the surly talk that mumbled against him from sullen, motionless

figures watching his arrival. A woman, fat with thick lips and stringy black hair, held an infant in her arms and stood at the entrance of her lodge staring at him. He felt uncomfortable; he wished he had not come. His fist tightened on the reins of the led packhorse. A single buck appeared on horseback high on the gully wall, silhouetted and waving in his right hand a cavalryman's blouse and in his left a sticky mass of hair.

White man's hair, Emmett thought bleakly, and rode on in the center of his silent escort. A small child threw a rock at him; he ducked and it only thumped his shoulder gently, rolling down and skipping off his boot toe. One of the bucks escorting him laughed deep in his throat. Emmett thought: What am I doing here? To hell with Russ Gaultt—let him hold his own powwows. Moonlight was a coating like dust on everything in sight.

They dismounted before the big lodge of the chief and Emmett stood fretting while one of his escort walked past him to the door of the lodge and spoke softly. Presently a wizened shape came out of the lodge—Nachez.

Emmett held up his hand palm-forward in the sign of peace; he said, "*Enju*—friend."

"*Enju,*" Nachez grunted, and walked around Emmett to the packhorse, where he stood in funereal silence while two bucks undid the packrope's diamond-hitch and unloaded from the crosstree saddle boxes of whisky bottles, beads, ammunition and knives. "*Enju,*" Nachez said again, "All right."

Emmett spoke in dialect Spanish. "I come in friendship."

"*Bueno,*" Nachez replied, a little dryly it seemed to Emmett.

"The white-haired one is not with me," Emmett said.

"I can see that," Nachez replied in soft Spanish.

"I came to tell you of a cattle herd coming to your country," Emmett said.

THIRTEEN

IN A TONE laced with anger, Ben Gaultt said, "It took a lot of nerve to let him come here." He was talking to Sweet but his eyes lay across the camp on the solitary white-haired figure of Nate Ringabaugh. Silence was thick in camp; everyone watched Ringabaugh and no one spoke to him except Harriet, who quietly took his dishes and brought them back to the chuckwagon, eliciting a sardonic nod from Ringabaugh.

"Haven't we got enough trouble," Gaultt said, "without bringing more of it right into camp?"

"He'll cause us no trouble," Sweet said mildly.

"It's nice," Gaultt said, almost icily. "It's nice you're so sure of that, my friend. I've known that man more than twenty years and never trusted him."

"Why?"

Gaultt shook his head, not answering. But his hot bitter eyes lay steadily against Ringabaugh, who pretended to take no notice of it, and after a moment Gaultt said, "Have you thought of the effect he has on the men, just by being here?"

"I should think they'd be happy," Sweet answered, a little smile turning up his lip corners. "At least now he's where they can watch him."

"Which is exactly what they're doing." Gaultt spat a brown stream of tobacco juice toward the fire. "Look at them, Sweet—all of them. They're ready to break. First Mingo and Pete Santell, and now this. One quiet night you'll find yourself buried in a pile of them. Don't think they're not willing to jump you."

"Let me worry about that," Sweet said.

Gaultt grumbled under his breath. "Don't bite my head off. I'm trying to do you a good turn."

"Obliged," Sweet drawled. He turned his head and saw Hank Flood mounting his horse with an easy swing. Flood

pulled his hat down tight and left the remuda at a trot, disappearing quickly into the darkness.

Ben Gaultt said, "Where's he going?"

"To look around."

"Apache?"

"Maybe. They know we're here, by now."

"I expect they do," Gaultt agreed dryly. "Listen, you're running this drive and you're free to hire and fire men. But keep Ringabaugh away from me—hear?"

"He won't bother you."

"But I might bother him," Gaultt said. He stood up and made a little show of moving his blankets farther out from the circle of firelight—farther away from Ringabaugh.

A hundred yards away Sweet heard the creek trickle faintly. He surveyed the camp with care and walked off toward the creek, thinking idly of bathing in the cold water. Presently his thought turned to reality and he was immersed to his neck. He ducked his head under and came up, spitting and shaking water from his hair; he scrubbed himself with creekbed sand and returned to the shore to put on his clothes. He dressed under a ceiling of stars and sat down with his back to a cottonwood, rolling a cigarette.

Shortly thereafter he tossed the cigarette into the water and stood, and turned through the rim of trees toward camp. He walked four paces and stopped, jerking his head around; and saw a figure prone on the ground—Harriet Gaultt, looking up at him with a smile on her generous lips. She lay propped against an elbow and said, "Hello."

"How long have you been here?"

"Not long. I saw you light your cigarette so I came down. But then I decided you didn't want to be disturbed." She lay back flat. Poised calmness defined her features. Her breasts rose and fell softly with her breathing; her hands lay motionless against the earth. Sweet said, "Is this to prove you're not afraid of me?"

"Why should I be afraid?" Her head was thrown back and he could see the throbbing of her throat.

"Get up," he said gently.

"What?"

"I don't accept what I haven't earned," he told her.

She stood up and smiled. "What did you think I was offering you?"

"Agh," he murmured; he gave her a quiet stare and stepped forward abruptly, bringing her against him, kissing her hard and then, when her arms rose to press his back, lifting his head to look down at her eyes. He said, "My clothes smell like horse."

"So do mine. This isn't a carpeted parlor."

He laughed gently and lifted his right hand to touch her hair. Her eyes were suddenly filled with meaning to him; he dropped his lips over her mouth and tightened his arms around her. Afterward he said, "I aim to take you away from Iron Springs."

Harriet tilted her head back and looked at him with her eyes round; he knew she was laughing at him; she said, "You've never learned how to use soft words, have you? Well, neither have I. Maybe it's better this way. We can't cover up what we mean with silly words."

He put his hands on her hips and swayed her toward him once more but just then he was arrested by the sound of voices rising, faint in the distance at the camp.

He said, "Uh-uh—Look out," and turned from her quickly, breaking into a run across the meadow toward the beacon of the wavering campfire. Behind him he heard the girl's running footfalls following him. Something was wrong in camp; as he drew closer he saw that a good many of the men had risen from their blankets and were standing around in a loose circle near the rope corral where the horses were held. One man's voice rose angrily and subsided. Shapes shifted and milled and when Sweet broke through the circle he saw young Russ Gaultt standing angrily beside his saddled horse, talking hotly: "It ain't none of your affair, Littlejack. Mind your own damned business. You've got no right to stop me."

Standing with his arms folded, Miles Littlejack was a dark and stolid shape. Littlejack said stubbornly, "I think it's

about time we found out where you go on these little night *pasears,* kid."

"None of your damned business," Russ said and turned to his horse, twisting the stirrup in preparation for mounting.

Littlejack moved toward him and Sweet was about to act when Nate Ringabaugh pushed past the circle of men and moved his hand forward swiftly to touch Littlejack's arm.

"Hold it," Ringabaugh said mildly.

Littlejack wheeled. "Huh?"

"Leave the kid alone," Ringabaugh said.

"Like hell," Littlejack said. "What right have you got to step into this, fella?"

"The kid's minding his own business, isn't he?"

Someone shouted from the crowd: "Tear him apart, Littlejack!"

"All right," Sweet said. "That's enough." He walked forward and stood between Littlejack and Ringabaugh. He had not forgotten Russ behind him waiting to mount, but at the moment Russ was the least important of the three men concerned. "Break it off," Sweet said.

Littlejack took a firm stance and thrust out his jaw. "I want to know where he's going."

"No place where you'd want to be," Russ said. He mounted quickly and reined the horse around, drumming past the crowd and out into the night.

No one spoke or moved until his hoofbeats had faded beyond hearing. Ben Gaultt stood off by the fire, watching with a guarded expression, saying nothing. Harriet had come up and also watched silently.

After a while the crew began to shuffle and Sweet heard someone say, "Slice his damned albino heart out, Miles."

"Shut up," Sweet said gently, without looking around to see who had spoken. Then he addressed Littlejack: "As long as the kid does his share of the work and keeps out of trouble, he's entitled to do what he wants on his off time. But if you see him slack off, ride him hard."

"He's up to no good," Littlejack insisted.

"Maybe. But it's not your job to stop him," Sweet said.

Littlejack met his glance and presently nodded, a manner of apology, and moved away. The crew began to break up, grumbling, heading for their bedrolls. Sweet distinctly heard Owen Mingo's voice somewhere in the dark:

"Sweet had a point, I guess. Littlejack's always been a bully."

Littlejack's answer crossed the darkness like a rumble of thunder: "Swappin' horses in midstream, ain't you, Mingo?"

