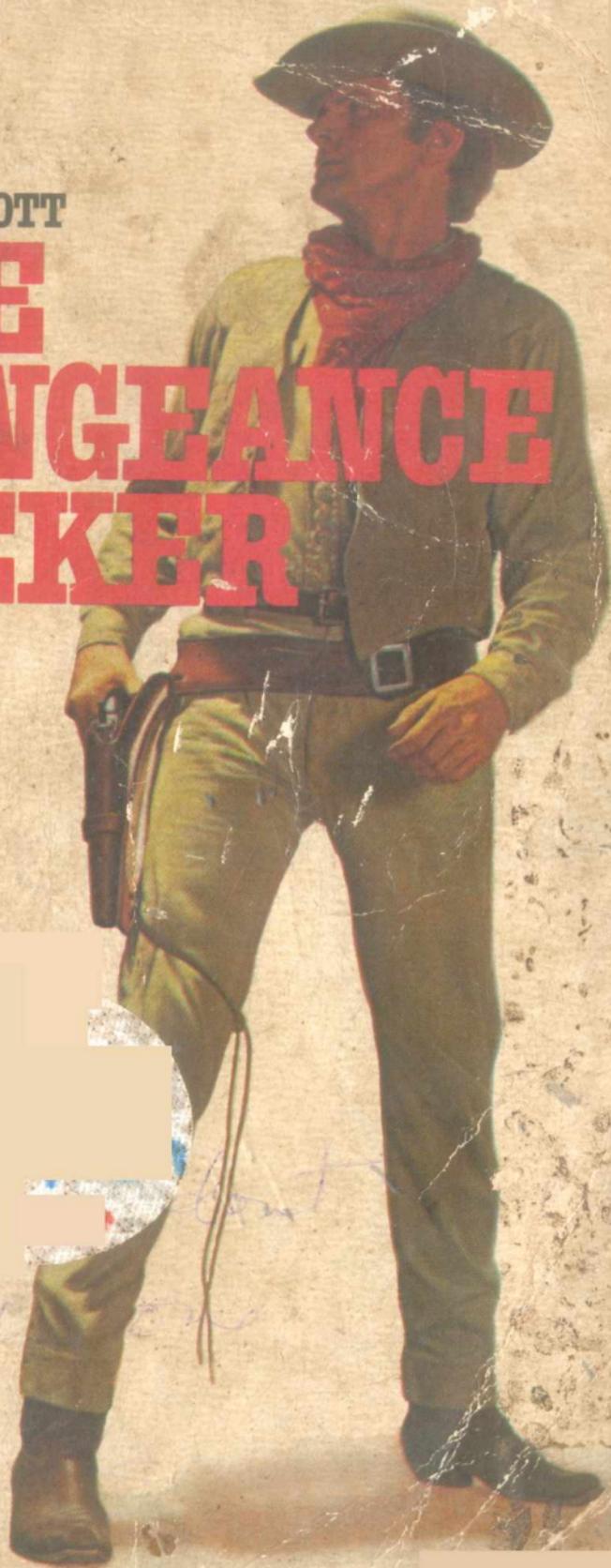


WILL C. KNOTT

THE VENGEANCE SEEKER

#1



Ellen appeared in the doorway, screamed and dropped to the side of the broken form that moved sluggishly on the ground before her—like an enormous worm some brutal giant had stomped on.

The purpled, barely recognizable face of Bob Bowman looked up at his wife. The puffed slits that hid his eyes flickered open. The mangled lips twisted in pain, and the groan that escaped them seemed torn from the very roots of his soul.

THE VENGEANCE SEEKER #1

BY WILL C. KNOTT



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PROLOGUE

The first shot swung the boy around and caused him to set the water bucket down hastily. On the second shot the boy darted past the stall and back out into the glare of mid-day. The five saddle-tramps who'd just rode in not long before were now crowding down the porch steps—and one of them was carrying his father's strong box on his shoulder.

As the boy raced across the hard baked ground toward the porch, his father appeared in the doorway behind the five men, leaning shakily on the door-jamb, his shotgun held in one hand. But his father had trouble leveling it, and as he lurched out onto the porch, one of the men already on his horse brought up his sixgun and fired. The boy was closer now, near enough to see clearly the look of slack surprise on his father's face as the slug tore through his vest, flinging him back against the wall. And then his mother stood in the doorway, an enormous revolver in her small hand.

But even as she lifted it, another rider, quieting his horse as he aimed, fired. The bullet tore into the jamb beside her. He fired again. She dropped the revolver and clutched at the fountain that spewed from her neck. With both hands trying to stem the flood,

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she sank to her knees beside her husband, then pitched forward.

A scream tore from the boy's lips. The men saw him coming for the first time, and the three others who had still not mounted swung quickly into their saddles, the one with the strong box under his arm experiencing the most difficulty. But before they could get under way, the boy had reached the rider who had shot his father. He flung himself at the man, caught him about the waist, and dragged him off his horse.

The rider came down hard, with the boy on top of him. He was momentarily stunned. But not the boy. He was aware only of a transporting fury that rendered him insensible to pain. He snatched at the fallen rider's holstered revolver and pulled it free, fired quickly into the slowly stirring form beside him on the ground, then whirled and fired up at one of the other riders wheeling about him. He hardly felt the impact of the gun as it exploded with each shot.

He saw one rider throw his hands up and spin back off his horse, then turned to face another looming close behind him; but he did not complete the turn as the barrel of a sixgun slammed down onto the crown of his head. The blow drove the boy onto one knee. The ground seemed to speed up a little and tip under him. He looked at his empty right hand and realized he'd dropped the gun. Another blow from the gun barrel struck him on the right side of his face, which immediately seemed to come alive with a blossoming scarlet flower.

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He was on his hands and knees now, aware of cursing and shouting and the clatter of hooves on all sides of him, and then a shot, so near it momentarily deafened him, as something incredibly hot smashed through his left shoulder so that he could no longer rest on his hands and knees. As he pitched forward onto the ground, he felt something hard and warm hanging from his right eye-socket and realized dimly what it was—his right eye.

Another shot thundered equally close, and as he felt the slug slicing into his back under his shoulder blade, he thought, they have killed me also.

A rough hand caught his shoulder and turned him so that he lay face up. Through a bloody sunset he saw a face lean close, cruel, impassive, noting with satisfaction his condition. The man was hatless and from under his thick shock of hair a fresh charge of blood flowed down the man's forehead into his eyebrow. As he leaned over the boy, a great gob of it dropped warmly onto the boy's cheek.

The man straightened and leveled his revolver at the boy's remaining eye. A call from beside him caused him to pause. There was a great ringing in the boy's ears—a sound of rushing also, like a spring freshet—and he did not hear the words. The man holstered his gun, turned to catch the reins of his mount, and swung into his saddle.

Abruptly, in a sudden explosion of dust, the boy was left to die, his face up, his fresh young blood darkening and cooling the parched ground around him. He managed to close his eye, then turn

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his face away from the searing eye of the sun. He felt himself begin to fall over the edge into oblivion.

He did not feel the anxious yet gentle hands that lifted him from the dust and carried him swiftly up the porch steps and into his house.

I

Deputy Roy Hogan pushed through the batwing doors of the saloon and paused in the doorway for a moment to accustom his eyes to the cool shadows of the place. A poker game was in progress at one of the two back tables, and Hogan relaxed somewhat when he realized that he knew each one of the players. Molly was at the other table with a young cowpoke who'd been chasing Molly for a week now. There was no one else in the saloon with the exception of Wes Cooper, the owner and barkeep, who was in the act of wiping the bar dry with a towel when Hogan stepped through the doors.

"Afternoon, Roy," Cooper called, reaching back for the whiskey.

Hogan tipped his hat back off his head and walked over to the bar. He didn't shake his head as Cooper poured his shot and then pushed the glass toward him. Right now it was something he sorely needed. An hour on the trail after a fruitless quest out to the squatters' encampment along the river had done nothing for his temper. Those poor-mouthed sodbusters were going to get their asses whupped and there was nothing Hogan could—or wanted—to do about it. This was cow country, and that was that. He

lifted the glass quickly to his mouth, and choked down the fiery liquid. It took just a little of the trail dust with it. He slapped the empty glass down on the counter and shoved it back to Cooper. The barkeep had the bottle ready.

"Anything happen while I was gone?" Hogan asked casually, pulling the newly-filled glass back toward him.

"Not a thing," the barkeep said warily. "Not in this heat. The only things moving are the damned lizards."

"Any strangers in town?"

"Yup."

The question had been asked casually, like the first one—and was a question Roy Hogan had asked of this barkeep daily for the past sixteen months of his tenure as deputy sheriff of Providence.

He straightened his feet under him now and looked squarely at Cooper. "Drifter?"

"Hard to tell. A strange one."

"Now just what the hell do you mean by that?"

The big man shrugged and reached nervously for his bar cloth. "If you saw him, you'd know what I mean. He don't look like the average cowpoke."

"A gunslinger?"

"Maybe. His iron is well-taken care of and tied down. But that wasn't what struck me as strange."

Hogan's mouth had gone dry. He reached for the shot glass and noticed with alarm that his hand shook just a trifle. "Go on."

"He's only got one eye, Roy."

Hogan picked up the glass and downed the whis-

key. When he slapped it down, the barkeep extended the bottle again, but Hogan shook his head. Close to panic, he was ashamed of himself for this reaction. This was not the time for panic. But it *was* a time for a clear head. It sure as Jesus was.

"Big fellow?" Hogan asked, glancing about the saloon casually, as if the answer to his question was not particularly important to him.

"Six feet anyway."

"Quiet?"

"Very. Like a coiled spring, I'd say."

"Well, so long as he don't get into any trouble, he's none of my concern. What was he wearing?"

"Red shirt, vest and Levi's. A black, low-crowned Stetson. Dusty, but neat. Asked where he could get a bath. I told him Vince kept a tub in back of the barber shop."

"What was he riding?"

"A black. Prettiest piece of horseflesh I've seen in years." Cooper looked at Hogan closely. "You know the fellow, huh?"

Hogan looked squarely at Cooper. "What the hell gave you that idea?"

"Sorry, Roy. Didn't mean to pry. Just seemed that from the questions you asked."

"Hell, man. I'm the only law this real estate's got until Donovan gets back from Abilene. It's my job to keep an eye out for anyone who rides in—especially with that mess we got brewing with the sodbusters."

"You think this fellow might be a hired gun brought up by one of the ranchers?"

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"Could be. I'm not accusing him, you understand, but it sure as hell could be."

One of the cowpokes at the table whooped suddenly as he slapped down his hand. Hogan spun quickly in the direction of the sound, his right hand already around the handle of his six-gun. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then looked back at the barkeep.

"Noisy sonofabitch, isn't he!"

"Sure, Roy. But he don't mean no harm."

Hogan nodded. Despite himself, his knees were weak. He wanted to piss and sit down all at the same time. "Pour me another shot," he told Cooper. "Think I'll sit down for a while."

Cooper poured and Hogan took the glass over to a table against the wall and sat down at it, facing the batwing doors. Chinks of gleaming sunlight showed through the slats and dug into his trail-weary eyes, but he did not divert them. He sipped at the whiskey, then called across the floor to Cooper.

"What time did you say that stranger rode in?"

"I didn't, Roy. He rode in here a little after two, I'd say."

Hogan nodded and went back to the whiskey, his head already several shades lighter than when he had entered. He was still aware that it was not the wise thing to do, but he needed something to keep his mouth from drying out.

Two o'clock. He pulled out his pocket watch. It was now a little after three. Plenty time enough to take a bath and find a room at the hotel. Perhaps

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he'd soon be returning to the bar to look for him. But then he might have watched him ride in. . . .

Settle down, he told himself. The sonofabitch doesn't know you by sight, and your badge is in your pocket. And yet he couldn't have known Walt or Cantrell or Masterson by sight either—if this was the one Hogan thought it was.

He pulled a tobacco pouch from his vest pocket and carefully extracted from it a well-worn envelope; he blew away a piece of tobacco, unfolded a piece of lined paper containing a short message scrawled on it with a blunt pencil.

Roy:

I just heard that one-eyed devil got Walt last week outside Hays City. The sonofabitch hung him. Walt writ me where you was when Cantrell got his. He knew you was deputy at Providence and maybe he talked some before he got hung. He wanted for me and you to come down there to help him lay for this guy. So looks like maybe you better lite out.

Burn this letter.

Frank

Hogan read the letter twice, his lips moving painfully over each word. He knew the message by heart and realized now that he should have taken Frank's warning and lit out.

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But there had always been the chance that Walt never opened his mouth to this guy. And anyway he was getting mighty tired of always moving on. He was close to forty now, and his bones didn't take so easy to the saddle. Not any more they didn't. But that didn't matter now. It was certain that Walt had told this guy where he was.

Hogan stuck the letter back in the envelope, folded it again into its familiar creases and returned it to the pouch. As he finished the whiskey, he stood up and dropped the pouch back into his vest pocket. Reading the letter again was like placing a nettle under his saddle. Before it got much damn later, he decided, he'd better light out, just as Frank had suggested.

He'd try south this time, and he wouldn't stop until he got damn near to the other side of Mexico. Maybe he'd find himself a little Mex chick and settle down.

Hogan didn't stop at the bar to settle up. His money was not good in this establishment; that was part of his job, Donovan had told him, to sort of sample the whiskey every now and then. He stopped at the table to watch the poker game, standing in such a way as to enable him to keep an eye on the door, exchanged a few bantering remarks with the players, then moved casually out the back door into the alley.

It was shadowed and cool out here, the sky a bright mirror of blue overhead. He heard a few of Fat Sal's girls in the kitchen fixing their breakfast. As he moved through the alley toward his room, he kept an

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eye on his tail to make sure that he wasn't being followed. And once when a horse and rider blocked out the far end of the alley, he quickly flattened himself against a wall, his iron jumping into his hand. But the rider moved on and Hogan cursed himself for his skittishness.

He'd better get the hell out before it got any worse.

II

Wolf Caulder sat quietly astride his black, his one good eye watching closely the lone rider picking his way past the last clump of cottonwood, then striking out south, horse and rider outlined clearly in the bright moonlight that flooded the plain. As soon as Wolf was certain of Hogan's direction, he urged his mount forward, keeping to the crest of the ridge.

For close to two miles Wolf kept parallel with the rider below him until, sure of the trail Hogan must take to quit the valley, he urged his horse to a canter, guided it carefully part way down the slope on the far side of the ridge, and then rode ahead as fast as the moonlight permitted for close on to ten more miles, reaching Indian Wells Pass just as the first streaks of gold lightened the sky behind him.

He dismounted above the trail, tied his black to a sapling on the rim of a clearing, withdrew the Winchester from its scabbard, and angled down the slope until he reached a clump of scrub pine not more than fifty feet above the trail, a vantage point that afforded him an unobstructed view of the trail for almost a hundred yards in both directions.

He made himself comfortable behind the largest of the pines, thumbed his black Stetson well back on his head, and closed his eyes.

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But he did not sleep.

He had waited too long, come too far for that now. But he rested, allowed his large frame to relax, his pulse to slow. As he always did at such times, he found himself thinking again of Diego Sanchez, the foreman who had returned too late to save his mother and father, but who had then spared himself no labor in honing their son like the edge of a fine knife, readying him for the accomplishment of the vengeance he must someday seek and gain. Diego was dead now. He had died the year Wolf had set out. Wolf. This was the name Diego had given him.

Single them out one by one, my son, like the wolf you must be and cut them down. Do this thing for your mother and for your father—and for he that loved them both, for Diego. Do not rest, my son, until you have slaked your thirst for vengeance.

He had said this, and then he had closed his wild eyes in death—a homely, grizzled old Spaniard with a snow white beard . . . a face that floated now before Wolf's closed eyes, a face that still commanded him to seek out and destroy.

It will be sweet, my young wolf cub—sweet, indeed, for you to drink the blood of these vultures. Your mother and your father will look down upon you from heaven and bless you for avenging them. It will be sweet to bring justice to the dead, my son. You will see.

Wolf stirred against the tree and opened his eyes. Sweet would it be? No. It had not been and it would not be this day. That part was an old man's lie—but

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it would be done this day because it had to be done. For no other reason. And that was reason enough.

A fresh morning breeze swept down from the peaks behind him and tugged at Wolf's dark hair. Again he closed his eyes. The call of a whippoorwill echoed in the pines, and though it soothed him, he still did not sleep.

The sun's rays had whitened the trail's dust by the time Wolf heard the first faint click of hoof on stone. He opened his eyes wider and straightened. After a few moments he saw the rider, shading his eyes and inspecting the high ground about him, obviously intending to find a spot somewhere in the cover above the pass where he could sleep the day out. Until he had shaken the dust of the Wyoming Territory, he obviously intended to travel by night and sleep by day, for as Wolf watched, Hogan guided his mount halfway up a slope to examine a likely spot, then returned to the trail on the lookout for a less exposed campsite.

As Hogan passed beneath Wolf, his eyes still on the lookout for a place to camp, Wolf levered a round of .44/40 into the chamber of his Winchester, making no effort to muffle the sound.

The rider pulled up abruptly, his horse twisting its neck unhappily at the cruel suddenness with which the bit cut into its mouth. As Wolf had intended, the levering of the cartridge had echoed sharply in the narrow pass. If Hogan had been nervous before, he

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was close to panic now. The man's iron was already in his right hand as he peered closely up at the brush on all sides of him. It was obvious that he wanted to dismount, but did not know which side of his horse was the safest.

For more than a minute he searched the rocks and pines above him. Then slowly he replaced his sixgun and seemed to relax in his saddle. Wolf heard the creak of the saddle's leather as Hogan leaned forward to quiet his horse after the cruel way it had just been used. A thin smile broke Wolf's impassive features, and a long scar that extended from the patched eye socket back across his cheekbone to just below his ear deepened significantly as Hogan flicked his reins and urged his horse on.

Waiting for the rider to travel a few more yards, Wolf lifted the Winchester to his left cheek, aimed carefully and fired. The reins were cut from Hogan's hand as cleanly as if a Bowie had slashed through them. The horse bucked in alarm and Hogan went tumbling backward off his mount.

He hit the ground hard and lay stunned where he had fallen, his head resting alongside the boulder it had struck when he came down. Wolf levered another round into the chamber of his Winchester, stood up and picked his way down the slope, his lean six-foot-three frame moving with deceptive grace. It was the click of his spurs on rock that aroused Hogan. He opened his eyes, caught sight of Wolf and grabbed for his iron. As he rolled about to face Wolf, Wolf stopped, sighted quickly, and fired a second

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time. The six-gun went flying from Hogan's hand, a finger going with it.

On his knees now, Hogan grabbed his shattered hand in an effort to stem the pulsing flow. "You son-ofabitch!" he rasped. "Why don't you give me a chance!"

Wolf levered another cartridge into his Winchester. "Before I kill you, Hogan, I want some information. Where's Frank Joplin?"

Hogan moistened dry lips. "How the hell should I know? We split up ten years ago."

"You know where he is, Hogan. So make it quick. Like McClure. He told me where to find you quick enough. He got down on his knees right pronto to draw me a map. And Joplin would have been just as anxious to draw that map for me."

"I told you. I don't know where Joplin is. But even if I did, what good would it do for me to tell you? You'll kill me anyway."

Wolf smiled thinly. "You never can tell. I might give you a chance."

"You bastard."

Hogan stood up, still holding his bleeding hand. The naked fear was gone from his face now. What Wolf read there instead was a desperate—but admirable—defiance. Wolf was pleased. It was easier to kill a man who did not dishonor himself by groveling. McClure and Cantrell had both died shamefully. Of the three Wolf had executed, only Sam Masterson had died with courage.

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Hogan said, "You're the kid we busted up in Arizona Territory about ten years ago, ain't you."

Wolf nodded.

"I figured it when I heard you only had one eye."

"Where's Frank Joplin?"

"I don't know."

"You're lying."

"I'm sorry, kid. I'm sorry for what we did to you."

"Where's Joplin?"

"I mean I'm sorry about . . . what we turned you into, a killer—a cold-blooded killer. For that I'm sorry, kid."

"But not sorry enough to tell me where Frank Joplin is, is that it?"

"Like I said. You'll kill me anyway."

Wolf lifted the rifle to his good eye, sighted, and fired. Hogan crashed forward to the ground, his right knee shattered, his face twisting in agony, he groaned softly.

Wolf reloaded and strode closer. "It can be quick, Hogan—and merciful. But that's up to you. Now just tell me where I can find Joplin."

The man lay back and closed his eyes. "Make it quick, kid. For Christ's sake!"

"Where's Frank Joplin?"

". . . letter. There's a letter . . . tobacco pouch . . . my vest . . ."

Wolf leaned the Winchester against a boulder, went down on one knee, fished in Hogan's vest pockets until he found and withdrew the pouch, and from

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it the letter. Unfolding it carefully, he stood up and squinting in the bright sunlight, read the short message. Then he inspected closely the postmark on the envelope. The ink had faded so by this time that he could barely make it out. Fort Buford, it looked like.

Wolf frowned. Joplin could easily have had someone mail the letter from. . . .

A sudden movement alerted him. Glancing up, he saw Hogan launch himself at the Winchester with his one functioning leg, snatch it cleanly with his good left hand and roll quickly away. Wolf drew his six-gun in one swift motion and fired at the rolling figure.

A patch of dirt by the man's head exploded as the slug missed. And then Hogan fired. It was a desperate shot—but a lucky one as the slug punched brutally into Wolf's left side, staggering him back and causing him to go down on one knee. For a quiet, cold moment he watched Hogan as the man scrambled frantically toward the six-gun Wolf had shot from his hand earlier. Then calmly Wolf sighted—and fired. The back of Hogan's head vanished and the man convulsed suddenly, half-turned, then abruptly lay still.

Wolf holstered his gun and stood slowly. His left pants leg was heavy with blood. The numbness and shock caused by the bullet's entry had now given way to a searing pain as the bullet—like a white-hot branding iron—kept working its way into his vitals.

The first bitter reflection that occurred to him was that now he would be unable to find Joplin. He

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leaned back on a boulder large enough to hold him. His head was already swimming sickeningly. He closed his eyes and waited for the ground to steady under his feet.

When it had, he stood up and took his bandanna off and stuck it in under his shirt to staunch the flow of blood. But the bandanna was not equal to the task. He dropped his Colt to the ground, unbuckled the gun belt, lifted it higher, then buckled it as tightly as he could bear it over the bandanna.

The blood's flow slackened appreciably, but as he started for his rifle, the pain caused him to wince aloud.

After he had retrieved his Winchester and Colt, he picked up the letter and envelope he had dropped during the shooting and focused his thoughts on his black, still well up the slope, grazing in the clearing where he had tethered him. He looked down the trail. Hogan's mount was in sight, quietly cropping a patch of lush grass. He would have to use Hogan's horse to reach his own.

As he started for it, the swift gliding shadow of a buzzard passed across the trail ahead of him; and by the time he had managed to pull himself onto the horse, another bird had joined the first in the sky over Hogan's still body.

III

Ellen Bowman paused in the doorway. She was certain of it this time. A horse was nickering softly, anxiously from somewhere in back of the carriage barn, and that was not where the horses were. They were in the front corral, unless Abe had moved them for some reason.

She turned about in the doorway and faced the bunkhouse. "Abe!" she called.

A wiry old man, bow-legged from the years he had spent in the saddle and wearing wide yellow braces to hold up his faded pants, emerged quickly from the bunkhouse.

"Yes, Miss Ellen?"

"Where's the stock?"

"In the front corral—where you said, Miss Ellen."

She nodded and turned back into the kitchen. Placing down on the counter the dish she'd used to carry the chicken feed, she brushed her long auburn hair off her forehead and walked through the kitchen to the bedroom.

For a moment she stood looking down at the still-sleeping form of her husband. Then she bent and shook him by the shoulder.

"Bob, get up."

He opened his eyes and gazed at her. "What's the matter?"

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Last night's whiskey was still lacing his breath. "I can hear a strange horse out back. Maybe it's one of Sanderson's men."

"Tell Abe," he said, rolling over and pulling the covers over his shoulder.

She straightened and looked at the balding, disheveled head of the man she had married too quickly and for all the wrong reasons. Well, she'd made her bed . . . Turning abruptly, she left the bedroom, walked back through the kitchen and out the door.

Abe was in the act of lugging a full bucket of water from the well to the bunkhouse. She considered calling him for a moment, decided against it, and continued around back and headed for the main barn. There was no horse in sight as she approached the big open doors. She felt a little silly.

And then she heard the nicker again, louder now and unmistakably impatient—coming from behind the barn. She hurried past the open door and cut through a small tangle of alders. The black was tethered at the far edge of the clearing on the other side of the alders. His massive flanks were to her; but sensing her approach, he trotted forward and then turned about to face her, ears flat, nostrils flaring.

"Easy, boy," she said, moving to him and taking hold of the black's reins.

The horse was still saddled, a blanket roll neatly trussed behind it, a Winchester in the scabbard. But the horse had come a long way, its long legs gray with sweathardened dust. The horse had cropped all

the grass within reach of its snout. She felt the horse's nose. It needed water. That was why he had been complaining. But where was its rider?

She no longer considered the rider one of Sander-son's men; but who was he? She looked back at the barn and remembered its wide open doors. Hurrying back through the alders, she stepped into the cool interior. She moved past a buckboard that Bob had let slip past repair. The old stalls, no longer in use, were piled high with loose hay.

As she moved past the second stall, she caught the furtive movement and whirled to confront a tall stranger whose enormous gun was leveled at her heart. He was leaning weakly against the side of the stall, and his voice came cold, but soft, just barely above a husky whisper:

"Not a sound, Miss. Not one sound."

Her hand flew up to her mouth involuntarily, but she kept the gasp barely audible. "Who . . . who are you?" she asked softly. "What do you want?"

"Nothing much, Miss. Just needed a place to catch my breath."

In the dim light provided by the single, dirt-smearred window behind the stall she could see that he was a frighteningly ugly man, taller than her by more than a foot with only one eye and the right side of his face cruelly scarred, his face lean and drawn and paler than moonlight.

"Put down that gun," she said. "You don't need it with me. I'm unarmed."

He nodded slightly and the ghost of a smile flick-

ered across his broken visage. Slowly—the movement obviously causing him great discomfort—he motioned to her with the gun, indicating she should turn and go back out while he followed.

“What are you going to do?” Ellen demanded. “I told you you don’t need that gun you’re waving.”

He pushed himself away from the wall and started toward her. “Just do as I say, Miss,” he whispered.

She did not move. “You’re wounded—on the run from the law most likely. I’ll not give you any help. And if you pull that trigger, it’ll bring my ranch hands in here on the double. Now give it to me.”

His one eye flickered shut for a moment—then opened wildly, desperation and fury flashing from it: “Do as I say, Miss!” he cried hoarsely. “You are right. I *am* hurt. And that means I don’t have time to stand here and argue with you! Now move!”

She stepped calmly toward him. He raised the gun to strike her—but slowly, haltingly. Quickly her right hand snaked out and slapped the man smartly on the left cheek. His head snapped around and the gun dropped from his hand to the hay at his feet. He looked stupidly down at the six gun, then back at her—a look of astonishment and what she thought might be relief flooding his face. And then with a barely audible groan, he collapsed forward.

She braced herself and caught him, but was forced to let him down easily to the barn floor as his dead weight threatened to crush her beneath him. As soon as he was quiet on the floor, she straightened and stepped back, her heart racing like a frightened ani-

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mal, the blood pulsing in her temples. Only gradually did she become aware of the heavy slick of fresh blood that bathed the front of her dress down to her knees.

With a small cry, she whirled and darted from the barn, her near-hysterical cries bringing Abe on the run. The old man caught her halfway between the barn and the ranchhouse and shook the hysteria out of her, then led her into the kitchen, sat her down at the table, and went in to the bedroom to roust her husband.

By the time the two men had managed to carry the stranger into the house, Ellen had changed her dress, and readied the bed her husband had just quit. Abe was carrying the stranger by the legs, Bob by the shoulders, and as Abe backed into the bedroom, he looked with a question in his eyes at Ellen, obviously reluctant to deposit the blood-sodden stranger in her bed.

"Go ahead," she told Abe firmly. "Put him down."

"Yes, Miss Ellen," he said, swinging around so that the stranger's legs would rest at the foot of the bed.

"Christ, Ellen!" Bob complained hopelessly, as soon as he'd dropped the fellow's head onto the pillow. "Where we going to sleep?"

"You can sleep in the bunkhouse with Abe. I'll sleep in the sitting room. On the sofa. I'm not planning to make this a permanent arrangement. I want you to ride in this morning for Doc Gurney."

Bob Bowman looked distastefully down at the

sunken, almost cadaverous figure. "He'll be dead before I get back," he said, looking back at Ellen.

"Perhaps."

"I don't see why we should bother about him. Who is he, anyway? Just some drifter that got himself shot."

"If you want, Miss Ellen, I'll go in to Fort Buford for the doctor," said Abe.

Ellen looked at Bob. "Will you go, please? I need Abe here."

Her husband considered a moment; then his pale eyes lit craftily as he considered the ride to Fort Buford to hunt up Doc Gurney. It didn't need to be such an unpleasant chore, at that. Ellen saw the gleam in his eye and understood at once.

"Just don't you and Doc Gurney get liquored up."

"Or you'll what?"

"See to it that this time you stay in the bunkhouse," she replied firmly.

He made an effort to square his shoulders. "Now, listen here, Ellen. That's no way for you to. . . ."

But she had already turned and was on her way back into the kitchen, Abe obediently on her heels. Bowman caught himself, glanced down in frustration at the long, sunken stranger bleeding in his bed, cursed, and reached for his hat resting on the dresser.

Bowman reached Fort Buford a little past noon, a sullen ghost of a rider as dry as the dust that clung to him and his horse. As he prepared to dismount in front of Steadman's Saloon, a puncher sitting on a

bench looked up from his whittling and grinned. "You sure didn't take long to get back in here, Bowman. How's your head?"

Bowman swung off his horse. "Who the hell are you?"