"I give a man his due."

"Like you gave to Pete Santell," someone said, and chuckled.

All this while Sweet was facing Nate Ringabaugh across six feet of half-light. "You shouldn't have mixed in that."

"Sorry," Ringabaugh muttered, and turned toward his blankets. But there had been a gleam in his eyes that made Sweet wonder what had made the white-haired man defend Russ Gaultt—especially when the boy's father had remained aloof and silent during the episode.

Owen Mingo's voice came again faintly to him: "Why did he let that outlaw into our camp? Sweet's a fool—I tell you he's a fool. We'll all be dead soon."

Sweet pressed his lips together. Mingo's dissatisfaction was creeping through the camp, turning men even more edgy than the circumstances demanded. Mingo took out his frustration by snapping at whatever came within reach. There was, Sweet judged, no specific intent in Mingo's mind; Mingo was fighting back against the world that had treated him cruelly and taken advantage of his weakness. But that made Mingo no less a danger. Sweet made his decision and turned toward Mingo, but just then Russ returned, dismounted and turned his horse into the corral. A short ride, Sweet silently observed, and remained highly puzzled.

Harriet came to him and said, "What was that all about?"

"I'm not sure. Littlejack overstepped his bounds and so did Ringabaugh. What's Russ's game?"

"I don't know."

"I'm wondering why Ringabaugh took a part in it."

"I wonder, too," she said. "Odd, how he looks so much like Russ sometimes."

"I marked the resemblance." He met her quiet look and was about to add further words when hoofbeats telegraphed along the ground and Hank Flood swept into camp, reining his horse in hard and talking with suppressed urgency: "Apache camp over the ridge, not four miles from here. I almost stumbled into the middle of it."

Sweet took a moment to digest this information. "Did they see you?"

"I guess not. They're traveling light—no lodges or women or kids. And no dogs."

"War party," Sweet said. "I expect they've got this herd in mind."

"That sounds like a safe bet," Flood said dryly.

Ben Gaultt came out of the shadows. "Apaches? We'd better fort up, then."

"No," Sweet said. "That's what they expect us to do. They'll just run the herd off and laugh at us."

"Then what do you propose?"

"We'll take the fight to them," Sweet said. "Hank, roust half a dozen men and saddle up."

"Just half a dozen? There's twenty bucks in that camp, I reckon."

"Just half a dozen," Sweet answered. "On the run, Hank."

Gaultt looked at Sweet. "What are you going to do?"

"Set them afoot," Sweet said with a little smile. He held Harriet's glance a moment, and strode toward the horses.

They mounted and were ready to ride out when a pale figure walked out of the timber shadows and said mildly, "I guess I'll ride along."

That was Nate Ringabaugh, and Sweet felt the others

stiffen beside him when Ringabaugh entered the scene. No one trusted Ringabaugh. Pete Santell, closing the corral's rope gate said, "First maybe we'd like to know which side you're on, friend."

Ringabaugh regarded him gently. "I'll let that pass," he murmured, and looked at Sweet. "If those Apaches are after us, it was Jack Emmett who put them up to it. Some of the responsibility for that is mine."

"All right," Sweet said. "Get saddled. Pete, you'll stay here."

"What the hell?"

"Orders, Pete," said Miles Littlejack, and reined his horse forward between Sweet and Hank Flood. Littlejack's whisper came softly to Sweet's ears: "Maybe Pete was right. You sure we can trust Ringabaugh?"

"There's one way to find out," Hank Flood said.

"I trust him," Sweet answered.

"If you're wrong," Littlejack observed, "we may all pay for the mistake."

"Want to stay behind, Miles?"

Littlejack laughed hoarsely and backed his horse away. That was when another rider—Ben Gaultt—came from the corral on horseback. Gaultt said, "If you don't mind."

"Party's getting a little large," Sweet murmured, and indicated two men half hidden by the night. "You two dismount and stay here. Gaultt, you're sure?"

"I ain't that old," Gaultt said, and took his place in the bunch. Russ was the sixth man and now Gaultt reined up beside his son. Sweet saw a strange glance pass between the two men, a glance of lingering coldness; it only broke away when Ringabaugh trotted into the bunch and sat with his gaze resting blankly on Gaultt, who returned the glance with reserve.

"All right," Sweet said. "Keep quiet and watch me for signals. Let's go."

They left the camp at a trot, six silent men crossing the valley. Hank Flood rode at Sweet's shoulder, a rifle bobbing in his fist. Only faint starlight showed. Sweet took a course

that kept a high timber wall between them and the ridge-top so that a watcher up there would not see the advancing horsemen.

It was within an hour of midnight. They drew rein within the trees and stepped down, leaving reins to trail. "No talking after we leave the trees," Sweet said. His glance paused on Ben Gaultt and he saw the odd way Gaultt was looking at Ringabaugh. Sweet said quietly, "This may not stop them, but it will give them something to think about for a while. Maybe by the time they decide to strike back at us, we'll be out of their bailiwick. We'll be out of the mountains by afternoon."

"Still pushing, I see," Hank Flood said. The light was too poor to see, but Sweet was sure Flood was smiling.

Ringabaugh was walking forward from where he had tethered his horse a short distance away. Ringabaugh's white hair shone pale; Sweet took off his hat and handed it to the man and received a short nod of thanks. Ringabaugh afterward turned to Russ Gaultt and touched the boy's arm, saying, "When we get up there, take your time and keep quiet. Don't get jumpy. If you feel wind on the back of your neck, freeze—it may be somebody looking down a Winchester at you. And if you get in trouble, don't yell for help unless the other fellow hollers first."

The boy's gaze rested blankly on Ringabaugh's dark face. Ben Gaultt strode heavily up from two yards away and said crisply, "You're a funny one to be giving advice."

"Just being helpful," Ringabaugh drawled, unruffled.

"Maybe," Gaultt said. "Maybe. This is the second time tonight you've gone out of your way to do my kid a favor. What's on your mind, Ringabaugh?"

"Do you begrudge him the favor?"

Even in this light Sweet saw Gaultt's flesh darken; Gaultt said insistently, "How do we know you're not tolling us into a trap?"

"You have my word."

Gaultt chuckled ironically. "A lot of good that'll do us when our scalps are hanging from an Apache lance."

Sweet heard Ringabaugh's tight breath; but Ringabaugh spoke calmly: "I've got a number of things to say to you, Gaultt, but I don't choose to say them now. If you don't trust me you don't have to come along."

"This isn't your party," Sweet told him quietly. "We're all going. Come on." And led the way forward on foot.

FOURTEEN

He wormed slowly up the barren rise. Far to his left he saw the vague hump of a man moving cautiously, paralleling his own course; that was Flood. Littlejack was an equal distance to his right but Littlejack was hidden behind a hump of rocks. Silence breathed like a loud sound across the line of the ridge and once a number of bats swooped out of the sky, swirled overhead and were gone.

Caves around here, I guess, Sweet reflected, but his senses were tuned to every dim sight and every sound and touch. He moved on his belly and when he achieved the summit he lay tight along the ground, letting time stretch while he searched with painstaking care the hollow below.

The horses stood hobbled close together by a small bunch of trees and a single guard was posted on the slope fifty yards up and to Sweet's left, squatting with a rifle in plain sight. This far within the borders of their stronghold they felt secure, and the other Indians slept in the open down below near the ashes of their campfire. Strung on poles suspended between trees were the half-eaten carcasses of two big antelope. Starlight brushed the scene softly and Sweet made his judgment and lay motionless while he saw Hank Flood stop to remove his boots, and then crawl forward into an eroded ravine, disappearing.

The Apache on guard stirred, looked around, and became still once more. Down below a horse moved, striking a rock with its hoof. Sweet looked at the man on guard again, whereupon he saw Flood lift himself into view at a point concealed from the Apache guard's position by an

outcrop of flat shale. Sweet considered the guard, but the Indian showed no sign of being disturbed. Clad in breechclout and leggings, with his long hair held by a simple rawhide band, the squat figure was typically Apache. Just now his head was averted. With that opportunity, and seeing that Flood was in position, Sweet moved away from his cover and crept downhill toward the camp, swinging wide around it in a circle. When, half an hour later, he had completed his arc, he stood up in the profound obscurity of the grove of trees next to which the hobbled Indian ponies stood.