"Don't recall, huh?" the puncher said, grinning. "You bought me my share of rounds last night. Fact is, you stood half the riders of the Diamond T."

Dropping the reins over the hitching rail, Bowman stepped up onto the boardwalk. "Well, maybe you can return the favor in a little while. I'm as dry as a bone."

"Sorry, Bowman," the puncher said, returning to his whittling. "All I own 'cept the clothes on my back is this here knife and the stick I'm whittlin' on."

Bowman swore under his breath and pushed on past the puncher down the walk until he came to Frank Latimer's Barber Shop. He stuck his head in the door. Latimer was lathering a customer.

"Frank, the doc back there?"

"Nope. Ain't been around all morning."

"If he comes by, you tell him I'll be in Steadman's."

"Reckon since you asked me nice and proper, I'll be glad to do that," the barber said, as he turned his attention back to his customer.

Relieved that he had not been able to locate the doctor at once, Bowman turned back around and returned to Steadman's. The clink of poker chips coming from a table at the far end of the place was the

only sound besides that of his spurs as he belled up to the bar. Harry Korn, the bartender, nodded curtly.

"Whiskey," Bowman said.

Korn waited for Bowman to slap a coin down on the polished mahogany before he reached back for the bottle and poured Bowman's drink. *Thanks, you sonofabitch*, Bowman muttered under his breath as he drew the shot glass up to his lips.

Harry Korn waited until Bowman placed the empty shot glass back down on the bar before he smiled thinly at Bowman and said, "You're welcome, you sonofabitch."

Bowman frowned in surprise. He hadn't realized the bartender had heard him. "Didn't mean nothing, Harry," he said. "Just seems like you'd know by now I'm good for it."

"Sure, Mr. Bowman. I understand. "You're a big rancher now."

Hell, Bowman told himself angrily, *no use talking to the hired help. What the hell do they know?* Bowman pushed the empty glass toward Korn. As the bartender refilled it, Bowman asked, "The doc been in yet?"

Korn nodded and stoppered the bottle. "Drank his breakfast a little after ten. Ain't seen him since."

Bowman tipped his hat up off his forehead, turned and looked over the place, his elbows resting on the bar. He expected that reply, of course. If doc was on a call, he wouldn't be back for some time yet.

One of the players got up abruptly from the poker

table and walked unhappily past Bowman and out through the batwing doors. Bowman recognized Sheriff Gulch still sitting at the table and decided to deal himself in. He had lost plenty last night. But now, his head a little clearer, he just might win some of it back. He was encouraged by the pile of chips sitting in front of Gulch. Whenever the sheriff got ahead, he became an incorrigible bluffer.

The sheriff glanced up as Bowman stopped in back of the empty chair. "Back already, Bowman?"

"Mind if I sit in, Sheriff?"

Gulch shrugged. "Your money's as good as anyone else's," the man said.

Bowman waved Harry Korn over.

"Let's have a few more chips—and a glass of beer," he told the bartender.

As Korn went back to the bar, Bowman sat down in the empty chair and the sheriff began dealing. Pete Riley, sitting directly across from Bowman, spoke up.

"What brings you back so soon, Bowman? Ain't that wife of yours got enough for you to do on that ranch of hers?"

"Sure," Bowman admitted ruefully. "She's always got plenty for me to do—only today she sent me in here to get Doc Gurney."

"What she want him for?" the sheriff asked, without pausing in his dealing.

His eyes on the cards sliding toward him, Bowman answered, "She found some guy in the barn got himself shot up pretty bad. Now the poor bastard is bleeding all over our bed."

Pete Riley smiled thinly as he fanned his cards and studied them. Bowman looked his hand over and licked suddenly dry lips. Aces and Jacks. He could open, all right. He sure as hell could open.

Stan Betts, the fellow next to Pete, said, "I can open," and tossed two blue chips in.

Desperate to hide his pleasure, Bowman followed his example and discarded one card. The sheriff's eyebrows went up a notch.

"Well," he drawled, tossing out a couple of chips also, "I might as well hang around to see what the weather'll be like."

Everyone stayed in but Pete Riley, who looked across the table at Bowman after discarding his hand. "So where'd this fellow come from, Bowman?"

Bowman shrugged. "I don't know. He's just some drifter. An ugly one, though. He's got an eye patch and a pretty deep scar running from it all the way back to his ear. He's as lean as a beanpole and just as long—a big sonofabitch."

Harry Korn brought over Bowman's beer and fifty dollars worth of chips. As Bowman paid for his beer, the sheriff watched him closely and dealt him his single card. Then he dealt himself three and two more for Stan Betts. As Stan studied his hand, the sheriff looked back at Bowman.

"You say this fellow is a big one?"

"That's what I said. His legs hung right out over the bed when we put him down."

"And he has only one eye?"

THE VENGEANCE SEEKER #1

"Well now, I didn't look under the eye patch to make sure. But that's the way it looked to me."

Bowman was only barely aware of the sheriff's curiosity as he studied his hand. Three jacks and a couple of aces. Why the hell couldn't he have been this lucky the night before? Trying not to show his eagerness, he picked up five dollars worth of chips and looked expectantly at Stan.

Stan tossed a dollar's worth of chips into the pot. As casually as he could manage it, Bowman shoved a single blue chip forward—then four more.

"Too rich for me," the sheriff drawled as he slapped his cards down.

Stan looked sharply at Bowman and dropped his hand to the table. "Okay, Bowman. You can have it."

"Hell!" exploded Bowman. "I get a hand like this and wind up with peanuts."

"You sweat too much," said Pete Riley, smiling without affection at Bowman.

The sheriff placed both hands down on the table and pushed his chair back. "That's it for today, gents. We got the law to keep."

The two deputies stood up quickly as Bowman looked in dismay at the sheriff. "You guys quitting? I feel lucky today. And after last night, you fellows owe me a chance to. . . ."

"We don't owe you nothing, Bowman. Not a goddam thing."

Riley and Betts grinned down at Bowman. Riley met Bowman's frantic gaze with a mocking smile. "Maybe this ain't your day, after all, Bowman."

As they picked up their chips and left the table, Bowman watched them with mounting fury and frustration. They had no right to treat him the way they did. And then he thought of Ellen. She was getting to be the same way, for Christ's sake. He felt suddenly betrayed, forlorn—abandoned even. Didn't anyone care for him, not even his own wife? Sure, maybe he did marry her for that spread . . . but that didn't mean he couldn't make her a good husband, just as soon as they shook off the dust of this territory.

But would she go? *Hell, man*, he told himself, *she'll have no choice when she finds out what you've done.*

The thought sobered him abruptly, and he found himself recalling the purpose of his ride in to Fort Buford. He finished up the glass of beer, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and got to his feet. Maybe Doc Gurney was back to the barber shop by now.

As Bowman made his way along the boardwalk, Sheriff Gulch led his own mount from Stile's Livery and swung into the saddle. He'd already sent Pete and Stan over to his office to keep an eye on things after he rode out.

Gulch had something pretty damned important to tell Frank Sanderson of the Diamond T: that one-eyed killer he'd been on the lookout for had finally arrived.

IV

Frank Sanderson sat facing the open window, the bright sun slanting across his seamed face, down his vest, and over his left forearm. He liked to sit in the sun like this, drinking in the smells that came in the open window—especially the pungent odor that came from the sun-baked axle on the wagon wheel someone must have left just outside the window.

From the way sound carried and the feel of the sunlight on his face, he had little trouble imagining the sky's cobalt blue and the white glare of the hard-packed front yard before the main corral. But it was his ears that brought the scene to life for him: the lazy shuffle of his cowpokes as they went about their business and the nervous hooves of the broncs circling inside their corral; while above it all the steady clangor from the blacksmith shop off to his left brought to his mind's eye a picture of the bright white flame guttering in the bellows' blast and the rippling muscles of his giant of a blacksmith as the man brought down his hammer. . . .

Breaking suddenly into this came the sound of his daughter's boots as she strode quickly across the yard toward the house. She passed in front of his open window, mounted the front porch and entered the house. Sanderson swung his swivel chair about and

directed his sightless gaze at the door a moment before he heard it swing open.

"What is it, Tara?" he asked, aware from her stride and from the force with which she swung open the door that she was a mite upset.

"Sheriff Gulch just rode in. He wants to see you and he won't tell me what it's all about."

"I'll see him. If it's important you should know what he wants, I'll let you know, Tara."

She hesitated a moment, then spun about and left the room. He heard her leave the house and a moment later return across the yard with the sheriff. Tara escorted the man into the study. As Gulch strode across the room toward Sanderson's desk, Sanderson heard his daughter leave, pulling the door shut behind her.

"Well, what is it, Gulch?"

"Caulder's here, Frank."

Sanderson felt a sudden dismay. But he kept his voice level. "You've seen him?"

"No. I just heard about him. He's been shot up real bad, it looks like."

"You said he's *here*."

"At Ellen Bowman's spread."

"What the hell is he doing at her place?"

"Bowman rode in about noon. He said something about his wife finding Caulder in his barn this morning."

"Could that woman have . . .?"

"I don't see how, Frank. It's just a crazy fluke is all."

THE VENGEANCE SEEKER #1

"Are you *sure* it's him?"

"Better than six feet tall, a patch over his eye, and a scar running from the eye socket all the way back to his ear—a real mean-looking sonofabitch is the way Bowman described him."

"It's Wolf Caulder all right."

Sanderson's heavy gray brows knitted as Sanderson considered his situation. Wolf Caulder had finally found him. Or *had* he? He was now looking for Frank Joplin, not Frank Sanderson. None of the gang had ever known who he really was—only Gulch here, and Barton, who'd recruited the four men. And yet, for the past four years Caulder had gotten closer and closer. The man was a devil.

But now he was wounded—dead perhaps—which meant that Roy Hogan had not been taken easily. Of course the fact that Caulder was here at all meant that Hogan was dead.

"He's probably killed Hogan then," Sanderson said softly.

He heard Gulch shift his weight. "Seems like it," the man said. "How do you suppose Caulder got wind you was up here? Hogan didn't know that himself."

"That letter we sent to warn him. If he kept it and Caulder found it on him, the post mark would tell him it came from Fort Buford."

"That makes it pretty certain then. Hogan's dead."

"Yes."

"What do we do now, Frank?"

"You do nothing. Go back to town. I'll send Bar-

ton over to the Circle M to check out Caulder's condition."

When Sanderson heard Gulch open the door, he said, "Tell Tara to find Barton and send him here."

Gulch said he would and closed the door behind him.

Still in his swivel chair, Sanderson pulled himself closer to the massive desk. Pulling open the second drawer on his right, he lifted from it a well-oiled Colt, leaving the holster and cartridge belt in the drawer. Placing the Colt on the top of the desk, he closed the drawer, then fitted his hand almost lovingly around the butt.

For a long moment he sat at the desk, the sixgun in his hand. Then he opened the top drawer and placed it carefully inside and closed the drawer. The gun was loaded. He had been able to tell that easily enough from its weight.

A foolish precaution, perhaps. But the action gave him some comfort. Through the open window behind him he heard the sound of Tara's rapid footsteps as she hurried from the house and across the yard, evidently on her way to find Barton.

The sound of a horse galloping toward the main gate told him that Gulch was on his way back to Fort Buford. It told himself something else as well: how long it had been since he had been able to swing onto a horse and ride off like that.

He still rode, of course, but only with difficulty and with Tara riding at his side.

Perhaps he should be glad that Caulder had finally

blundered this close to him. Like a blind spider waiting in the corner of his web, he could now move in while Caulder was still helpless and finish him off—as he should have done so long ago . . .

Not one of his four riders had known him until that day he met them in Fort Worth, and as usual he had no intention of seeing any of them again once their business together had been completed. In this way had he recovered his losses once before. The first time the Indians had run off his stock, and on this occasion it had been a blizzard that had frozen most of his cattle solid.

The Caulder spread had been their fourth job in as many weeks as they swept out of Texas and into New Mexico Territory, knocking off a stage, a small cowtown bank, and two wealthy ranchers. Each separate operation had been planned meticulously by him, and until the Caulder ranch they had been executed without a hitch.

But when Caulder went for his iron, Frank had had to gun him down with a bullet to his chest. But then the man had followed them out of the house with a shotgun . . . and his wife . . . and then that wild kid, coming out of nowhere, pulling Hogan from his horse and shooting him with his own gun. Then one of the kid's wild shots had nicked Frank high on the forehead and knocked him back off his horse.

Sanderson stirred in frustration at the memory. It was only a momentary hesitation that had kept him from finishing off the kid by blowing out his remaining eye. How many times since had he cursed him-

self for not having done so? But a frantic call had come from the wounded Hogan, alerting him to the foreman's approach, and he had holstered his gun and vaulted back onto his horse, slapping his hat back on and pulling it down over the wound that crazy kid had given him.

The hat. The sweaty, dirty hat. Under its sweat band the wound had festered. At Denver he'd asked the doctor why his forehead was swelling, and the fool had told him it was just a flesh wound and to swab it with whiskey. He'd left the doctor with Hogan, who still carried the kid's bullet in his backside, and continued north. Soon his whole damn head was on fire, his face swollen like a pig's. And then first one eye and then the other began to close.

Somehow he had managed to keep going until he reached the Diamond T. Doc Gurney had been sent for, and it was he who decided finally to lance the infection and drain it—but not before both eyes had been darkened forever. . . .

Through the window behind him, Sanderson heard his daughter and his foreman, Steve Barton, mount the porch steps and enter the house. A moment later when they both walked into the room, Sanderson said to his daughter, "I'll speak to Barton alone, Tara."

Sanderson heard her hesitate at the door, but said nothing and waited for her to leave. After a moment he heard her turn quickly and pull the door shut behind her. As soon as she had left, Barton approached Sanderson. Sanderson could smell the dust on the man—and the feet within his boots.

"What was Gulch doing here?" Barton asked. "The way he rode in, as lathered as his horse I wondered if maybe Ellen Bowman up and murdered her husband." He chuckled. "I wouldn't blame her if she had."

"No," said Sanderson. "We ain't likely to get rid of Ellen Bowman that easy."

"What was it then?"

"Gulch has some news about Wolf Caulder."

Quickly Sanderson told his foreman what Gulch had learned about the wounded stranger who had shown up on the Bowman ranch.

"And you're sure it is Wolf Caulder?" Barton asked.

"I'm as sure as I can be, knowing what I know, ride over there and see what you can find out."

"Does that mean we wait then to give Ellen Bowman the good news?"

"About her moving out?"

"That's right. I don't figure Bowman has told her yet. I hear tell he was in town last night pissing that money away at poker and standing everyone in the county to all the liquor they could handle."

Sanderson considered a moment, then nodded. "All right. Tell her then. But remember, I'm giving her two weeks to clear out. That should be plenty of time."

"She's going to put up a fuss."

"Of course she is. She's got steel in her backbone. But Bowman has my money and we've got his signature on a bill of sale. When that sinks in, she'll

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realize she hasn't got much of a choice in the matter."

"She'll probably empty a shotgun into Bowman, Frank."

"Maybe. He sure as hell deserves it. But that won't help her hang on to the Circle M. Now get on over there and see what you can find out about Caulder."

As the foreman turned and left the room, Sanderson sat back, the trace of a smile creasing the bleak landscape of his face. Perhaps this day was the beginning of the end for two very tough opponents—one of whom he had learned to respect, while the other had caused to grow within him something he had never really felt before and never wanted to feel again—a cold, persistent, sometimes paralyzing fear.

VI

Wolf woke to the sound of a woman's voice. It was coming from behind him, near his head. Her words were urgent, hushed. She was talking to an older man. He opened his eye and saw nothing. Only gradually did he realize he was staring up at the ceiling of the room. He turned his head in the direction of the voice and abruptly the woman stopped talking.

He saw her face then. It was round, soft, with eyes that were large and filled with concern—dark brown eyes, the same shade as the thick explosion of curls that she had swept up into a hasty knot on the back of her head.

He felt sudden, enormous relief. "Then . . . I didn't kill you?"

She seemed startled by his question, and before she could answer, the grizzled old timer beside her spoke up for her.

"You're lucky this young lady didn't kill *you!*"

Yes, of course. That was true. It was all a wonder . . . that she was beside him, that he was here in this room, that all his life's blood had not drained away entirely. He felt extraordinarily light-headed, as a matter of fact. He wanted to get up and skip a jig and to laugh, loud and long—and to ride, and ride, and ride . . . but he was so tired . . . and so thirsty.

He closed his eyes. His lids were as heavy as full cartridge belts.

An incredibly cool hand rested lightly on his forehead and he became aware of how warm he was. A sun was burning within him, causing that almost intolerable thirst. He opened his mouth and waited for the cool, blessed water—as if by doing this he could command the water to attend his parched lips.

There was a stirring beside him. He heard the clink of a crock striking a glass and then the cool glass was pressed to his lips. The water trickling into his mouth was like a revelation. He gulped at it greedily and some of it went down the wrong way, causing him to cough. With each wrenching cough, lights danced in his head. But no matter. He must have more. He finished the glass and lay back content, his eyes closed, the fire within him momentarily banked.

“Can you hear me?” the woman asked.

He could only open his eyes and turn his head to her.

“Then listen,” she continued. “I sent my husband for the doctor this morning. It is past midnight and he hasn’t returned yet. Abe here is going to take that bullet out of you. He doesn’t think he can wait much longer.”

The old man spoke then. “It’ll hurt like blazes, mister. My hands ain’t as steady as they used to be. But if I don’t find that slug, you won’t be here tomorrow morning to complain about it.”

“Abe has some whiskey he can give you,” the woman explained. “You could take that for the pain.”

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Wolf shook his head slowly and then concentrated mightily on what he had to say next. When he was ready, he twisted his head around so that he was looking directly into Abe's face.

"Keep probe . . . until I tell you when you find it . . . I'll know . . . understand?"

Abe nodded.

He turned his head enough then to face the woman. "Save . . . whiskey for . . . wound." He smiled faintly. ". . . kills worms."

She pulled back, a hand flying to her mouth at his words, her eyes filled with sudden compassion.

"Understand . . .?"

She nodded.

He looked back up at the ceiling and closed his eyes and waited as the old man began cutting away his clothing with a heavy pair of shears. When the blades of the shears came into contact with the skin about the wound, an incredible bolt of pain suffused his left side. He opened his mouth to scream, but heard only a faint moan.

The old man began to work more swiftly. . . .

The sun was pouring into the room, falling full upon his pillow and the back of his head. But it was not the sun that had awakened him.

It was the voices. Angry voices. First the woman's and then the man's. The argument was bitter, intense. It stopped abruptly as the sound came to him of a hand slapping a face. This was followed by the sound of a fist burying itself into a shoulder or stomach and

was accompanied by a soft cry of startled pain. The woman had slapped the man and he had punched her back.

He lifted his head and turned it in the direction from which the sounds were coming. The kitchen. The door was slightly ajar, and the woman was crying now—not piteously, but furiously, with contempt for the man who had struck her and anger at herself for having let him.

“You can get out of here now,” she said evenly. “And don’t ever come back.”

“I’m your husband. You can’t kick me out.”

“If you don’t go, I’ll kill you. I don’t know how I’ll do it, but I will.”

“Woman talk,” the man scoffed. “I should have taken you in hand sooner. We’re leaving for California next week and there ain’t nothing you can do about it.”

There was the sound of quick movement, a woman’s footsteps, and then a man following. The sound of a short, brutal scuffle followed and then that of a heavy cooking utensil falling to the floor. And then the woman cried out—a small, desperate cry this time.

Wolf could almost see the upturned face, the desperation, the sense of helplessness. He sat up, disregarding the pain, found he was wearing someone’s long johns, put his hand out and pushed himself toward the kitchen door.

Both turned at his entrance and at once Wolf recognized the woman who had found him in the barn

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. . . and later, had held the bottle of whiskey to his lips, forcing him to drink it while tears for his pain coursed down her cheeks. This man could be her husband, he realized. But it didn't matter. He lurched across the kitchen and caught the man about his neck with both hands and pulled him away from the woman, slamming him violently against the door.

The man stayed upright, clawing frantically at his neck and gasping in fury. "You . . .!" he cried. "What do you mean by . . .!"

Wolf said, "Get out. She said to get out."

"Now listen here, you—"

Wolf slapped him across the face, hard. The force of the blow spun the man half around. For a moment he held his face where Wolf had slapped him, then he backed quickly away toward the bedroom, clawing at his sixgun as he went.

Wolf overtook him before he could get the gun level and swiped downward, knocking the gun from his hand. As it clattered to the floor, the man looked down at it stupidly. Then Wolf punched him on the side of his jaw. He was feeling dizzy now, half crazy with the delight of venting his fury on this piece of offal before him. He swung again, catching the man on the side of his head this time, causing the fellow's forehead to slam into the edge of a cupboard.

But before Wolf could strike out at him again, he felt a firm hand grasping his right forearm. He turned. The woman was pulling him back. Tears were staining her face, but there was something else on it

as well—fear, fear of him. Wolf relaxed immediately and pulled back from her husband.

“Please,” she pleaded. “You’ve done enough to him. No more, please.”

Wolf looked back at the man, aware suddenly that he was himself shivering violently, whether from the sudden exertion or the wild, ungovernably fury that had swept over him, he could not tell.

He let his hands fall to his side, then looked back at the woman. “You told him to get out,” he said. “And then I heard him hitting you.”

“I know,” she said weakly. “I know . . .”

At that moment the fellow scuttled past Wolf to the door. Once he reached it, he glanced back at his wife. “This won’t settle anything, Ellen,” he cried. “You’re acting crazy! Sanderson only gave us two weeks to clear out! And it’s almost been that long now!”

“Just get out, Bob,” she replied wearily. “Please, just get away from me!”

“You’re my wife, Ellen!”

“You heard her,” Wolf said, taking a step toward him. “Get out.”

The man licked his lips as he glared up at Wolf. “I need my weapon. You can’t send me out of here without a gun. Sanderson’s gunslinger said if Ellen and I weren’t out of here soon he’d go after us.”

Wolf bent, picked up the sixgun and tossed it lightly to Ellen’s husband. He holstered it and looked back miserably at his wife.

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"Ellen, please! I'm sorry I hit you just now. I . . . I don't know what came over me!"

She shook her head sadly. "It's just no good, Bob," she said with weary finality. "It never was, really. And now . . . after this . . . Please, just get out of here and stay out. Take that money if you want and go to California. I won't stop you. Just get out and leave me alone."

The man's face darkened. "Leave you alone!" he burst out furiously. "You mean leave you with *him*! You think I don't know what's been going on behind my back?" He glared wildly up at Wolf. "You ain't fooling me none! You ain't sick!"

"Oh, Bob," Ellen said. "You—you're such a fool!"

"Fool, am I? We'll see who's the fool!"

He flung the door open and stepped out, slamming the door behind him. In a moment the quick thunder of his horse's hooves filled the kitchen. As soon as it faded, Ellen sank into the kitchen chair nearest her and laid her head down on her arms.

As she wept silently, Wolf walked over to the stove and the pot of coffee sitting on it. He placed the back of his hand against the side of the pot. It was still pretty warm. Cups were hanging from hooks in the cupboard over the sink. He took down two, filled them with coffee, placed them down on the table and sat down carefully across from Ellen.

The smell of the coffee appeared to revive her spirits some. She raised her head and looked across the table at him. She struck Wolf as not pretty, handsome rather—with a fearless honesty in her eyes that

he could only admire. The eyes looked at him now with a deep sadness, and a fear that was still there, he noted, just below the surface.

"I suppose I should thank you," she said.

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

"He's such a weak man," she said. "And I was such a fool to have married him." She reached out for the coffee and pulled it closer to her across the red-checked linoleum table cloth. "I thought he could help me run the ranch. After my first husband died, I was sure I needed help."

"You don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to," he said.

"I know that," she said. "I just thought you deserved some kind of explanation."

"It's none of my business, Ma'am. Except when he hit you. I figured that part of it *was* my business."

She nodded and sipped her coffee. "How do you feel?"

"Hungry," he said, smiling. "How long have I been in there?" He indicated the bedroom with a nod of his head.

"More than a week," she said. "You certainly *must* be hungry, at that."

"I could eat a mountain lion—tail and all."

Finishing her coffee, she got up from the table and went quickly to the stove. As the kitchen filled with the smell of bacon and eggs frying in the skillet, he watched her cut thick slices of dark bread and drop them into the iron skillet alongside the eggs and bacon. His stomach twisted in anticipation. Just soon

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enough, she pulled down a huge platter from a shelf above the stove, filled it with the eggs and bacon and bread and placed it down in front of him.

Then she refilled his coffee cup and sat across from him to watch him eat. "How's your wound?"

"Burns some. But it itches too, and that's a good sign, I reckon."

"Then you'll be all right."

"Thanks to you—and to that other fellow. Who was he?"

"You must mean Abe. My hired hand."

"That's the fellow, I guess. I reckon he got that slug out all right—or I wouldn't be here now."

"Yes," she said, frowning suddenly at the memory of that night's operation. She poured herself another cup of coffee and Wolf went back to his breakfast.

Fleeting memories of the days following the operation returned to him now. He had seemed always to be waking at night or when the house was silent. The two of them—this woman Ellen and her hired hand—moved about him softly, quietly. How many times had he opened his eyes to find their concerned faces bent close? He realized that it was her cool hands he had felt on his forehead so often, her soft voice calling him to hush, to lay back down and sleep. And that was what he had done. Each time, at her gentle command, he had sunk back into a deep, delicious sleep that unwound the sheets of pain, that cooled the raging fever, and finally quieted the thudding torment of a headache that had followed him even into his disordered dreams.

"You . . . haven't told me your name," she said.

He hesitated a moment, then said, "Michael. Michael . . . Smith."

"I'm Ellen," she said. "Ellen Bowman. That man—in case you haven't guessed—was my husband, Bob Bowman."

Finished, he pushed his plate away.

"More coffee?" she asked.

He shook his head, aware suddenly of an enormous fatigue. It had descended on him with a suddenness and a finality that astounded him. He looked quickly in the direction of the bedroom and wondered if he would be able to make it back to the bed. Ellen caught its significance immediately.

"You're exhausted," she said, getting quickly to her feet and moving around beside him. "Let me help you get back into bed."

As she helped him to his feet, he noticed again the long johns he was wearing and felt a searing embarrassment, but the fatigue wiped it out and he barely remembered hitting the bed and her gentle hands pulling the covers up around him.

VI

The woman looking down at him was not Ellen Bowman. He tried to say something, but his mouth would not open, and then his eye closed. When he awoke again, the afternoon sun was pouring in the window and the strange woman was gone.

He sat up, more ravenous than before, and flipped back the covers. As his bare feet planted themselves on the rough board floor, Ellen Bowman appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Hungry."

"I've got a steak waiting," she said with a smile. Then she turned quickly back into the kitchen.

"Ellen . . .?"

She looked back into the room. "Yes?"

"Where are my clothes?"

"You should be able to wear what I've laid out for you on the dresser. The pants are Bob's, but I've altered them. They should fit you. We had to cut your own pants off you."

"Thanks."

When he appeared in the kitchen a few moments later, he was fully dressed. She was a fine tailor. The pants fit perfectly. His shirt, vest and undergarments had all been washed and ironed.

She was just putting the platter down at his place. "How do the pants fit?"

"Just fine," he said, sitting down. "How long did I sleep this time?"

"It's the next day," she said, smiling. "Around four in the afternoon."

He looked down at the steak. It was more than an inch thick and filled the platter. She had smothered it with fries, onions and mushrooms. He set to work on it.

As he was sipping his coffee a little later, he asked her, "Who was that woman?"

Ellen poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down across from him. "That was Tara Sanderson," she said.

"What was she doing here?"

"A visit. She'd heard about you."

"About me?"

Ellen smiled. "Tara was curious. Strangers are rare in these parts. Also, she wanted to see if she could talk sense into me."

"You seem quite sensible to me, Ellen."

She smiled ironically. "Do I? Well, it seems that that husband of mine—the one I thought would be such a help around here—sold the Circle M to Frank Sanderson, Tara's father. But Bob did it without my knowledge or consent and I am not leaving here."

Wolf nodded. "So Tara came over here to see if she could convince you to go quietly."

Ellen smiled bleakly. "That's about it."

The sound of heavy running footsteps approaching

the door caused Wolf to turn in his chair. As he did so, the door was flung open and the old man—Abe—burst into the kitchen.

“Our two friends are back,” he told Ellen. “Right on schedule.”

Ellen got up quickly and glanced at Wolf in sudden alarm. By this time Abe had gathered in the scene at the table and, smiling quickly at Wolf, he stuck out his rough hand. Wolf grabbed it and shook it warmly. The grizzled old timer was small, bow-legged—an ex-cowpoke who no longer had all his teeth. But there was a rugged strength in his clear blue eyes that reminded Wolf at once of Diego.

“Ellen told me you was up and about yesterday,” Abe said, grinning. “I wish I’d been on hand to see you handle Bob. You did what I been wanting to do for a year or more.”

Wolf caught Ellen’s blush.

“Anyway, mister,” Abe went on, “you got visitors—an’ you’ve been having them for some time—ever since you showed up here, as a matter of fact.”

“Who are they?”

“Ruel Tyson and Steve Barton,” Ellen said, frowning and moving to the open door to look out. “They work for the Diamond T, Sanderson’s outfit.”

“Ruel is Sanderson’s hired gun,” explained Abe. “And he’s been asking a whole lot of questions about you. For some reason, he’s been real interested in the state of your health.”

“Michael,” Ellen said. “Is he the one who . . .”

“No,” Wolf said, shaking his head emphatically.

"He's not the one who shot me." But as he spoke he felt a prickling along his scalp as something deep within him—a sixth sense of some kind—warned him.

"My gun," he asked Ellen. "Where is it?"

"The bedroom."

He found his Winchester resting on wall pegs, the holstered gun and belt dangling from a hook underneath it. He strapped on his gunbelt, fastening the holster to his thigh with a rawhide thong. Then he reached down the Winchester, levered a cartridge into firing position, and returned to the kitchen.