Wind softly rustled the branches. By now, if everyone had followed instructions, the Apache camp was surrounded by a loose net of riflemen. Ringabaugh should, by this time, be nearby on the other side of the bunch of horses. Sweet stepped silently forward to the edge of the trees, within twenty yards of a small pinto but downwind of it; and posted himself there to wait, looking across the sleeping camp and upward toward the ridge, where the watching Indian was sitting in faint silhouette.

A lean shape stood up abruptly near the Indian guard and even at this distance Sweet heard Flood's voice carry clearly: "All right."

Flood's rifle was lifted, centered on the guard. The Indian wheeled, snapping up his own rifle, and got off one hasty shot before Flood fired. The Apache took the slug in his chest and dropped without firing again.

Rising instantly, the others in the camp went for their weapons and Sweet turned his attention to them. Up on the slope two rifles—Flood's and Russ Gaultt's—began talking in steady, harsh signals, their bullets searching out targets in the camp. From one side of the meadow Ben Gaultt's gun spoke and, from the other, Littlejack's. Apaches milled confusedly around the barren campground and Sweet fired four or five quick shots and thereupon ran forward toward the horse herd, lifting his knife. His boots clattered; his voice rose in a string of long whoops. He ran among the horses, bending down by each one to cut the

hobbles; once he saw a looming shape of a naked man and fired point-blank, and saw the man go down. Now and then he saw Ringabaugh's lank figure threading a course among the horses. He stopped once to look at the camp, and fired his last bullet into it, after which he paused long enough to reload his rifle before moving among the horses again. The animals by now were wild wheeling shapes in the dark; he narrowly avoided getting trampled by one horse, and again when he looked up he saw rearing hoofs flailing the air above him. He dodged aside and cut the rope hobbles as the horse came down. He lashed the horse's rump with his rifle and shouted. He saw the horse break into an immediate dead run, lining out across the meadow behind a bunch that had already been freed and frightened away.

By now the gunfire from the top of the ridge had ceased. According to plan, Russ and Flood had retreated back toward their saddled horses; by now they should be on their way to intercept the frightened Indian ponies. Most of the Apaches from the camp were climbing the slope, looking like ants climbing the rim of their anthill. Sweet let them go without firing. Three or four bodies lay still near the campfire ashes. One Apache limped slowly after his fleeing companions, his leg obviously shattered by a bullet. Sweet cut the hobbles from the last pony and swung aboard it expertly. He had a bad moment combing the kinks out of it, almost dropping his rifle. He plunged his heels into the horse's flanks and leaned forward, galloping ahead, hearing scattered Indian bullets and arrows whistle by and seeing Ringabaugh retreating in front of him, likewise mounted bareback on an Indian horse. Somewhere Ringabaugh had lost the hat Sweet had given him, and now his paper-white hair fled with the wind. Sweet glanced behind him and saw the last of the Indians achieve the top of the ridge and take positions to fire. But by this time the range was too great and their ammunition fell far short. Sweet felt the wind cool his sweat-damp face.

They gathered the Apache horses and put them to

circling, and presently grouped together behind the herd of ponies. Sweet counted noses swiftly and said in sharp voice: "Five. Where's Littlejack?"

No one spoke. After a moment Flood, who had been nearest Littlejack's position, said, "He fired a few times and then I lost sight of him."

"We can't go back," Russ Gaultt said, breathing hard. "Those Indians are forted up on the ridge by now."

"No," Sweet said. "They think we may come back. They've faded back into the mountains to get fresh horses. That will take them a day, or the better part of it. We'll go back." He singled out Russ and Ben Gaultt to drive the Indian horses back to the Iron Springs herd, and with Flood and Ringabaugh beside him he turned back toward the ridge. "Maybe," Flood suggested hopefully, "maybe he lost his horse. Maybe he's following us on foot."

Ringabaugh shrugged. Sweet did not speak. His face remained grim through the short, silent ride, until presently they reached the grove where they had left their horses before assaulting the ridge. Sweet's saddled horse was still tethered there with Ringabaugh's—and so was Miles Littlejack's.

"Well," Flood said with tired bitterness, "I guess that tells the story."

"Maybe," Sweet said, unwilling to give up so quickly. He dismounted from the Indian pony and mounted his own; and when Ringabaugh followed suit he said, "Let's have a look around that camp."

"Sure enough."

"Damn it," Flood said, "I hate this country."

"There's nowhere in the world where men don't die," Ringabaugh answered, and put his horse out of the trees. "I've known Littlejack a long time. He licked Jack Emmett once right under my nose—and I laughed at it."

"Littlejack's a man to ride with," Flood said.

"Aye."

Sweet glanced at the two of them. They topped the ridge and spread apart, and rode down with their nerves

on edge. There was no knowing whether an Apache or two had stayed behind to guard the dead. Sweet found nothing to disturb him; and after a while Flood's call drew him away from the four dead Apaches by the campfire ashes.

Littlejack was not dead but he was coming to it. Consciousness had gone; he lay as a great heap on the ground, a vague mass in the blackness under the sweep of a heavy-limbed tree; his great chest rose and fell in slow jerks and his breathing was a coarse rasp against the air. Flood struck a match and by the flickering light Sweet saw the trickle of blood at Littlejack's mouth and the broken haft of an arrow imbedded in Littlejack's throat with blood thickly pulsing around it.

Ringabaugh came up from somewhere in the dark and squatted beside Flood. The match went out, leaving a smell of sulphur, and Ringabaugh said softly, "That's what his loyalty got him. Something to think about."

"You're soured," Sweet said in answer. "Littlejack was no fool."

"Was?" Ringabaugh repeated. "He's still breathing."

"His mind has died by now. His hands don't move."

"Hell," Ringabaugh said suddenly. "What are we talking about?"

Sweet shrugged. In that brief interval of silence he heard a quick gasp from the ground, and then nothing. Littlejack's heart had stopped.

Sweet spoke to Flood. "Catch up one of those Indian ponies. We'll take him back to camp and bury him near the river."

"In the trees," Flood said, standing up. "In the shade. He'll like that." And turned away, walking softly off into the night.

"Just like that?" Ringabaugh muttered. "Funny—I've seen a good many men die. It never gets easier to take. I've never killed a man."

"You shot some Indians tonight."

"I don't think I hit any."

Sweet regarded the dim face curiously. It added something new to his knowledge of Ringabaugh. "You're not a poor shot."

"No," Ringabaugh said slowly. "I'm not. I can wing a man when I want to."

"It may be," Sweet observed, "that you're the most honest man among us."

"Hardly," Ringabaugh said, and laughed quietly, leaning over Littlejack's body. "Help me lift him up."

A newborn calf rode in the chuckwagon; its mother bawled at being dragged along behind the wagon on a rope.

The herd was moving soon after Littlejack was buried, and by dawn they had strung the leaders out and made two miles toward the edge of the mountains. Sweet had flung out his flankers wide on the ridgetops to keep watch on the backtrail for sign of approaching Indians. In the van, a mile behind the dust of the drag, two men rode with loaded rifles, crooking their necks often to look behind. In that manner, cautious and prepared, they moved the long herd out of the canyons and into the foothills, and ate the noonday meal in shifts, as was the custom.

Standing in the shade of a tall rock, dish in one hand and fork in the other, Sweet watched three or four men mill around the chuckwagon tailgate chuckling at the tiny calf. Presently Owen Mingo stepped out of the saddle, took his meal without giving the calf any attention, and walked toward Sweet. "Littlejack hadn't much of a brain, but he was the foundation—he was what we all stand on. There's a certain strength in that, maybe a virtue."

Not quite sure what Mingo was angling toward, Sweet nodded and kept silent. He saw Mingo's eyes reach him and observed that they seemed full of sullen anger. Mingo's head went back and his expression filled with willful courage; his voice abruptly prowled across the distance between them like a cat stalking with the threat of death in its head.

"I didn't like what happened to Littlejack. We had our

points of disagreement but that doesn't change the fact that he deserved better than what he got. I consider it an act of sheer personal bravado on your part to ambush those Indians. It wasn't fair to them and it was criminal to Littlejack—and you might have got the others killed, too, if it hadn't been for luck."

Sweet regarded him levelly for a moment and then smiled. "I don't agree with your opinion, Mingo, but you're entitled to hold it."

"Don't laugh at me!"

"Perhaps you need a little lightness—a fresh approach."

"Stop laughing at me, Sweet. I want to know how you intend to answer for Littlejack's death."

"You're not my conscience. Eat and get back to work."

"I'm a man—I'm one of the people, one of the men whose lives are in your hands. I think that's sufficient reason for you to give me an answer."