Abe was standing outside in front of the open doorway, watching the approaching riders. Wolf stepped out through the doorway to stand beside him.

"The one in front is Ruel," Abe said.

Wolf looked Ruel Tyson over carefully. The gunslinger was riding a sleek, well-fed stallion—the horse a fine contrast to its rider, who was a chunky, slovenly customer with bloodless lips and dead-looking eyes set in a pocked face. He wore a collarless shirt and a stained red vest with a Bull Durham tag dangling from the pocket.

He reined in his mount as soon as Wolf appeared beside Abe, and his companion pulled up beside him.

"That other gent's the Diamond T foreman," Abe said. "Steve Barton."

The foreman wore a neat, flat-crowned Stetson, a freshly-washed red-checked calico shirt with a dark bandana neatly knotted at his throat.

"See you're finally up and about, mister," the fore-

man said, leaning forward on the pommel and smiling thinly at Wolf.

"Thanks to Abe here and Miss Ellen," Wolf replied easily.

"Well, now, mister, since you're all well and no longer bed-ridden, Mr. Sanderson figures it's time for you and Mrs. Bowman to pack up and head on out of here. If you've come all the way up here to help her, that would sure be a real good help."

"Miss Ellen ain't going nowhere," snapped Abe.

"Who the hell asked you, you old fart!" said Tyson. He smiled at Abe as he spoke, revealing yellow, ill-cared-for teeth.

It was an insolent smile and Wolf realized at once that Tyson was deliberately goading Abe. As Abe made a move for his sidearm, Wolf stopped him with a quick motion of his left hand. It was a good thing he did. Tyson's gun was already clearing his oiled, flapless holster.

"Hold it right there," Wolf told Tyson quietly. "Better put that iron back where it belongs."

Tyson was still smiling. "Why the hell should I?"

Wolf swung his carbine up, and without sighting, pulled the trigger. Tyson's black sombrero went flying back off his head. Only its chin strap kept it from tumbling to the ground. Wolf swiftly levered another cartridge into the firing chamber and calmly caught Tyson's face in the sights.

"If that's not a good enough reason, Tyson," Wolf said, "bring that sixgun up just an inch more."

Tyson's face was chalk-white. The smile gone, he

slowly, deliberately allowed his weapon to fall, dropping it finally back into its holster.

"Some day soon," Tyson said softly, "I'll kick your face in for that, mister. Then I'll kill you."

"And he will too," said Barton grimly. "But that's not what we're here for—not right now anyways." The foreman looked beyond Wolf and Abe at Ellen standing behind them in the doorway. "We've waited long enough, Miss Ellen. Starting tomorrow the fences separating Circle M grazing from Diamond T will come down. We need those water holes in the north fork and in the flats for our new stock—and we're taking them."

"No, you're not!" said Ellen, leaving the doorway to stand beside Wolf and Abe.

"The land's all bought and paid for, Ma'am," said Tyson, grinning.

"That's true," said the foreman. "If Frank Sanderson weren't such a fair man, you'd have been put off his land long before this."

"Circle M is not his land!" Ellen snapped. "I don't care what piece of paper that fool of a husband of mine signed."

"He not only signed the bill of sale," said Barton, "but he's long since spent all that money Mr. Sanderson paid him for this ranch. It was a fair enough price too, Ma'am."

"That doesn't make any difference to me. When Bob Bowman married me, that didn't give him the right to sell my ranch. And there isn't a judge in the territory who'd allow that sale to stand."

"Maybe," said Tyson slowly, "but we ain't waiting for no judge to decide. So you and your hired gun better clear out, and damn soon." He glanced at the foreman. "That right, Barton?"

Barton moved uneasily in his saddle. It was plain to Wolf that the foreman didn't like Ruel Tyson very much.

"Ma'am," Barton said, "you know it ain't fair you standing in the way of Mr. Sanderson gaining the use of what he bought and paid for."

"All he bought was trouble," Ellen said, "and you'll not force me off the Circle M."

"If you won't think of your own safety, Ma'am," Barton said, "think of your husband's. This is putting him in a real bind."

"He's old enough to take care of himself," Ellen said defiantly. "And so am I."

"That's what I like," said Ruel, licking his lips, "a woman with spirit." He leaned forward over the pommel and smiled at her. "When we fix your husband's wagon and this here one-eyed freak he says you're bedding down with, I think maybe I'll deal myself in. Yessir." His yellow teeth flickered in his pocked face. "I bet you've got plenty of fire."

The stinging implications of his words and the obvious relish with which he contemplated her submission to his lust seemed to strike Ellen with the force of a blow. She reached out and took Wolf's arm to steady herself.

"You filth!" she hissed furiously. "Get off my land! Both of you! Get off!"

Barton pulled his horse around and started from the yard. Ruel turned his horse to follow after the foreman. But then he pulled up and reined around to face Wolf squarely.

"We'll meet again soon, mister," he told Wolf. "So you all keep Miss Ellen's bed warm for me. Hear?"

Then with a shout of laughter, he rowelled his horse viciously and took off after the foreman.

As Wolf watched the two riders go, he found himself asking why they had waited until he was healthy before making their move on Ellen Bowman's ranch. And why Ruel Tyson was so all-fired anxious to goad him into action. Even as he asked himself these questions, he found himself coming up with a disturbing answer: they wanted him dead, and tying him in with Ellen Bowman's troubles was all the excuse they needed to kill him.

Who was this Frank Sanderson, anyhow?

VII

As the dust raised by the departing horsemen settled, Wolf turned to Abe. "What can you tell me about this Sanderson fellow?"

"A gent with a mighty big reach," Abe responded with a shrug. "He's greedy—just plain greedy."

"It's more than that," Ellen said, turning to go back inside the kitchen. The two men followed her.

"Go on, Ellen," said Wolf, leaning his Winchester against the wall and slumping into a chair at the table. The tension had been good for him, he realized. He felt alive—alert once more, ready to move out again. But he was glad to see Ellen continue on over to the stove where the coffee pot was sitting.

"He's sick," Ellen continued, "a driven man." She lifted one of the stove lids and with a short poker jabbed at the embers to get them going again. Replacing the lid, she moved the coffee pot over onto it and turned to face Wolf. "The more land he gets, the more land he wants—for Tara, he says. But I don't believe him. In the last five years his men have driven out four other small ranchers."

"His men?"

"Frank Sanderson is blind," said Ellen.

"That's right," said Abe. "He stays pretty well cooped up in that big house of his." Abe shook his

head in grudging admiration. "But being blind hasn't stopped him any."

Wolf looked at Ellen. "How did it happen?"

"I don't know," she replied. "He's been blind as long as I can remember. When Sam and I bought the Circle M six years ago, he was blind then. Tara was just a gangling youngster, more like one of the hands than a girl. She used to ride over for company. I helped her to sew her first party dress. She's as hard as her father, though. And, as far as she's concerned, the sun rises and sets on him."

"It's really something," said Abe, "to see the two of them out riding together. She sticks real close, talking low while he guides his horse according to what she tells him."

"You've got to give them that much, I suppose," said Ellen. "They're really quite devoted to each other."

Wolf nodded and found that he had relaxed considerably. For a moment back there he had thought that this fellow Sanderson might . . . but now it seemed pretty unlikely. He would not be looking for a blind man. The Frank Joplin who had led those men to his father's ranch had been able to see—and to shoot—with cruel accuracy.

The coffee pot began to hum. Ellen saw to it, and as she placed the filled cups down before them, she smiled somewhat nervously at Wolf.

"Thank you for what you did back there," she said. "But it was not very wise of you to make an enemy of Sanderson's men like that."

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Wolf shrugged. "I don't see that I had much choice—under the circumstances.

"Who is Frank Joplin, Michael?" Ellen asked abruptly, sitting down at the table across from him. "Is he the one who shot you? The one you are . . . looking for?"

Wolf put down his cup of coffee. They were both waiting for his answer. But though he owed them his life, he didn't feel that he owed them an answer to that question—as much for their protection as his own.

"I reckon I must have blabbed some while I was sick," he said.

Ellen nodded. "You did, Michael. It was quite . . . terrible at times, the things you said." She looked away from Wolf's eyes. "I didn't want to listen. I tried not to."

Abe spoke up then. "You were delirious. It took the two of us to hold you down at times."

"Your name is not Michael, is it," said Ellen.

"It is, Ellen."

"You called yourself Wolf," Abe said.

"It's a name I go by," Wolf replied, "a name given to me by a friend—an old friend who brought me up."

Ellen nodded bleakly. "I see."

But she did not see, and Wolf saw the fear in her eyes again—as he had the day before when he'd burst in on her and her husband. He knew now why she felt it. He could imagine what she had heard. His mind must have raked back over the past five years,

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leaving out nothing, giving voice to all the hate, the lust for vengeance that drove him. All of a sudden he felt a surge of bitterness so strong he could taste it. Why did these two have to know this about him?

"You don't have to be afraid of me," he told Ellen.

She smiled wanly. "I hope not . . . Michael."

"I'd appreciate one thing, though."

"What is it?"

"Keep what you heard to yourself, especially my name—Wolf Caulder."

They both nodded silently to that request, and Wolf knew his secret was secure with them.

"I'd like to move out tomorrow," he said. "Just how much further is Fort Buford?"

Abe answered. "A good hour's ride."

"Could I bunk with you tonight?" Wolf asked the old man.

Abe looked at Ellen.

"Of course," she answered quickly, "and please don't think, Michael, that you're not welcome to stay as long as you want."

Wolf smiled bitterly. "Well, then," he said. "I won't think it."

Abe stood up. "Come on," he said to Wolf. "I'll help you with your gear."

Wolf finished his coffee and followed Abe into the bedroom. A moment later, as he and Abe moved back out through the kitchen, he glanced at Ellen and saw that she was keeping her eyes resolutely away from him as she busied herself cleaning out the coffee pot.

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Just before daybreak the next morning, the clatter of hooves in the yard sent Wolf out of his bunk with a bound. In a moment he was crouched at the window, his Winchester in his hand.

"What is it?" Abe cried, hastily throwing back his buffalo robe and scrambling for his sixgun.

Wolf didn't reply. All he could see through the mud-smearred windowpane was a swirl of horsemen pulling up in front of the main building. As Abe joined him at the window, Wolf saw something large and dark and misshapen fall from a horse to land in front of the kitchen doorway. At once the riders swung their mounts and clattered back out through the main gate.

Pulling on his pants, Wolf left the bunkhouse and loped across the yard, Abe on his heels. Before they reached the house, Ellen appeared in the doorway, screamed and dropped to the side of the broken form that moved sluggishly on the ground before her—like an enormous worm some brutal giant had stomped.

Reaching Ellen's side, Wolf looked down. The purpled, barely recognizable face of Bob Bowman looked up at his wife. The puffed slits that hid his eyes flickered open. The mangled lips twisted in pain, and the groan that escaped them seemed torn from the very roots of his soul.

"Legs . . . my legs . . ." he whispered thickly.

Ellen took Bowman's head in her lap and bent over it, rocking.

Wolf looked at Abe. "Take care of Ellen," he said. "I'll bring Bowman inside."

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As gently as he could, Abe pulled Ellen away from Bowman, lifted her to her feet and guided her inside. Remembering what Bowman had said about his legs, Wolf took the man under his arms and pulled him carefully inside and on into the bedroom.

But when he began to lift Bowman onto the bed that he had himself so recently quitted, the broken form in his arms became alive, uttering a scream so filled with agony that Wolf almost dropped the man. Once he had Bowman on the bed, he stepped back. That was when he noticed the legs. From the knees down they were bent outward—the way no legs properly attached ever should. They looked like the legs of a discarded rag doll.

“Abe,” Wolf said. “Get in here.”

He came, Ellen behind him. She appeared to have pulled herself together; only the paleness of her face and the red around her eyes betrayed her feelings.

“I think both his legs are broken,” Wolf said. “At the knees.”

Abe moved closer to the moaning form on the bed and gently touched the knees, and the legs just below them.

“Give me something,” Bowman gasped. “Give me something . . . for the pain, for Christ’s sake! Please!”

Ellen glanced at Abe. “I’ll get the whiskey,” she said, hurrying from the bedroom.

Abe turned to Wolf. “If you’re going to ride out today, why don’t you go ahead now? Ellen’ll be too busy to fix you any breakfast, I reckon.”

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Wolf looked back down at Bowman and nodded. "Yes. I'll leave right away."

"You going in to Fort Buford?"

Wolf nodded.

"I'd be obliged if you'd look up Doc Gurney. I think we're going to need him out here if we're going to save those legs."

Wolf nodded. "I'll leave now."

Ellen was returning to the bedroom as he left it. He wanted to say something to her, to thank her for all she had done—but when he saw the distracted look on her face, he decided against it. He hurried through the kitchen and out of the house.

VIII

It was a little past nine that same morning when Wolf rode into Fort Buford. The long ride had not been easy for him. His left side felt raw, and as he dismounted in front of Stiles' Livery, he did so carefully. The few punchers and townspeople passing on the boardwalk tried not to stare at his eye patch and the broken side of his face. Wolf paid no attention as he led his black into the livery.

He was lifting off his bedroll when an old man with a light thatch of red hair covering his head came out of a stall, smelling and snorting in such a way as to resemble the horses he was currying. His face did indeed seem longer than average.

"Go light on the oats," Wolf said, pulling the Winchester out of the scabbard, "and give him a good rub down."

"That'll make it two bits, mister," the fellow said.

Wolf flipped a coin at him. The fellow's old hand snatched the piece out of the air with the quickness of a rattlesnake.

"Stiles, is it?" Wolf asked.

"That's the name of the thief I bought out ten years ago," the man said, sending a black dart of tobacco juice from his mouth. "Ain't got around to changing it yet. People call me Hoss."

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"I'd like to leave this Winchester and the rest of the gear here for now. Any objections?"

Hoss shrugged. "Your responsibility."

"Where can I find Doc Gurney?"

"Try Latimer's Barber Shop. Or Steadman's. More than likely he's in the saloon getting ready for the day ahead. Either that or recovering from last night."

Wolf nodded and left the livery.

The doctor was not at the barber shop, so Wolf continued along the boardwalk until he came to Steadman's. Bellying up to the bar, Wolf ordered a whiskey from the bartender—a tall, lean fellow with a well-oiled mustache and a cool, appraising gleam in his eye. As the man poured his whiskey, Wolf looked around.

This early the saloon was almost empty, except for a single cowboy nursing a beer at one of the tables close to the end of the bar—and beyond, almost lost in the shadows of the rear of the place, a stocky figure slumped face down on a table.

Wolf looked back at the bartender and pulled his drink toward him. "I was told I might be able to find Doctor Gurney in here."

"That mangy old coot sleeping it off back there is the doc," the bartender replied curtly, not bothering to hide the contempt he felt.

Wolf downed his drink and started toward the doctor. Abe had told him the night before of this same doctor's tardy and somewhat belligerent arrival at the Bowman ranch a full two days after Ellen and he had

removed the bullet from Wolf's side. And he had come in as drunk or drunker than Bowman. It was plain that his habits hadn't improved much.

The young puncher glanced up at him with cold eyes as Wolf skirted his table in order to approach the doctor. The stench of whiskey and sour vomit hung about the sleeping man like a curse. He was snoring loudly.

Wolf bent and shook him by the shoulder without gentleness, insistently, until at last the man raised his head in protest and glared foggily up at Wolf.

"Go 'way," he muttered. "See me later . . . Lati-mer's Barber . . . office . . ."

Before the man could lower his head again, Wolf slapped him—hard. The fellow's eyes flew open in sudden, startled pain. He pulled back quickly, then looked closer at Wolf.

"My good man," he mumbled. "See me later. I'll be up and about soon." He took another, closer look at Wolf's face. "Too bad. Too bad, that scar. But you're going to be all right . . . all right . . ."

He started to put his head down again. Before he could, however, Wolf caught him under his arms and hauled him roughly to his feet. He glanced back at the bartender. "You got any coffee?"

"Take more'n coffee to sober up Doc Gurney."

"I asked you a question, mister."

"Across the street. Ma's Restaurant."

The doctor tried to pull out of Wolf's grasp, but Wolf pulled the man along as one would an idiot child. As the doctor stumbled along, he caught sight

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of the lone puncher sipping his beer. The puncher had been watching with faint amusement.

"Nat!" the doc cried. "Rise to my defense, lad! Get this gargoyle off my back!"

The puncher glanced coolly at Wolf, pushing his near empty mug of beer from him as he did so. Wolf found himself studying the fellow's face closer than he had earlier. It was a swarthy one, lean, the dark eyes now suddenly alert.

"What's the matter, doc?" the puncher asked. "This stranger here giving you trouble?"

"Stay out of this," Wolf advised quietly.

At once the puncher was out of his chair, his eyes gleaming eagerly. "Maybe you better leave the doc be, mister," the puncher said softly, his voice like velvet. "Looks like he don't want to work this morning."

Wolf ignored the puncher and turned back to the doctor. "Pull yourself out of it, Gurney. Bob Bowman is in bad shape!"

"Hey, what's that?" the puncher said. "You working for the Bowmans, stranger?"

Wolf hesitated for just an instant. Then he turned to face the puncher. "Yes," he said. "I am."

"And you want the doc to fix up Bowman?" He smiled thinly, only it wasn't a smile, really. "Well, I'll tell you. Looks like the doc is staying right here in his office where he belongs. Right, Doc?"

Pulling away from Wolf, Gurney blinked a couple of times, suddenly uncertain. It was beginning to dawn on him that Wolf might indeed have a legitimate claim on his services. Reaching out for the

edge of the bar to steady himself, he said, "Well . . . now, that is not the truth, Nat. This here . . . establishment . . . is not my office . . ."

"That so, doc?" the bartender asked coldly, moving still closer down the bar toward them. "First I knew it wasn't."

The doctor looked toward Wolf, his eyes focusing with sudden determination, his chin coming up some. "Sir, if you would continue to give my . . . faltering steps some assistance," he said, "perhaps a cup of Ma's coffee would be just the thing . . ."

"Hold it right there, doc," the puncher said from behind Wolf. "You and this one-eyed galoot ain't going nowhere."

"Go back to your beer, Nat," Wolf said quietly, without turning.

He reached for the doctor, caught him by the arm and started to help him from the saloon.

"All right, stranger . . ."

Out of the corner of his eye, Wolf saw the look on the bartender's face. Swiftly he stepped away from the doctor and turned, his gun clearing leather with a swift, fluid motion and already level by the time he got around. He saw the gun rising in the startled puncher's hand and crouched low as he squeezed the trigger.

Twice the heavy sixgun roared and pulsed in his hand like something alive. The puncher grabbed at his gun hand, then went slamming backward as the second slug—poorly aimed in the dim saloon—plowed into his right side, belt high. When the thick,

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acid smoke cleared, Wolf could see the fallen puncher lying on his back amidst a wreckage of tables and chairs.

He holstered his weapon and turned to the doctor, who was standing erect now unassisted, his eyes wide and filled with remorse. He was undoubtedly recalling that it was his plea for assistance that had brought Nat into it.

"Looks like you've got another customer, doc," Wolf said wearily. "See to him. I'll be waiting across the street in Ma's."

The doctor nodded and started forward somewhat unsteadily. Without glancing back at the fallen puncher, Wolf walked out of the saloon.

As the doctor joined him in Ma's sometime later, he was accompanied by a man in his late forties, who was still powerful about the shoulders but getting uncomfortably heavy about the middle. His face had the look of old leather; the eyes were narrow blue slits that did not waver as they met Wolf's steady gaze. A dusty star was pinned to the man's vest.

"This here is Sheriff Gulch," Doc Gurney said, slumping down at the table across from Wolf. His face was white and drawn. It had been a hell of a way to do it, Wolf reflected, but the doc was sober enough now.

"Sit down, Sheriff," Wolf said to the lawman.

But the sheriff was obviously not going to sit down. "You're lucky Nat ain't dead," he said shortly. "The doc here just took one of your slugs out of him, and

I aim to see to it that you don't throw any more lead around this town."

"That's fine, sheriff. Just keep your trigger-happy cowboys from drawing on my back and I'll keep myself from shooting them."

"If that boy dies . . ."

"If that cowpoke dies, Gulch, I'll be sorry to hear it and that's no mistake. But he drew on me first." Wolf looked at Gurney. "That right, doctor?"

The doctor nodded quickly, mopping his brow with a soiled handkerchief.

"What's your name, mister?" the sheriff asked. He was obviously spoiling for a fight, Wolf realized.

"Smith."

"Smith, is it? Well, I'm warning you, Smith. If Nat Love dies . . ."

"I don't appreciate warnings, sheriff," Wolf rasped, surprised himself at how raw his nerves had become, "either from young cowboys or aging lawmen. If Nat Love dies, you'll have one hell of a time trying to rope me for it. But you're welcome to try."

The sheriff's face went dark. His hand dropped suddenly to his sixgun. But Wolf had his gun out of its holster before the sheriff's cleared its own. Wolf cocked his sixgun and let it rest casually beside his cup of coffee—the barrel trained on the sheriff's sagging belly.

The sheriff took a step backward, the color draining out of his face. From somewhere behind Wolf a woman gasped. Wolf saw the doctor getting ready to dive under the table.

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Smiling suddenly, Wolf said, "Relax, sheriff. There's no sense in getting that belly of yours blown off over some rambunctious cowpoke."

Obviously furious with himself for having let Wolf get the drop on him, the sheriff stared at Wolf with a cold, implacable hostility laced with fear—a most dangerous combination, Wolf realized. The sheriff let his sixgun slide back into his holster.

"Goodbye, sheriff," Wolf said, picking his revolver up off the table and holstering it.

The sheriff turned and slammed out of the restaurant.

Wolf looked at the doctor. "You've got a long ride ahead of you, doc. Better get some food under your belt before we set out."

"I guess I could use that cup of coffee now, all right," the man admitted.

Turning, Wolf saw Ma—an enormously fat woman—hastening toward them with a fresh pot of coffee and a cup for the doctor. It must have been her gasp he had heard. As she placed the cup down in front of the doctor and poured, her hand shook just a trifle.

Gurney looked bleakly across the table at Wolf. "That puncher you shot was a Diamond T hand."

"Then I don't feel quite so bad about it. Now why don't you order your breakfast."

It was a command, not a question. Doc Gurney looked up at Ma and began to order.

IX

When Wolf rode into the Circle M yard with the doctor a little after the noon hour, Ellen appeared in the doorway. She looked drained. As the doctor climbed wearily down off his mount, Ellen looked up at Wolf.

"You didn't have to bring the doctor back yourself, Michael."

"Figured it was maybe the only way to make sure he'd get here," Wolf replied.

"Will you come inside," she asked. "I've just finished baking some bread." She pushed an unruly chestnut curl off her forehead and smiled apologetically. "I had to do something to keep my mind . . . to keep busy."

When he hesitated, she said, "And there's coffee."

Wolf hadn't planned on it—or so he had thought. But he found himself swinging off the black without protest.

"Thank you, Ellen. I'd like that."

After he had taken care of his horse and the Doc's, he entered the kitchen to find that Ellen had prepared a platter of thickly-sliced, still warm slabs of bread with fresh butter melting on each one. A steaming cup of black coffee sat beside the platter.

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Ellen appeared in the bedroom doorway as he sat down at the table. She came over wearily and sat across from him. She tried to smile, but it was a wan affair at best.

"How's your husband?" Wolf asked.

"He's still in terrible pain."

At that moment Abe and a visibly shaken Doc Gurney left the bedroom and seated themselves at the table. "Both legs have got to come off," the doctor said.

Ellen gasped.

"Gangrene will set in if we don't," Abe said, reaching out and placing a comforting hand on Ellen's forearm. Then he looked at Wolf. "Bob told me who done this to him. Tyson and his bully boys."

"I met one of them at Steadman's this morning," Wolf remarked.

"Nat Love," the doctor explained to Ellen and Abe. "Nat drew on Mr. Smith. When it was over I had to remove a bullet from Nat's right side." He looked at Wolf. "I am genuinely sorry for my part in that unfortunate business."

Abe's frosted eyebrows shot up a notch as he looked at Wolf with sudden respect. "Nat Love's a real hardcase," the old man said. "You'll be having trouble with Diamond T from here on in, it looks like."

Wolf shrugged. He was not really anxious to take on Diamond T. He had another, more urgent reason for being in this territory. But when Nat Love asked

him if he worked for the Bowmans, he had found himself unable to deny it. It would have meant turning his back on Ellen and Abe simply to avoid trouble with a foolish young cowboy who fancied himself a gunslinger.

Wolf sipped his coffee and looked at the doctor. "What about Bowman's legs?"

"I'll need assistance," the doctor replied. He looked around the table. "It won't be pretty, and it won't be quiet, I am afraid." He glanced at Ellen. "I would certainly appreciate something a bit more potent than coffee at this juncture, Miss Ellen."

"Afterward," said Abe. "You better wait until afterward."

The doctor sighed. "You're quite right, of course."

"What will you need?" Ellen asked. Her voice sounded small and frightened, but the line of her jaw remained firm.

As Doc Gurney began to tell her, Wolf excused himself and left the table to go outside for a smoke. "Call me when you're ready," he told the doctor.

The doctor—in the act of removing his shiny, somewhat threadbare frock coat—nodded. Ellen went to the sink and began to fill a large pan with water from the pump. Abe, on his feet also, followed Wolf outside onto the small porch.

Wolf handed Abe the first cigarette he fashioned, then proceeded to roll himself another. He was careful with the finely cut tobacco, anxious not to lose any of it as he sprinkled it along the rice straw paper.

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Finished, he lit it with relish and smoked it carefully while Abe—as silent as he—stood beside him, smoking just as intently.

Wolf was just about finished with the cigarette when Doc Gurney appeared in the doorway. The doctor said nothing to them. He just nodded, then turned and went back inside. Wolf flicked his cigarette away and followed after the doctor, Abe right behind him.

They used the kitchen table. Despite the quantities of raw whiskey they poured down Bowman's throat, the man was awake through most of it. At the last, however, the pain was too much. Bowman quit screaming and passed out. The doctor hurried then, anxious to finish cauterizing the stumps and stitching over the skin flaps before Bowman regained consciousness. The danger was that the doctor might not be able to stop the bleeding. The sound of the hot knife blade searing flesh filled the kitchen. . . .

When it was over they carried the still unconscious man back into the bedroom. The difference in Bowman's weight struck Wolf with the full impact of what they had just done to Bowman. He did not like the man. The little he had seen of him convinced Wolf that Bowman was a coward and a sneak. But he was a fellow human being—and Wolf could not rest easy with the knowledge of what Ruel and the others had done to him.

When they returned to the kitchen, Ellen had disposed of the blood-soaked blankets and what had been left of a man's two legs, and was scrubbing the

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table furiously with a strong soap, the powerful smell of which served to clear Wolf's head of the too-sweet smell of blood. He could see how close to collapse Ellen was, but he knew there was nothing he could say or do for her.

"Now, Miss Ellen," the doctor said. "I'd like some of that whiskey, if there's any left."

Wordlessly, Ellen stopped her scrubbing, pushed a strand of hair out her eyes and went over to the cupboard over the sink. She reached up and took down a fresh bottle of fine brandy and three shot glasses. Filling the glasses on the sideboard by the window, she handed a glass to each of them.

Wolf threw his drink down, then went outside. He came to a halt by the corral and leaned on the fence to watch the horses. There were three of them, his own black and two others. Their high-spirited, prancing restlessness seemed to settle him. They were sleek, they were beautiful. They were animals that seemed to fit nature's scheme perfectly. Man, Wolf told himself grimly, suffered in the comparison.

At the sound of footsteps, he turned. The doctor, his face already slightly flushed, was approaching him. The man had that hectic look an alcoholic has when he is on the way to a big one.

"How's that wound?" the doctor asked.

"It's coming along."

The man nodded. "Yes, it did not seem to hold you back any this morning. Perhaps it was a good thing I came so late. You were in excellent hands, as it turned out."

"Will Bowman be all right?"

"If Ellen can keep the stumps clean."

Wolf nodded. Ellen would be able to do that, he was sure. Through the entire operation she had stood her ground without a murmur, her hands as steady as the doc's—steadier, perhaps.

"She'll do it," Wolf said. Then he looked at the doctor closely, trying to guess his age. "You been in these parts long, doc?"

"Ten, maybe eleven years now."

Wolf looked at the man. The doctor had done a better than competent job on that kitchen table, and Wolf had seen enough botched amputations to judge. The man was a surprisingly good doctor. Yet he was swilling his life away in this place—and though Wolf had seen men of all sizes and talents doing the same thing in almost every town he'd ridden into these past five year, the waste of it, the pure bone stupidity of it never failed to depress him.

But at the moment Wolf was interested in exploring the meaning of what had happened at Steadman's that morning. From the moment he arrived at the Circle M, if Abe and Ellen's account of it was the truth, Diamond T men had been alert to his presence. They had missed no opportunity to crowd him. Ruel Tyson had made it a personal vendetta almost the moment Wolf left his bed. Nat Love had drawn on him with an almost eager readiness this morning—with the sheriff following suit almost as eagerly.

"Who owns the sheriff?" Wolf asked the doctor abruptly.

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The man hesitated for only a moment. "Frank Sanderson."

Wolf nodded. That made sense. Whenever one big rancher like Sanderson was able to run out small ranchers with impunity it usually meant he owned the law.

Then a surprising thought occurred to Wolf.

"Has Frank Sanderson always been blind, Doc?"

"No. It was an accident—at about the same time I arrived in Fort Buford, as a matter of fact."

"That'd make it about ten years ago."

The doctor nodded.

"What kind of an accident was it?"

The man smiled thinly. "The usual kind. He was cleaning his gun. There was a bullet in the chamber. The gun went off and the slug creased his scalp at the hairline. The wound was superficial however, not deep at all; but Sanderson treated it too lightly. By the time I was called in, he had a massive infection. I did all I could to clear it up, but the infection had already reached the optic nerves of both eyes. There was nothing I could do to save his sight."

Wolf looked away from the doctor. He was remembering a face from long before that leaned close out of a hot sky—cruel, impassive, a freshet of blood flowing down over the forehead from a scalp wound

. . .