"I'm responsible to myself," Sweet said, "not to you. Understand that, Mingo, or ride away."

"In the name of God," Mingo breathed passionately, "what are you, Sweet?"

"Don't you know?"

"I thought I did. Now I don't know. I can't believe there can be a man as evil as you."

Sweet shook his head. "You've run a race and lost, my friend. Your failures are your own doing. It won't help you to blame me for your own weakness."

"All right," Mingo said. "I can't do a good job of things—and that's all you can see in me. But you're wrong—it isn't entirely my fault. Any system that sets one man above another is to blame for what the lower man suffers. Can't you see that?"

"I can see it. But it's a weak approach, Mingo. I don't agree with it."

"You don't have to. Maybe you would, if you were on the bottom of things like me." He stooped to rub sand in his tin plate, cleaning off the grease of fried beef. He said,

"I've never had fifty dollars to rub together at any one time."

"Is that my fault?"

"Don't you have any other argument than that?"

"The truth doesn't get stale," Sweet said. "Face yourself, Mingo. That's where your answers are."

The comment had a strange effect on Mingo. It kept him silent. After a long while he looked up and said, "I just can't seem to do a good job of things any more." And turned away. It was as much of a confession of weakness as he had ever made. Sweet could see that Mingo was changing. Mingo was one of those men, common to the earth, who struggled under the belief that life was tragically brief, that there ought to be something he could cling to, a faith. But there was no real faith in the man and, beyond that, Mingo was bowed under his bitterness; he was alone and convinced that he was at the world's mercy. Losing his capacity for pride, Mingo had squeezed himself flat and lost the ability to see that the day was a long road of time to be covered at a steady pace, all the while making the day serve as a tool to his accomplishment.

Mingo had lost his hold on the truth—the truth that a man is master of his life and must live by and for it. But now, perhaps, Mingo was awakening. Sweet felt that somehow just now he had struck a spark in Mingo's head; he wondered if it would kindle.

Miles Littlejack had not been a man who worked to live. Littlejack had lived to work. That had been Littlejack's success, and death could not dim it. Sweet did not feel pity for Littlejack, for in his sturdy way Littlejack had found as much of the truth as any man could, and he had lived according to it. Life was not a matter of quantity in length of years.

Sober with his thoughts, Sweet dropped his plate off at the wagon and mounted a fresh horse. He rode toward the herd, tasting the grit of dust and smelling sweat and feeling the rippling muscular movements of the horse beneath him.

FIFTEEN

EMMETT FELT the push of time driving forward. He noticed the gray vertical streaks of rain falling over the higher peaks deeper in the mountains; out here in the foothills the clouded sky seemed about to weep. Emmett halted his horse near the top of a cactus-studded hill and dismounted, climbing out to the end of a rock shelf to look back through the gray canyons he had traveled this morning. He saw a stir of motion somewhere back there; instant fear turned his skin pallid; and then he recognized the movement as nothing more than a small pack of *javelina*—wild pigs—foraging for roots and grubs.

Emmett's mouth showed a waspish expression. He went back to his horse, climbed aboard, and continued on his way with his overlapping belly bouncing against the saddle horn and his fat legs rubbed raw on the insides by so much steady horseback journeying.

Presently he found a line of willow banks at the edge of the Smoke, and—some distance upriver—the little group of adobe cubicles that marked the settlement at Tilghley's Ford. There was a tangle of cattle on this side of the ford, the last remnants of the Iron Springs herd just now crossing the river. Behind the drive lay a week's quick trailing from the Yellows, where the Iron Springs outfit had left two dozen Apaches on foot.

Emmett remembered that night vividly. He had watched the whole scene take place from a vantage point high on the mountainside above the Indian camp. Until then he would not have believed it possible for a group of white men to take an Apache war camp by surprise.

Now he believed it, but the belief gave him no satisfaction. He had led Natchez's hardy bucks into a trap. Ever since that night, Emmett had stayed near the fast-traveling Iron Springs herd, out of a vague feeling of protection. He had remained far enough behind the herd to avoid

being discovered by Sweet's backtrail scouts, and in hanging back so far he had seen occasional signs of Indians behind him.

He had seen no such signs in the past two days, but this failed to hearten him. Nachez might very well be rounding up his scattered warriors and planning a sweep across the Massacre Valley, through the hills and up the Smoke to retaliate against the white drovers who had insulted him so hugely by unhorsing his troops. It might matter little to Nachez that by now the Iron Springs herd was a hundred miles from the Apaches' usual stamping grounds. Nachez would know, of course, that the herd was headed for Hays Pass—the only good trail up through the Mogollon Rim at this point—and thence across the grass plateau to Dry Fork on the railroad. And it just might be that Nachez was holding his men back until the opportunity came to ambush the trail drive in the narrow confines of Hays Pass.

Emmett was not worried about what Nachez and the Apaches might do to the herd out ahead. It had been Emmett's job to incite Nachez to make an attack on the herd. But Emmett knew also that to the Indian way of thinking, he himself was as much to blame for the ambush of a week ago as was Sweet or any of the Iron Springs men. And he was not at all sure that the Indians behind him had the herd as their target. Emmett knew that he might be their quarry.

Now, with the settlement drawing nearer, Emmett had three choices: He could keep following the herd; he could lay over at Tilghley's Ford, which would certainly offer him better protection than the cowboys would; or he could strike out southwest across the desert, trusting that the Apaches would follow the herd rather than his single trail.

Emmett thought little of the idea of striking out on his own. It was too risky. Similarly, staying behind the trail herd much longer might put him in the difficult position of being caught between two fires. He had seen Ringabaugh with the Iron Springs crew and he knew that whatever the causes of Ringabaugh's joining the Gaultt crew, Ringabaugh

was now a part of the drive, and had undoubtedly let it be known that it was Emmett who had encouraged the Apache attack that Sweet had foiled. Emmett felt that he would enjoy no better hospitality at the hands of Sweet and Gaultt than he would at the hands of Nachez.

Therefore he determined to put up at Tilghley's way station for a few days before making further plans. It was vaguely in his mind to wait and see what happened to the herd. If the Indians stampeded it over a cliff, and if Russ Gaultt remained alive to take over the Iron Springs outfit, then Emmett intended to return to Iron Springs and demand his due from Russ. But if the Indians failed to rout the herd, or killed Russ in the process, then Emmett had no choice but to quit the country before the Apaches found him.

Altogether, Emmett realized, he was in a ticklish situation. But greed made him determine to stay and see it out. And so when he arrived in Tilghley's dusty yard, he lowered his fat frame from the saddle with the intent to stay at the way station until word came from Dry Fork—word as to the fate of the Iron Springs drive. He took down his warbag from the saddle, glanced up at the dismal gray sky, and plodded corpulently toward the covered porch of the station.

As early as five o'clock the heaviness of rain clouds brought twilight to the valley of the Smoke; Ben Gaultt looked up anxiously and said, "I wonder if that means snow on Hays Pass. We're done for if it does."

"It won't snow yet," Sweet said. "Those are thunderheads, not snow clouds. It's not that much colder at Hays Pass."

"The temperature can drop forty degrees in a few hours hereabouts," Gaultt insisted. He frowned and trotted back to inspect the herd.

Shortly thereafter Ringabaugh's hatless figure appeared out of the dust and the white-haired man smiled slightly,

looking back toward Gaultt's receding horse. "Worried about snow, eh? Well, so am I."

"I doubt it will snow just yet," Sweet said. "You seem a good deal concerned about the safety of this herd."

"I hired on here. My loyalty goes with my hire."

"Does it?" Sweet said; but he did not press the issue, and Ringabaugh seemed unwilling to be ruffled. Instead, he produced a cigar from his pocket—probably purchased at Tilghley's Ford this morning—and silently offered it to Sweet.

Sweet bit off the end, spat it out, and reined his horse in long enough to light the cigar. He held the match to Ringabaugh's smoke and when Ringabaugh was puffing he said to Sweet, "I just had a talk with Hank Flood. He's a little confused about everything, but he's a good man. A little more seasoning and he'll do fine."

Sweet nodded in agreement. Ringabaugh added, "Right now the big trouble with Flood is his ambition's bigger than his ability. He'll learn to satisfy himself with what he can do best, which is cowboying. One day he'll be foreman and maybe even start a small outfit of his own. By then he'll have a family and likely be a happy man. He likes to work—a taste I should have cultivated long ago."

Sweet nodded absently, his eyes constantly roving the breaks of the country ahead. He said after a time, "I don't believe those Apaches have given us up. I expect to meet them between here and the pass, or maybe at the pass. That's four more days of trailing with our eyes open. Listen—the next time you get a bead on an Indian, don't pull your sights away before you shoot. He won't give you that chance; don't give it to him."

Ringabaugh smiled. "You're a harder man than I am, my friend. I never intended to be a killer, and I don't intend it now. If I have to save my own life or someone else's with a bullet, I'll probably do it. But I won't kill a man for the sake of a bunch of cows."

Sweet had to laugh. "You're an odd trick for an outlaw, Ringabaugh."

"Outlawry's a state of mind," Ringabaugh replied. "Inside, I feel clean enough." He tapped ash from his cigar and changed his seat on the saddle, glancing at the cattle and then ahead toward the gray horizon. A faint smile hung across his lips but Sweet saw a bitter secret behind his eyes. Ringabaugh was not yet ready to reveal it, whatever it was. He looked back along the sea of humping red-brown backs. "Our friend Mingo seems a little less belligerent these days. Do you suppose he's learned something?"

Sweet shrugged. "When we started this drive he was the biggest threat I had to face. He might have incited the men to break loose on me. Lately he hasn't been firing them up.

"Getting dark early tonight," Sweet continued. "We'll camp by the river beyond that next hogback. I think the Apaches may still have their eyes on us—it's better to camp in open country."

"Sure," Ringabaugh said absentmindedly. His gaze lay across the herd and when Sweet looked that way he saw Pete Santell riding lazily, twirling his rope beside the moving remuda of extra horses. Ringabaugh said, "They tell me you made Mingo whip him. I've seen the way that boy looks at you. He hasn't forgotten it. Watch your back, my friend."

"The one thing Pete isn't short on is guts. He won't try at my back."

"Don't be sure," Ringabaugh advised. "I've seen kids like him come and go. They start brave but pretty soon they get the taste of blood and it chills them down. How do you think a killer gets his start?"

Sweet shrugged again. He was not particularly troubled by Pete Santell.

Ringabaugh's somber face seemed cut from granite. He said, "Pete doesn't matter, but Pete could be the end of you."

"Is it up to you to worry about that?" Sweet replied. He looked back, watching men sweat on the pounding saddles.

Finally Ringabaugh said, "Maybe it is. I'm not so sure as I once was. We're none of us islands."

"That's where you're wrong."

Ringabaugh's answer was a small smile. "That's your sensitive point, isn't it? How far do you have to carry self-reliance?"

He added, "You live through all this and you're not touched by it—you're stronger than it is. But it's got to teach you something. It's taught me one thing—Dan Sweet's afraid of something. What are you afraid of, amigo?"

Sweet uttered a gruff, humorless laugh. He still had not spoken and after a while Ringabaugh said in an odd tone, "You're a hell of a dangerous man, Sweet."

"Dangerous to what? The rule I live by is the rule of minding my own business, strictly. That's only dangerous to the man who tries to prevent me."

"Like Mingo?"

"Mingo's a mosquito. So's Pete Santell."

"And so am I," Ringabaugh murmured with the same quiet smile. "Well, my friend, you know I warned Harriet against you."

Ringabaugh cut away to drive a straying steer back into the herd and when he returned he said, "Now I'm not so sure it shouldn't have been the other way around. Maybe I should have warned you against her."

"What do you mean?"

"She may be able to break you down, open up your fear."

With a certain amount of amusement, Sweet said, "Come on, fellow. What is it I'm afraid of?"

"Nobody has a claim on you. You've got no claim on anyone."

"That's as it should be," Sweet said, but he thought of Harriet and knew Ringabaugh was wrong.

"You've got no one to please but yourself. And I don't think it's any good. I think you're afraid of giving someone a hold on you."

"I'm not afraid of it," Sweet said. "Someone has a hold on me now."

"Harriet?"

He glanced at Ringabaugh quickly but he answered with frankness. "Yes."

Ringabaugh chuckled. "I was afraid of that once. Now it doesn't trouble me." He paused to give Sweet a deliberate glance. "I like you, Sweet, but that doesn't keep me from seeing something that maybe you don't know. What you're afraid of is the day when you have to admit that you need somebody. And that day will come."

"I suppose it will," Sweet said evenly.

His calm answer seemed to startle Rinabaugh, who scratched his ear and after a moment said, "Well, I'll be damned. You're even smarter than I gave you credit for."

"I don't mind needing anyone," Sweet said. "What I like to stay away from is leaning on people when I don't have to lean on them. That's weakness—and I hate weakness."

"Sure enough. Well, I wish I'd known you before I set out to ruin ten years of my life. At forty-one, I'm a little old to start fresh, but that's what I'm doing now."

"Better that than to live with regrets."

"Yeah," Ringabaugh muttered, and suddenly grinned. "It's a good thing you're a strong man. You'll need your strength pretty soon. It's no easy trail from here to Dry Fork."

"We'll get there."

"We will," Ringabaugh said. "And I'll be at your stirrup when we do, my friend."

SIXTEEN

DRY BRANCHES of brush rustled before small winds and as the sun went down behind the clouds a gray and darkening drizzle began. It hissed in the campfire and pasted shirts to backs while the men walked in from the rope corral to supper. Men's voices ran softly through the night and after the meal, while the cook was greasing the wheel-hubs of the chuckwagon and the men were spreading ponchos over their blanketed figures, the driz-

zling rain struck the dying red coals, making spirals of white steam.

This was, at last, the foot of Hays Pass, and the morning would see the great herd enter the narrowing constriction of the upward-winding trail. The rain was cold tonight and a fear ran through the camp like a hunting dog—a fear that before dawn the rain would turn to snow. Snow in the pass would cut the herd off from its destination. And so men slept fearfully and there was a tremor in the softly singing voices of the drenched nighthawks who rode slow circles around the bedded-down cattle.

Harriet made her bed under the wagon that night, lying back under blankets and hearing the occasional bumping of the calf's hoofs when it moved in the wagon-bed above, covered by a tarpaulin. She lifted herself up on one elbow to look through the wheel spokes at the nearby spot of ground where Sweet reclined with his hat over his face. A frigid wind met her but she kept her eyes turned to watch the slow rise and fall of the big man's chest, only just visible against the dull glow of hissing coals beyond.

She heard, then, a quiet step on the other side of the wagon and turned to see a man crouching down there. The man was her uncle; he lit a match, cupping it in his hands and lighting a cigar, and by that light she could see that his expression was close and attentive.

"Bad night," he murmured to the girl, and shook out the match. "I was cursed with an observant eye. You were watching Sweet just now."

"Yes."

"Is it my privilege to ask if you've found your man?"

"It is," she said, smiling. "I've found him."

"I see," he said, and sat motionless for a time with the tip of his cigar glowing. "Then the next point is, has he found you?"

"Yes."

He nodded. Someone came in from the corral and built up the fire to boil coffee. During that time her uncle said nothing. The light increased and flickered frostily across his

bearded face. His voice, when it came, had a push of certainty. "I dislike some of Sweet's notions but I like him for what he is—a man, and unashamed of it. In my memory I was like him once, only I know I really wasn't that much like him. If I had been, I'd still be as strong. Now I've got soft spots. But I've led a full life and no regrets. I wish you the same."

It was a long speech for Ben Gaultt and he subsided, puffing on his cigar. Someone made a small sound with a tin coffee cup; a horse snorted in the corral and her uncle resumed: "For a time I was afraid your interests leaned toward Nate Ringabaugh. I'm pleased to see I was wrong."

She considered that and replied bluntly, "Why are you afraid of Ringabaugh?"

"As to that," he said, "I'm not sure, myself. It was long ago and I never had the courage to confirm my suspicions about him."

"What suspicions?"

"I believe in letting sleeping dogs lie."

"Then why do you walk around him like a cautious hound?"

"Because I never disproved my suspicions. I don't trust the man."

"I see," she said, without understanding at all.

Presently Gaultt said, "Since he's been with us I've seen a number of good things in him. He's tough and he's bold and he seems honest. By the way, you can consider it a tribute to your friend Sweet that I put up so little opposition to having Ringabaugh join the crew."

"I know," she replied quietly.

He considered his cigar thoughtfully. "You've always been more of a daughter to me than Russ has been a son."

"Don't say that."

"I can't blind myself, can I? Perhaps it's my fault Russ is as he is, but I can't change the truth now. He's not capable of handling Iron Springs. You are. That's an odd fact, I know, but I had it vaguely in mind that you would take over after me. Now that won't happen. In a way I'm

sorry. Sweet's the first man to come along who's part of your world, though, and I can't say it makes me sad to see it. You'll have a better life with him than you would with my grass and cows." He crushed his cigar out and added softly, "I'll miss you, girl." And moved away.