But it still did not make sense. What would a wealthy rancher be doing leading a band of cut-throats through the southwest?

"This accident to Sanderson," Wolf said abruptly. "Did anyone see it?"

"His daughter, Tara. She explained to me what had happened." The doctor looked closely at Wolf. "You're asking quite a few questions about Sanderson's blindness. Do you have any reason to doubt it happened as Tara related it?"

"No, I don't," Wolf admitted. "And I'd just as soon you did not repeat this conversation, doctor."

"Of course," the man said; then, hastening to change the subject, he went on: "Miss Ellen has been kind enough to donate that bottle of Brandy for my fee. I accept it." He turned then and started—somewhat unsteadily—back to the ranch house.

Wolf watched the man move across the yard, then turned back to the horses. He had not met this Frank Sanderson yet; and his daughter Tara he had seen only once, when he had awakened to find her standing at the foot of his bed. Perhaps it would be a good idea to ride out to the Diamond T spread and return her visit.

He opened the corral gate, closed it securely behind him, and headed for his black.

X

Less than an hour's ride from the Bowman spread, Wolf broke out of a clump of cottonwood and splashed through a clear mountain stream. Ahead of him stretched gently rolling grasslands almost to the horizon. Barely visible in the distance a small herd of cattle was grazing against a soft green line of timber.

What held his eye, however, was not the lushness of the country; it was the two riders rapidly approaching him from the south. They were too far yet for Wolf to be able to make out each rider individually, but he could already see enough to know that something was wrong.

He reined the black to a halt and leaned over the pommel to watch. The lead rider was rocking in his saddle like a drunken Indian. The rider chasing him was smaller and a fine rider. Abruptly the rider in front leaned far out over his horse's neck and made a desperate grab. At once Wolf understood. The lead rider had lost his reins; his mount, evidently spooked by something, was running away with him.

Even before they got close enough for Wolf to see their faces clearly, he had just about decided who they were. The second rider was Tara—and this was

her father she was trying to overtake—Frank Sanderson. The man was some rider, he realized, to be able to stay on that rampaging storm of horseflesh without reins and without sight.

He urged his horse quickly forward, aiming to cut the horse back toward Tara. Waving his arm at the horse as he charged straight at it, he saw the horse swing his head first one way, then the other, his rear end ducking as he braked to turn. When he went left, Wolf cut over to head him off, and he saw Tara spin completely around in a fine display of horsemanship to come up from behind.

As the horse saw Wolf closing on him, he continued around in a wide circle and found himself moving up fast on Tara. Again he braked and cut then lit out due west in an effort to outdistance both Tara and Wolf. But he was tiring. Tara on one flank, Wolf on the other, they pulled abreast of the plunging horse. Wolf's mount was the freshest and he was able to pull in closest. Reaching out with his right hand he grabbed the dangling reins and pulled up, gradually.

As soon as the horse was halted, Sanderson leaned forward, then slid quickly off the horse. Once on the ground he sagged to a sitting position. Wolf dismounted and looked down at the exhausted, still pretty shaken head of Diamond T.

Tara was off her horse and beside her father in an instant. As she knelt by him, he took her hand and grinned shakily.

"You all right, Dad?"

He nodded at her. "Just a little woozy. That was some ride."

Wolf dismounted. "You did fine just staying on that horse," he said.

Tara looked up at him. "Thank you," she said. "If you hadn't turned him when you did, the horse might have charged right on into that stand of cottonwood."

Sanderson looked blindly up at Wolf. "Yes, thank you. Ah, who is it? My eyes . . ."

"My name is Michael Smith," Wolf said. "I am working for the Bowmans."

The man's face froze. He struggled to get up. Tara helped him back onto his feet, but by that time the older man had regained some measure of composure. "You . . . have my thanks," he said, in a voice that was under tight rein.

Looking at the man's face, Wolf tried to find in it any echoes of that other face that still loomed out over him in his dreams. But he could find little. Sanderson had a large, yellowing mustache that hung down, walrus-like, over the edges of his mouth. His face was fleshy, pale—and there was no light, no life at all, left in the eyes. That other face had been lean, clean-shaven and the eyes had been sparked with hatred as the owner prepared himself to blow Wolf's other eye out.

But this could be the man. It was ten years later. And blindness could sap a man like nothing else, curtailing drastically as it did, nearly all physical activity.

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"I was glad to be of help," Wolf told Sanderson.

Wolf looked at Tara. "I'd better ride along with you to the Diamond T. His horse will remain skittish for a while yet."

"No," said Sanderson. "We won't need you."

"Thank you," Tara said, "but I'm sure we'll be all right now."

She was dressed severely in black, finely tooled leather riding boots, black levis and vest, silver-trimmed, and a black sombrero. The silk shirt under the vest was an explosion of white in contrast. Though she was dressed entirely in men's clothing, no woman he had ever seen in his life looked more feminine as she stood there. She caught the appreciation in his eyes and flushed.

"I'm glad you have recovered so quickly from your wound," she said.

"Thank you for the visit," he said. "I was on my way over to return it."

"I wouldn't advise that," snapped Sanderson. "My men have orders to shoot you the moment you set foot on Diamond T ground."

Tara looked at her father in astonishment. "Father!"

"He's the one who shot Nat Love, Tara. Nat's in his bunk now, fighting for his life."

"The doctor told me," said Wolf, "that Nat Love will be all right—with proper care."

"Doc Gurney? What does that drunken fool know?"

"He's a drunk, yes. But he's a pretty fair doctor.

He just did a fine job of cutting off Bob Bowman's legs. The legs your boys broke so thoroughly and completely at the knees last night—before dumping him in front of Ellen Bowman's door."

set by Betty Tape? the Vengeance seeker

Wolf saw the shock registered on Tara's face at his blunt words and turned to her. "Sorry, Miss Tara," he said. "But I just wanted your father to know exactly how well his men carried out their orders."

"Whatever Bob Bowman got from my men," Sanderson said angrily, "he deserved. Among his other talents, he's a fourflusher. When he was called last night, he didn't have the money to cover his bet. Earlier in that same game he had been caught cheating."

"So for that, he loses both his legs. You call that justice, do you, Sanderson?"

"Yes! A rough justice, but justice all the same. Any man pulling that at a table of mine would have been shot!"

"Gambling had nothing to do with what happened to Bowman last night. You turned your dogs loose on Bowman because you want the Circle M."

Sanderson's face darkened dangerously. "Damn you" he cried. "Damn you for your insolence!"

Tara spoke up then. "What you say, Mr. Smith, doesn't make sense."

He turned to her. "Doesn't it? With Bowman crippled and Ellen forced to take care of him, how can she possibly keep off your father's dogs—and run the ranch at the same time?"

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Wolf saw Tara glance quickly at her father. In terms of her father's ambitions, she obviously found Wolf's reasoning not at all far-fetched. But Sanderson was furious—almost as if he could feel Tara's uneasiness. With an inarticulate cry the man reached out for Wolf and took a lunging step in his direction. But it was a sightless lunge into darkness. Wolf moved easily, insolently out of the man's way.

"Father, please!" Tara cried, reaching out and pulling him back.

Her hands calmed him, gentled him almost on contact. But the fury Sanderson felt still coursed through his veins, still purpled his face.

"You talk of justice," he snarled at Wolf. "You present yourself to my daughter as a champion of the Bowmans, do you! What's your real reason for meddling in Diamond T affairs, mister?"

"Perhaps you already know my reason," Wolf told him quietly. "Maybe you and I have met before."

The man's face collapsed—almost as if Wolf had struck it. Sanderson turned abruptly, groped pathetically for the pommel of his saddle, then pulled himself quickly aboard his horse.

About to mount her own horse, Tara looked at Wolf. "I think you'd better go back to the Bowmans, Mr. Smith. Tell Ellen how sorry I am. Perhaps I'll be able to ride over some time later this week to visit her." There was a flatness in her tone as she addressed him now, the softness replaced with an iron resolution. Sensing the profound hostility that Wolf felt for her father, she had chosen without hesita-

tion to stand by his side. "And goodbye to you, Mr. Smith. I suggest you heed my father's warning to stay off Diamond T land. His men are as loyal as I."

Wolf nodded curtly to her, then glanced up at Sanderson. "I'll hold you personally responsible, Sanderson, if your men make any trouble for Circle M—or trespass on Bowman land."

Sanderson held a tight rein on his mount as he looked with surprising intensity down at Wolf. Once astride his horse, there had come over the man a transformation of a sort. A strength and vitality flowed back into his face, and over the blind eyes his powerful, craggy brows gave his face a fierce, almost ennobling power.

"I'll do as I wish, Smith—to Circle M or anyone else who stands in my way."

Then Sanderson clapped spurs to his horse and took off at a gallop. With a soft cry of alarm Tara swung into her saddle and galloped off after him.

As Wolf remounted, he watched Tara overtake Sanderson and reach out to take hold of his arm. They both slowed then; and as Wolf turned his black about, he caught one last glimpse of them riding closely along, side by side.

Wolf had never met a woman who so impressed him. She was made of velvet and steel, and sat a horse better than any man. But there was no room in her heart for love or loyalty to any other man save the one she rode beside at that moment. It was too bad. She was bound to get hurt.

For the man she rode beside, Wolf was almost cer-

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tain, was Frank Joplin. Of course Wolf couldn't act until he was absolutely positive. But he had felt the man's almost palpable fear, had seen his face cave in when Wolf suggested that they might have met before.

Wolf urged his horse to a canter. He intended to ride on into Fort Buford to pick up his things at the livery. Ellen Bowman—it seemed—had gained herself another hired hand.

XI

The next morning, bright and early, the three of them—Ellen, Abe, and Wolf—did what they could to make Bob Bowman comfortable. It had been decided the night before around the kitchen table that something had to be done to perk up Bowman, that letting him just lie on his back staring up at the ceiling would surely finish the man.

Abe cut the runners off an old rocker and set it down under a large cottonwood beside the main barn, placing it where it would not be wholly in the sun once throughout the day. Ellen softened its rough contours with blankets and brought out some old magazines and placed them in the deep, lush grass beside it.

After Bowman had finished his breakfast, Wolf appeared in the bedroom. Bowman had been staring up at the ceiling. He turned his head and looked up at Wolf. The man needed a shave and his eyes were bloodshot. The face had turned pale and cadaverous.

"Thought you might like to get out of this bedroom, Bowman," Wolf said.

"What for?"

"A change. You must know that ceiling pretty much by heart now."

Bowman looked away from Wolf and down his

body where his legs should have been. "Wait just a minute. I'll get up and get dressed and walk right out."

Wolf reached down and flipped the blanket off the man, then lifted Bowman in his arms. "We've got a chair set up for you outside," he told him. "Under the cottonwood."

A pine jay, uttering an agitated *shook, shook, shook*, darted like a crazy blue lightning bolt out of the cottonwood as Wolf set Bowman down carefully in the rocker. It was a clear, fresh morning with the dew still heavy in the grass under the tree. It promised to be a fine day. In the corral behind them one of the horses whinnied exuberantly.

"How's that, Bob?" Ellen asked. She and Abe had followed Wolf out, both anxious to see some change in Bowman's dour expression.

But he seemed determined to disappoint them. He nodded curtly to Wolf as Wolf stepped back, then looked at his wife. "Guess it'll be easier for you now with me out of the house." He looked significantly at Wolf just in case his meaning should not be clear.

Wolf clenched his fists but said nothing. Abe caught his eye and shrugged. Ellen turned quickly and returned to the house.

Apparently grimly pleased at the reaction to his shot, Bowman busied himself getting comfortable, then reached down for one of the magazines.

"Let's go, Abe," Wolf said. "We've got some fences to ride."

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With obvious relief Abe followed Wolf to the corral.

It was past noon when they approached the knoll, its lush stand of silver birch trembling coolly in the gentle wind.

So far Wolf had been very much impressed. The Circle M contained much lush pasture, all of it superbly watered with streams or deep, clean water holes. The circle M stock was fat and sleek; Wolf had felt obliged to compliment Abe for keeping the number of head down. He wasn't interested only in numbers, and as a result what beef the Bowmans had would bring a fine price. And the profusion of lusty, bleating calves boded well for the future.

Just as he rode into the stand of birch, the muted tinkling of a bit chain coupled with the faint sound of brawling, unhappy cattle caused Wolf to pull up shortly. Abe's ears were no less acute than Wolf's, and the two dismounted swiftly and quietly. Pulling his Winchester from its scabbard, Wolf led the way through the birch. The sound of bustling activity, the short high whistles of drovers grew louder with each passing second, and by the time Wolf and Abe had reached the other side of the knoll, they were on their bellies, pushing their heads cautiously through the brush.

Below them, almost filling the widest, most lush flat within Circle M wire was a herd of cattle clustered thickly about the fringes of the flat's single water hole. The cattle surrounded it entirely, and so

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deep were the ranks that those in the rear could not get through, while those at the water's edge had already been pushed in up to their necks.

Behind them the green pasture had been trampled cruelly, revealing great dark clods where the turf had been sliced open. A ragged band of riders was lounging well behind the bawling cattle, at the point where they had cut through the Circle M fence.

"Diamond T riders," Abe said.

Wolf nodded silently. His sharp eyes had already picked out Ruel Tyson.

They pulled back behind the tree and hunkered down to parley. Before Wolf said anything, he put his rifle down beside him in the short grass. At once a covey of bobwhit chicks exploded like a bombshell and fled, fluttering and scolding in all directions. The panic was contagious. Above their heads in the top-most branches of the birch, a small flock of crows, cawing indignantly, took flight.

"Better take a look," said Abe.

Wolf poked his head back through the bushes. The riders below were looking in their direction. As Wolf watched, Ruel Tyson said something to a cowboy hunkered down a few feet from him. The man stood up slowly, reluctantly. Tyson raised his voice and the cowboy moved a little faster, as he caught his horse's rein and swung into the saddle.

"Tyson has sent someone up here to check," Wolf said, pulling back through the bush.

"We better high tail it. Get help or something."

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"No. I don't think so. We can handle this just fine ourselves."

"There's more'n eight riders down there, Michael."

"Tyson just sent us some help. Get over there, out of sight. Keep down 'till I call you."

As soon as Abe was ready, Wolf dropped his hat to the ground, untied his bandanna and let it fall onto a small bush just beyond where he'd dropped the hat. Then he moved behind a thick clump of birches to wait.

The rider was not long in cresting the ridge. Unwilling to dismount, he guided his horse carefully into the stand, his hat pushed back carelessly, an unconcerned look on his face. It was plain to Wolf that the man did not take his errand very seriously.

As soon as he spied the hat, he dismounted and picked it up. Alert now, he looked around—and spotted the bandanna. As he was reaching for it, Wolf moved out from the clump and approached him from behind. The fellow's horse was what gave the game away. It whickered softly, anxiously. The Diamond T hand turned quickly, then clawed frantically for his sixgun.