His talk had surprised her; she had never been close to him in the sense of fondness, because both of them were essentially strong and hard people. Now, though, she knew him better than she ever had, and her respect for him grew. For the first time, because of Russ, she felt pity for Ben Gaultt. It was no reward to build an empire only to see it go to a son like Russ.

She closed her eyes, and raindrops pelted the tarpaulin on the wagon bows and the fire sizzled. A relief nighthawk walked by, his boots squishing. Soon after that she fell asleep.

Some undiscovered impulse awakened her when it was still full dark. She lay quiet, wondering what had aroused her and feeling that the time was no later than three, she turned her face and looked toward the camp, and turned dead still. A figure was walking stealthily across the open and she thought for a few moments, from the light head of hair and the set of the features, that it was Ringabaugh, but when he came closer she saw that it was Russ.

He advanced and stopped and she saw that he was standing over Dan Sweet, looking down. He lifted his right hand along his hip and touched the gun holstered there, and abruptly shook his head in a troubled manner and turned away. Shortly thereafter she saw him pause once again by the fire, building it up and lighting it and crouching there in the slow-falling rain while the fire grew and he put his hands out toward it. His face turned and she saw that he was looking fixedly at the covered figure of Ringabaugh, not far from Sweet.

Harriet could not make anything reasonable of it; yet she lay awake puzzled long after Russ had returned to his bedroll. A cold wind ruffled her face, and after half an hour had passed something light and chill touched her

cheek. She reached up to brush it off and noticed then that the ground was turning slowly white.

The rain had turned to snow.

She rose immediately and went to Sweet's side. She shook him gently awake and said nothing. He saw the silently drifting flakes and the glisten of the ground, and at once he pulled on his boots and stood up, throwing on his poncho and putting his head through the hole in its center. He paused long enough to touch her shoulder; and she covered his left hand with her palm. Then he turned off, lifting his voice to rouse the men.

It was, suddenly, a grim race. No one could tell whether the snowfall would increase or diminish. The trail up Hays Pass was fifteen steep and narrow miles—normally two days of cattle-driving. Once the trail drifted over with snow, the herd would be trapped.

No one needed an explanation. The cook passed out coffee and in full darkness the men saddled and rode out of camp with silent determination. In their midst, Harriet thought vaguely of taking Sweet aside and telling him of Russ's strange behavior during the night; but there was no time. She fell into the urgency of work and presently forgot the episode.

The feel of the pass was bad. It made Flood wary. Riding scout, half a mile ahead of the point of the herd, he cast troubled eyes upward and saw no break in the sky. Snow drifted past him with monotonous silence; already a thin sheet of it covered the ground. He wondered if it wouldn't have been a better idea to wait at the foot and see whether the snowfall was to be a big one or not. But Sweet had said, "If we don't get through before the pass fills up, we'll wait the winter out at the foot of it. Push them—push them."

Push them, Flood thought. His bones ached; his flesh was weary. He had been pushing them for weeks. How much longer could his red-edged eyes keep in focus? How much longer would his legs keep him gripped on the saddle?

Fatigue was a black bird crouching on his shoulder, laughing. He looked up again at the gray-black of the sky and a premonition rippled through him. This morning a steer had broken its leg in a chuckhole and Mingo had shot the steer. The first head lost. Was it a sign? Things had gone too well; Flood worried.

He had to get down and move a deadfall that lay twisted across the trail with a lightning slash along its trunk. He heaved and grunted and knew he could not make his muscles do this work, and so he tied his rope on the tree and dallied the loose end around his saddlehorn. He gigged the horse and slowly dragged the deadfall back away from the trail.

Snowflakes moved past, riding the air. He rode upward with the walls of the pass growing narrow and steep at either hand. Cattle could travel this road no more than three abreast. It would be slow, heartbreaking work. The dismal gray sky pressed down and trees by the trail hung bent under the weight of snow in ghostly patterns. Flood felt his horse come to a stop and swore passionately when he found another deadfall barring his path; he moved it wearily and pushed on.

"A tough one—maybe too tough," he grunted. A sluggish current of air whipped flakes against his face, making him blink; he tugged his hat lower across his eyes and hunched his shoulders. Then he came to the top of a hump in the trail and looked back to see, far below him, the diminutive snakelike point of the herd advancing cautiously around a bend.

Ahead of him lay an easy grade of trail running uphill for half a mile and then once again plunging out of sight between rock walls. The cliffs surrounding him were massive and jagged at the tops; he felt like an ant at the bottom of a funnel of sand. The ground all about him was thinly layered in snow.

"If the wind rises," he said aloud, "we're done." He had seen the big winds whip drifts of snow down into the gulches many a time.

A man riding alone against fate, he put his face forward and rode on, clearing the trail of fallen brush and keeping an eye on the cliff tops, half-expecting to see a bareheaded Apache in silhouette there. The gloom of the day worked its way inside him and as he rode his face tightened; he felt crowded by time, by the tight walls compressing him, by the weather and by the intimation of danger.

He looked back from another high point and although he could see nothing move from here, he had in his mind a clear picture of the herd and of every rider with it. His thoughts gently came around to Harriet and for a while he carried a clear image of her—strong and lean and dark—and he spoke harshly to himself: *About time to grow up, Flood. Whatever happened to that brown-eyed girl in Santa Rita?* He thought he would look her up when he returned; he smiled slightly into his bandana and felt his earlobe with thumb and forefinger. His ears were half numb; the temperature had dropped sharply. What if the trail iced over?

He gigged the horse forward . . .

At Tilghley's Ford on the Smoke, Jack Emmett came out of the barn where he bunked and looked uncertainly at the lowering sky before he splashed water in his face from the water-trough and shook his hands dry, shaking the loose fat on his body. He turned across the yard and went into the trading post, nodded to Tilghley, and picked a salt cracker from the open barrel while he considered the shelves of canned goods and decided on his breakfast.

Tilghley handed him a can of stew and a can of peaches and said in his dried croak, "It ain't November yet but it sure looks like November weather out." The trader combed his sparse beard with gnarled fingers and shook his head. "I doubt that trail herd's made it through the pass yet. Rain down here means snow up there. I hate to see a steer froze to death."

Emmett grunted and took his cans outside. In the barn

he shivered against the cold, swept a clean space and built a fire of straw and twigs. He put the can of stew on his fire. Maybe he should have got hold of Russ and found out what was going on; he felt a moment's guilt and then shrugged, and watched the fire through half-shut eyes, squatting close to it to take advantage of its meager heat.

While he was peeling the rim off the can of peaches a horseman came out of the trees down the river, laid a long glance on the settlement buildings, and retreated into the trees, unseen. When Emmett finished the peaches and poked a hole in the stew can, the original horseman returned from the trees with fifteen companions, some dressed in blue cavalry shirts and some naked from the waist up, with rain glistening on their brown flesh. One Indian spoke a terse command and then they swept down upon the tiny settlement, whooping and waving and firing guns.

Emmett rushed to the barn door. The fire crackled behind him. He saw his death coming in the head of an Apache lance; he recoiled from it but he was too fat and too slow.

When the Apaches had burned the settlement they turned north along the Smoke and drummed toward the foot of Hays Pass at a canter.

SEVENTEEN

THERE WOULD be no camp tonight. All day the snow had come down with monotonous regularity, without increase and without diminishing. An inch-deep carpet covered everything and in low spots the drifts came up to a steer's belly. In twenty-four hours the trail would be too deep in snow for travel. There was no alternative; the herd must be driven by night. Six miles remained to the top of the pass, six miles far more steep and narrow than those the herd had traveled today. The chuckwagon came rattling up the road behind the herd and before the horse remuda. Here, in shifts, men broke away from the herd and came in for

cold beef and cold biscuits and a moment's stretching of stiffened muscles.

Sweet changed horses while the remuda was moving; he stopped at the chuckwagon and took his ration of beef and biscuits and was making ready to mount when Hank Flood entered the area, coming with the last vestige of gray daylight. Flood's expression was worried.

He put his troubled eyes on the sky, avoiding Sweet's gaze, and said uncertainly, "Blacker than the inside of a cow's gut. We'll have a time keeping them on the road."

Sweet only stared at him silently until Flood nodded. "Yeah. You're right. We've got trouble."

"Nachez," Sweet said.

"That's it. You seen them too?"

"For the past six hours," Sweet said. "They've been drifting up along the top of the cliff. Not too many—a dozen or a little more."

"Only takes one man to start a stampede. And if this herd gets turned around downhill there'll be no stopping them until they're scattered from here to Prescott. Once they're gone, they're gone. It'll take us till Christmas to get them rounded up."

"Then we can't let them stampede, can we?" Sweet said quietly.

Flood glanced bleakly at him. "Easy to say," he observed. "Here we stand with our boots in the snow and up there are fifteen Indians laughin' at us."

"We've got them matched, man for man."

"Sure," Flood said dryly. He walked to the wagon for food and came back immediately. He said, "We can't hunt them down, that's sure. They're forted up in those rocks better than a fox in his burrow."

"They won't do much until morning," Sweet said. "They need the sun god watching them. They'll snipe but they won't attack."

"Suppose they roll rocks off the cliff and start an avalanche?"

"Not enough snow," Sweet said. "Rocks would just get hung up in the trees."

"Then suppose they take a mind to shoot the lead steers?"

"Too dark for that kind of shooting."

"Got an answer for everything, ain't you?" Flood said with a touch of bitterness.

"I hope so," Sweet said. "In the morning they'll be waiting for us near the head of the pass. They'll be hidden up in the rocks by the trail and they'll try to stampede the herd around on top of us. That's what they want—to see us trampled and see the herd run back down the pass."

"I guessed something like that. What do we do?"

"Put them in a crossfire," Sweet answered, and walked toward the wagon. Half a dozen men were gathered there, huddled in coats and mackinaws, drinking melted snow and eating their dry meal. They formed half-real shapes in the white-drifted obscurity. Sweet considered them—Ben Gaultt and Harriet and Russ, Pete Santell and Ringabaugh and Flood and two other riders. He said to them, "Don't light any matches. We've got interested friends up on the cliffs."

Ben Gaultt reacted most quickly and most strongly. "Apaches?"

"That's right," Sweet said. "My guess is they intend to jump us at dawn near the head of the pass. We can't let them do it."

Gaultt's jaw clamped shut. He said grimly, "We've made it this far. If I have to kill every Apache in Arizona, I'll finish this drive."

Gaultt's bluster drew a short glance from Ringabaugh, and Sweet said, "I want to take a few men and get around behind them before sunup. It's a hard forty-mile ride through the mountains to come up on the head of the pass from the back side."

Wordlessly, Ringabaugh stepped forward. Flood stood at his shoulder. Sweet looked around at the half-visible faces and considered Pete Santell before he spoke. "We'll need your guns, Pete."

"All right," Pete said without emotion. But when he approached Sweet could see the glitter of his eyes. He wondered if the whip-scars across Pete's back had taught the boy anything.

"I'm coming, of course," Ben Gaultt said.

"Maybe," Ringabaugh suggested without any trace of malice, "maybe you'd better leave this to younger and faster men."

"I can keep up," Gaultt answered gruffly.

"How about you, then?" Ringabaugh said to Russ; and Sweet put a curious glance on Ringabaugh. What connection lay between Ringabaugh and Gaultt's son?

"I guess so," Russ said. There was a little break in his voice, as though from fear.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," his father told him.

"Hell, I ain't afraid." Russ stepped forward.

"Six of us," Sweet said. "That will be enough. Get saddled."

And while the others moved off to the horses, he waited by Harriet and spoke to her in a businesslike tone. "Split the herd into groups of four hundred, with a man to push each group. That will leave four or five extra men to ride point. Keep the groups separated and tell the point riders to be ready for a fight at dawn."

"I see," she said, just as practically. "If we separate the cattle into bunches, the danger of a stampede spreading through the herd is less. I hope our children have your wisdom, Sweet."

"If we live to have any," he breathed. He kissed her with hard and brief pressure and wheeled to his horse.

"Let's go," he said.

The night was bleak, cold, blind; Mingo threw himself against it with increasing resentment. The cold wind sliced across his face without relief. The old ironic smile was gone—Mingo no longer found the world amusing. He rode within six feet of Harriet Gaultt, ahead of the lead bunch

of cattle, and in the swirling obscurity of the drifting night he could barely make out her presence there. His eyes were close-lidded to shield them from snowflakes. As he thought back across his many years of toil and failure he felt a sharp regret; there was little malice left in Owen Mingo. He said aloud, "I should have looked to myself instead of to my grief."

His face was seamed and loose. Once he had been bigger; he rode now with flesh hanging on his skeleton. A cowboy came by and held his horse close to Mingo's; the cowboy's face was a sullen blur in the darkness.

"Maybe we should have quit a long time ago."

"What for?" Mingo said.

"Do you expect to live the day out?"

"Why," Mingo said, "I don't think it makes a lot of difference."

The cowboy sat brooding on his saddle. Behind them a rider called out at the cattle, driving them up the trail. Mingo felt trapped between the advancing steers behind him and the dawn ahead, the top of the pass where Nachez's Apaches silently waited. Mingo looked at the rider beside him and suddenly he leaned toward that glum cowboy and reached out to grasp his arm. "Idaho," Mingo said urgently, "don't let yourself drift. Make something out of your life."

"Huh?" Idaho's head turned.

"Don't expect anybody to do you any good turns," Mingo said rapidly out of excitement. "Don't expect the world to support you. Fight your fights and live your life and don't let anybody push you into anything."

"What the hell are you talking about, Mingo?"

"It's too late," Mingo said, so quietly that his voice was almost lost in the clop-clop of hoofbeats.

"You're talking loco," Idaho said.

Mingo made no answer. He only stared ahead into the blackness of the ascending trail. Snow wheeled past his eyes and disappeared. His hand fell upon the stock of the rifle held in his saddle boot. He let his hand lie there while

his horse pushed forward at a steady gait toward sunup and the head of Hays Pass.

Men and horses made pools of deeper black in the night's shadow. Growing above his head, Flood saw the tops of crowded trees weighted down with snow. Beyond the edge of these trees was the trail leading down across the flats to the head of Hays Pass, a half-mile distant.

It had been a long and desperate ride, down the pass to its foot and up around through the gaps and breaks of the Mogollon Rim. They had pushed to the limit of endurance; now Flood's horse stood under him with its legs braced, breathing hard, lathered and chilled.

One shadow, Pete Santell, moved slightly and said, "I ain't been this cold since I left Montana. How can a man shoot when his hands shake like this?"

"Use both hands," Ringabaugh told him dryly. Flood felt the horse buckle its back under him to sneeze; he reached forward swiftly to close his gloved hand over its nostrils and thus the sneeze emerged as a muffled snort. But the stuffed tone of it disturbed Flood and he dismounted and stood by the horse's drooping head peering closely at it in the bad light. The horse's nostrils were closed and glistening; its filmed eyes half shut. It stood wobbling on its legs. After a time, Flood said, "This horse is all gone. Pneumonia by noon. Where's my gun?" He groped foolishly at the flap of his holster.

Dan Sweet said, "Don't be a fool, Hank. One shot could bury all of us."

"He'll die by inches," Flood said angrily, and at the same time realized the stupidity of his anger. He added quickly, "Yeah. You're right."

The horse stumbled forward and stood heaving, trying to breathe, its head hanging down limply. Flood swung away, glad that it was dark; he did not have to meet anyone's eyes. His hand fumbled, snapping down the holster-flap.

"Half an hour yet to first light," Sweet said. "Keep your

hands warm." Flood heard his voice but could not see Sweet. He faced the direction of Sweet's voice and waited.

Sweet said, in an even tone, "We'll scatter out on either side of the trail. Wait till it gets light enough to pick targets. Then we'll wait for the herd. Remember this—if any one of us makes a sound, we're all done." There was a pause and then Sweet said, "Leave the horses here. Let's go."

EIGHTEEN

THE GROUND was crisp with glistening frost; the air was dry and cool, and the snow had quit falling. Up on this wind-swept summit only small patches of snow remained on the ground. Flood threaded the rocks and trees and waited while the eastern clouds turned violet and brown. Wind pushed a mist of snow across the trail, thirty yards to his left, and dropped it again. He saw a brown shape rise, move three feet, and disappear in the rocks down toward the head of the pass. Silence gripped the mountain; the air was sharp with chill and Flood put his hand inside the pocket of his mackinaw while he waited with his rifle propped against a rock beside him. Sweet was visible off to his left near the road, lying prone behind the bole of a pine. To his right he could see Ben Gaultt's bootheel protruding around a rock. Across the road out of sight lay Pete Santell and Ringabaugh and Russ Gaultt.

And far down the road he heard the clattering of distant hoofs.

Several Apaches moved into Flood's range of vision, coming out of their protected spots and picking posts from which to lay their fire down the trail. In the east on the horizon the sky was breaking up and now the sun suddenly glittered through a hole in the clouds, splashing the ground with brilliance. Cattle- and horse-sounds grew steadily louder; Flood heard an iron shoe strike chips off a rock and in the windless dawn a cowboy's voice called from beyond the bend in the road:

"Here we come—Iron Springs! Summit ahead, boys!"

That call acted as a signal to the waiting Indians. A number of dark figures lifted from the ground, raising rifles and bows. That was when someone with the herd shouted a terse warning and then, abruptly, the still air was shattered and blown about by the staccato crack of gunfire.

Flood's rifle came up; he took aim on a bare brown back and squeezed the trigger.

The bullet took the Apache in the shoulder and whipped him around. Surprise on his face was overcome by rage; his uninjured left hand pulled his gun up and Flood shot again. The Indian went down and another target popped up before Flood. Then his ears rang with shooting and his eyes burned with smoke. He fired as fast as he could work the rifle's lever. The Apaches fought with grim silence, wheeling in and out of rocks and timber, caught in a sudden crossfire they had not anticipated. Shapes swirled in and out of Flood's vision.

He stopped to reload his rifle and while his thumb plugged cartridges into the magazine his eyes swung off to the left and he saw a strange thing. He saw Nate Ringabaugh, white hair flying about his head, take aim at an Indian and then deliberately pull his rifle away before he pulled the trigger. The Indian jumped out of sight; Ringabaugh shook his head and dragged his hand across his eyes, and looked up again. *Why didn't he shoot him?* Flood thought. But now the Apaches, driven before the advancing cowboys from the herd, were retreating toward Flood and he had his mind wholly occupied with keeping behind cover and taking occasional shots at running figures. The dawn boiled with loud, wheeling confusion. Sweet's strong voice called in rallying signal and the first of the Iron Springs crew plunged forward over the top of the hill and galloped ahead, firing and shouting with wild energy.

A cold wind cut sharply across Flood's face. His hat had been knocked off and his red hair fell in his eyes; he swept it away and saw Pete Santell running wildly across the rocks, screaming insanely and firing both his pistols toward a little knot of three or four Apaches. The Indians answered his

fire grimly and Flood stood with his mouth agape while Pete's thin body lurched and shuddered against a half-dozen bullets that all seemed to strike him simultaneously.

Pete uttered a high, shrill scream and dropped, his guns flying from his hands. His face struck a rock and he rolled limply out of sight.

The four Apaches came on, firing carefully. Flood fired his last bullet at them and wheeled behind the cover of a high boulder while he fumbled shells into the empty rifle.

When the rifle was loaded and he peered toward the road again the firing had died out and no Indians remained in view. He heard a ragged volley of gunfire from back among the trees somewhere and then he heard the diminishing thunder of hoofs—the Indians galloping away.

His energy suddenly drained, Flood sat down. His hands shook so that the rifle fell from his grasp and clattered against a pebble. He felt moisture against his leg and looked down, and found with surprise that blood was slowly leaking from a long, thin scratch along his thigh. He laughed jerkily. Someone uttered a shout of high victory and then, from quite close by, Flood heard a broken moaning.

He pushed to his feet, listening wide-eyed to that dismal crying, and started through the trees in sudden haste. Suddenly he reached the lip of a small depression and saw Russ Gaultt lying in the bowl of land, his hand flung over his face and his stomach pumping blood through his coat.

Flood slid down the side of the bowl and crouched by Russ. The boy cried out when Flood touched him. He ripped the coat away and had a look, then sat back slowly. Russ's hand fell away from his face and his glazing eyes stared at Flood. When Flood looked up he saw Ringabaugh and Dan Sweet coming down from the trees. Both stopped by him and Flood saw a curious expression come over Ringabaugh's features, regret, sadness and guilt all seemingly mixed together.

Russ's voice bubbled in his throat. He cleared it by a plain effort of will. Flood saw his fists clench as Russ said hoarsely, "There never was a horse that couldn't be

rode, never a cowboy that couldn't be throwed." His lips grinned weakly; his stomach muscles contracted in spasm. He said, "Guess I reached too far. I started this whole mess—and I guess it's too late to make up for it."

"You put Nachez up to this, didn't you?" Sweet said to him. Sweet's voice was quite calm.

"I put Emmett up to it. Where the hell is Emmett?"

"Long gone, I guess," Sweet said. "What did you want, Russ?"

"The—the ranch, of course," the boy said weakly. "I guess the day was just too short for me." He rested a moment as Flood watched all this with unconcealed amazement. Russ said, "I guess I'm dying. Anybody got a drink of water?"

Ringabaugh walked away to the shade and brought back a cupped handful of snow that he held gently to Russ's lips. Russ's tongue came out and licked the snow. His head fell back and he said, "Thanks."

When Flood looked at Ringabaugh he saw that Ringabaugh's right arm was hanging limp, bleeding from the bicep. Ringabaugh's glance was pinned on Russ's face.

Russ said, "I made a hell of a mess of things. Tell my old man—hell, tell him I'm sorry." Then anger came over his face and he said more strongly, "No, damn it—tell him I wish I'd won this. Tell him I died tryin' to see him crawl."

Russ spoke several more words but Flood couldn't make them out. Harriet rode up to the edge of the bowl and dismounted, running down to crouch beside Russ. She watched him with bitter sympathy. It was too late for talk. Within a few moments Russ died.

Dan Sweet's glance lifted and traveled across Russ's body to meet Ringabaugh's. Flood looked from one man to the other and heard Sweet say, "He wasn't Ben Gaultt's son, was he?"

"No," Ringabaugh said. "I knew Gaultt's wife a long time ago." His eyes dropped to the dead, still face of the boy. "He was my son."

Flood heard Harriet's voice: "I felt that." The girl

turned her wind-raw face toward the white-haired outlaw and spoke quietly: "Don't tell Ben."

"No reason to," Ringabaugh said.

Flood felt as though he had accidentally partaken of a secret that he had no right to. He said awkwardly, "I saw Pete go down over the hill. I think he's dead."

Sweet nodded. "Mingo took an arrow in his back. I don't know if he'll pull through."

That was when Ben Gaultt came forward from the rocks above. Gaultt's face widened with recognition of the body on the ground; he pushed Flood aside and squatted by Russ and for a long time no one spoke and no one moved at all. Gaultt reached out hesitantly and touched Russ's motionless cheek; he stood up quickly and turned away, hiding his face, lowering his head and lifting his hands to cover his eyes. He said nothing.

Ringabaugh stood up and said blankly, "I guess I'll draw my pay in Dry Fork and ride on." He looked searchingly at Harriet. The girl met his eyes and her only response was to lift her hand and place it on Dan Sweet's shoulder.

Ringabaugh nodded and said to Sweet, "It's been a long ride and I'm glad it's over. I'll see you sometime, my friend." The white-haired man nodded to Flood and walked slowly uphill toward his horse.

He swung into the saddle, reined around and disappeared into the gray dripping timber. His horse's footfalls, muffled against the pine-needle carpet, soon faded beyond earshot. Flood had the feeling he had just seen the last of a great man.

"It will take the rest of the day to gather the herd," Sweet said coolly.

"And to bury our boys," Harriet added, low-voiced.

A horse came through the trees and Flood looked up, and was surprised to see Ringabaugh returning. Ringabaugh said, "Something I forgot to tell you, Sweet. It was my boy who killed your friend Tom Graves back in Santa Rita."

"I thought that," Sweet said.

Flood looked across at Ben Gaultt to see if Gaultt had understood what Ringabaugh had said. But Gaultt's back was

still turned and his face was still in his hands; he reacted not at all.

Ringabaugh touched his forehead with a finger in an indolent signal and rode away.

Soon after that, Sweet stood and touched Harriet's arm. She looked into his face. Flood watched them both walk away and then he was left alone in the shallow bowl with Ben Gaultt and the dead man who was not Ben Gaultt's son. Presently Gaultt turned to face him. Gaultt's face lifted and Flood saw that his eyes were dry. Gaultt said softly, "Next year there'll be another herd to trail to market."

"Why," Flood said, "I guess there will, Ben."

Gaultt's troubled gaze lay on Russ. He wiped his palms on his thighs.

He said, "Let's get moving. We've got some work to do."