Before he could draw, Wolf flung himself across the distance that separated them and buried his shoulder in the man's midsection. Wolf felt the sudden expulsion of breath as the cowboy went reeling back. A solid tree caught the fellow squarely in the back; his head snapped back with a sickening crack, and he sank slowly to the ground. But once on his

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hands and knees, he fought to get back up. Wolf took out his Colt, measured carefully, and brought the butt down on the back of the puncher's head. The fellow sprawled forward onto his face, unconscious.

"That wasn't very pretty," said Abe, stepping into view. "But it sure was effective."

"I didn't want the fellow to get off a shot, or cry out," said Wolf.

"Now what?" asked Abe.

"Now we get real clever. Take off his clothes, Abe. I mean the pants, the shirt and vest."

Abe saw at once what Wolf had in mind. "We get too cute, Michael," he said. "We're gonna be dead."

"I know that. You can cut out if you like."

"I didn't say that. And I didn't mean that."

Wolf grinned. "I didn't think you did. Here let me help you."

It was like disrobing a large doll that didn't want to cooperate. It would have been a more pleasant job if the puncher had been in the habit of taking more baths.

"Looks like I'm it," said Abe.

"That's not what I had in mind, Abe."

"You're way too big, and besides they'd see that eye patch of yours a mile away."

"I could take off the patch."

"I said you're too big. This guy's about my size, so that settles it."

"Okay, Abe. Now all I want is time to get in behind them. So all you've got to do is ride out be-

yond the knoll and wave the rest of them up here. It might be a good idea to get off a shot before you clear the stand."

"I'm way ahead of you," said Abe, climbing with distaste into the puncher's pants. "Damn! this poke smells like a buffalo hunter!"

Abe played his part beautifully. He fired the cowboy's Colt twice, upsetting another flock of crows, then rode out of the birch. By this time half of the Diamond T's riders were climbing into their saddles and on their way. Abe sat astride the horse and waved them on. In less than a minute every rider was roweling his mount up the knoll's flank.

Abe retreated back into the birches and pulled up beside the scantily clad puncher on the ground and waited, slumped forward over the pommel, his face hidden from the incoming riders. As the Diamond T hands poured in around him, Tyson flung himself off his horse and knelt quickly by the side of the fallen puncher.

When Ruel turned him over, saw who it was and looked up at Abe, Abe's sixgun was staring down his throat. "Tell the rest of your boys to drop their gun belts, Ruel," Abe said coldly.

But Ruel hesitated.

From behind them all came a shot. A rider to the left of Abe, still clutching his drawn Colt, settled sideways off his horse. There was something in the way he struck the ground and lay there that told every man watching that he was dead. Wolf appeared

then, stepping out from his cover, his Winchester up and ready. As he levered another cartridge into firing position, he aimed at Tyson's head and smiled.

"Drop your gun belts, boys!" Ruel cried. "We been bushwhacked!"

There was no more hesitation.

Once Abe had collected all their firearms and pitched them in as many directions as his imagination could devise, Wolf addressed the knot of sullen cowpokes.

"Take off your boots," he told them. "Every man jack of you."

Grudgingly, they did as they were told.

All except Ruel Tyson.

"Use this if you have to," Wolf told Abe as he tossed him his Winchester. "Ruel needs some help in getting his boots off."

It was obviously precisely what Tyson wanted. Like a deranged wildcat, he hurled himself at Wolf, the sheer force of his charge enough to stop Wolf cold. But Wolf held his ground and for a moment the two stood toe to toe exchanging brutal, sledging punches. Of the two, however, it was Wolf's telling, efficient precision that counted the most as his ripping punches shook Tyson to his bootstraps.

At last the gunslinger's rage unhinged him. He began swinging wildly with a reckless, almost feline fury that left him open still more to Wolf's punishing fists. Finally Tyson's guard dropped completely and Wolf moved in to finish the man, driving savage, piston-like punches to his midsection.

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Tyson began to sag. But he was still not through. After a particularly crunching blow from Wolf, he slipped groggily to one knee, then flung himself head down at Wolf, catching him in the gut. The surprise and the force of his charge caused Wolf to go reeling backward. His foot caught on a root and suddenly he was on his back, staring stupidly up at a patch of blue sky.

Before he could gather his wits, Tyson had buried his boot into Wolf's still tender left side. The pain was incredible. Another vicious kick followed and Wolf gasped in pain. The faces of the Diamond T riders leaning over to watch him were smiling now. Wolf saw Tyson bring his foot back deliberately for a third kick, this time for his head. Wolf waited, and when it came, he twisted over, caught Tyson's boot—and yanked.

Tyson went down heavily. Wolf was on him like a cat, swiping his face with brutal, sledging blows that knocked Tyson's head in first one direction, then another. At last, only when Wolf looked down and saw how bloody and swollen his knuckles were, did he pull back.

Slowly, wearily he got back up onto his feet, wincing at the lingering pain in his left side. Ruel remained on his back, shaking his head groggily and trying to sit up. Wolf reached down and hauled him to his feet. Tyson had difficulty focusing his eyes.

"Listen to me, Tyson," Wolf said. "If you trespass on Circle M land once more, or if you go near Ellen Bowman—or even tip your hat to her or smile in

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her direction—I'll kill you. Do you understand that, Tyson?"

The man nodded dully, his bloodied lips moving painfully. But no words came out.

"I can't hear you!"

"Yes . . . understand. For Christ's sake . . . I understand."

"Good."

Wolf flung the man from him and Ruel went down on one knee, his face slack, his senses obviously still reeling from the beating he had just taken.

"Now get those boots off," Wolf told him, "pronto!"

With clumsy fingers Tyson began to tug at his boots.

With Wolf and Abe herding the Diamond T riders ahead of them, they moved out of the birches and down onto the flat. Without their boots the Diamond T men found it difficult to ride well, but they managed to keep in good order, nevertheless, as Wolf and Abe drove them across the flat and through the still-unruly ranks of the cattle, and well out into the water hole.

As soon as the riders were completely hemmed in by the steers, Wolf and Abe galloped around behind the herd. They had saved a few extra sixguns, and now proceeded to empty them into the sky. The cattle, already spooked by this whole operation, gave a shrill brawl of dismay at the commotion in their rear and began climbing over each other in their frantic

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desire to get away. Though some of the cattle never did escape the water hole, the vast majority wasted no time in churning across the water, scrambling up the muddy, torn fabric of the bank, and following their leaders back across the flat and out through the fifty yard-long break in the fence the Diamond T riders had provided.

Abe knew in which direction to send the cattle in order to get them as close as possible to the Diamond T homestead. And they were fortunate in coming upon another herd on the way. The mania was contagious; and soon Wolf and Abe were stampeding what looked like a sea of heaving backsides across the grasslands toward the Diamond T.

And in the middle of that flowing mass of plunging beefsteak rode Ruel Tyson and the rest of his frantic crew.

A good mile or so into Diamond T land, Wolf and Abe pulled up, sent a few more parting shots over the backs of the now laboring cattle, then turned and headed back.

There was a fence that needed mending; and, after that, Wolf had a promise to keep: a promise he had made to Frank Sanderson.

XII

Frank Sanderson leaned back in his swivel chair, trying to catch the last rays of the setting sun and trying also to gain some measure of satisfaction from the cigar he was smoking. But it was useless. He was nervous and on edge. Worse, he was at a disadvantage, and he knew it.

You have sown the wind, and you shall reap the whirlwind.

He stirred irritably at the intrusive thought. He was not fond of it; he did not believe it. He was not a man who acted as if every seed he planted—for good or ill—would return to haunt him. A man could not build an empire, anything worth a damn without a certain ruthless disregard for those whose strength and resolution did not match his own. No, he was not reaping anything. But he could not deny that now, without his sight, he was at a disadvantage, a fact that nagged at him with unyielding persistence.

Tara had described Caulder to him. He'd grown up, the kid had. But the marks of that earlier encounter still remained. To Tara, if he could believe that her words reflected accurately what she truly felt, the man was exceedingly ugly—an outsized, cruelly marked apparition. Not only was it the eye patch and

the deep scar that ran back from the blind eye, but the crooked, yet powerful set to his broad shoulders.

How many bullets had they sent into that crazy kid? He stirred uneasily at the thought, but held resolutely to it nevertheless. They'd shot him twice: once in the left shoulder and the second time in the back. That first slug would account for the crooked shoulder, then. But what could account for the astonishing persistence, the satanic implacability that had already seen to the execution of four hard men—and that now brought Caulder here to his door, ready to strike him down as well?

Sanderson spun quickly in his swivel chair. The sun had abruptly lost its warmth. He took the cigar from his mouth and tried to find an ashtray he knew was somewhere on his desk. But he couldn't find it. Becoming more irritated with each second, he began to slap about the desk with his left hand. In his haste he knocked the ashtray—and something else—off the desk. At once he exploded in rage and hurled his cigar across the room.

He clung for a moment to the sides of the desk in an effort to pull himself together. It was the little things. Always the little things—like finding his shoes in the morning, or putting a cup back in its saucer—that nagged at him, that nibbled away at his patience and set him to seething in wild, disabling fury at his blindness.

Calmer now, he got up from the chair and got down on one knee by the desk and proceeded to feel around for the ashtray. He found it and placed it back

on the desk. It was a small box of matches that had gone over with the ashtray. He placed that back on the desk also and then got up and walked across the room to find the cigar. He had heard it strike the wall and knew about where it was.

He was relighting it at his desk when the clatter of hooves in the yard just outside his window alerted him. He frowned and leaned forward to wait. In a moment Barton burst through the door.

"Tyson's back," the foreman said.

"Well?"

The man closed the door and Sanderson heard him hesitate momentarily, then felt his hard stride as he crossed the room and came to a halt in front of Sanderson's desk.

"He's back, but without his gun, his boots, and without a couple of his teeth. Caulder beat the living shit out of him, in front of the hands. Willie Curtis is dead. And it looks like Feely might have a concussion. He was slugged from behind by someone. My guess is Caulder."

"Is that it?"

"There's more."

"Well, Jesus, man! Let's have it!"

"Caulder got all the men that could ride into the middle of the herd, and then stampeded the herd back through the hole the boys cut in the wire. They joined up with our cattle in the south flat and didn't stop for a couple of miles. The beef are scattered all over by now, and they must have lost a couple of weeks heft in the bargain."

"In other words," said Sanderson. "The trap we baited for Caulder was sprung on Tyson."

"I never liked Tyson."

"Gulch swears by him. Says they don't come any stronger."

"Maybe so. But it don't look like he's going to be enough against Caulder."

"So, what do we do now, Frank?"

"If we can't gun the bastard down, we'll just have to use the law."

"The law?"

"Send Tyson in here—that is, if he can walk. And send someone to town for Gulch."

Sanderson heard his foreman start to leave, then pause.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded. "I told you what to do."

"It's Love, the hand Caulder shot up."

"What about him?"

"He's complaining again. Says he wants Doc Gurney to come out here to look at him."

"Tell Nat Love to go to hell. If he wants to see Gurney, he can get on his horse and ride in—like anybody else. That all?"

"That's it, Frank. I'll go get Tyson."

When Barton returned, Sanderson could hear the gunslinger shuffling unhappily into the room ahead of Barton.

"Here's Tyson, Frank," Barton said, closing the door behind them.

Sanderson said nothing. He could almost smell Tyson from his chair. Was it fear—or pure bone meanness that made a man smell like that, he wondered. Probably a combination of both. And a pretty dangerous combination at that. Perhaps he could still put it to use.

“Hear you met Wolf Caulder today,” Sanderson said.

He heard Tyson shift his feet unhappily, and then the man started across the room toward him.

“You don’t need to come any closer, Tyson,” Sanderson snapped. “I asked you in here to answer a few questions. If you’ve got enough teeth left, I’d like your answers straight and simple. Like the questions.”

“Sure, Mr. Sanderson.”

“Fine.” Sanderson paused and put his cigar down on the ashtray. The skill and the apparent ease with which he did it in front of these men pleased him. “Did you see Caulder shoot and kill Willie Curtis?”

“No, I didn’t. I mean, when it happened, I was looking someplace else.”

“Explain that.”

“Abe—that old tramp works for the Bowmans—he had a pistol pointing at my head. He told the fellers to drop their gunbelts or I’d get shot. Guess Willie went for his iron—and Caulder shot him. He was behind us and we didn’t know it.”

“Were you inside Circle M land when this happened?”

“Sure, Mr. Sanderson. Remember? You told us to cut through their wire and—”

"Yes, yes. You don't need to explain to me what it was I told you to do. But there was another very important part of that plan, if you remember correctly."

"We had our eye out for him, Mr. Sanderson. And we were ready for him, but—"

"That's enough, Tyson. I don't want to hear your excuses. Just answer my questions."

"Yes, sir."

"You were inside Circle M wire when Feely got hit and Curtis got shot. Right?"

"Yes, Mr. Sanderson."

Sanderson looked in the direction of his foreman. "So technically they were trespassing. Nothing we can really use in that. We could use it, but it would be messy."

Sanderson looked back at Tyson.

"You're through here at Diamond T, Tyson. That fellow mopped the ground with you today and your men were on hand to watch it. You told anyone this guy's name?"

"No, sir."

"And you'd better not. But how would you like to get him?"

"I'd like that, sir."

"All nice and legal."

"Yes, sir. I'd sure as hell like that, sir."

"Fine. I'm going to make that possible for you. You will leave the Diamond T tonight with the sheriff—as one of his deputies, since he thinks so highly of your talents."

"He's a cousin, Mr. Sanderson."

"That must explain it then. As I said, you'll leave with the sheriff. But before you go I have one more job for you. And this one I suspect you will have little difficulty in carrying out."

Sanderson paused. Tara had described Tyson's face as ferret-like and had mentioned it was pock-marked. Now, out of the darkness of his everlasting night, Sanderson's imagination evoked Tyson's pale, pocked face, waiting to hear with feral eagerness the nature of this single task he had yet to accomplish for Sanderson. It was not a pleasant image, and Sanderson almost looked away. "Nat Love was shot up pretty bad by this Caulder, Tyson," he said carefully. "I don't think he's going to be able to last the night."

"Oh, he's a tough nut, sir. He'll be all right."

"I don't think so."

There was a silence as Sanderson allowed his meaning to sink in. When he was sure it had, he resumed: "The death of Nat Love should bring the law's heavy hand down rather hard on Wolf Caulder. And you, Tyson, with a star on your vest will be a great aid and comfort to the sheriff in this worthy enterprise." He paused and took up his cigar as neatly as if he still had eyes. "Is all that perfectly clear, Tyson?"

"You want me to—"

"Yes," snapped Sanderson. "Now get out of here and see to it. I don't care how, just do it—just so long as Nat's wounds are given as the reason for his demise. Is *that* understood?"

"Yes, sir," Tyson replied, and this time Sanderson

detected a rough insolence in the gunslinger's voice—as if he had suddenly achieved a kind of equality with Sanderson. The thought disturbed Sanderson, but there seemed no way now for him to remedy it.

“Then get to it,” Sanderson barked, in a voice that was rougher than he had intended.

As soon as the door closed behind Tyson, Barton moved quickly across the room.

“This is murder, Frank.”

“I don't care what you call it, Steve. If it gets Caulder off our backs, it's worth it.”

“But how can Gulch arrest Caulder for shooting Nat? Two witnesses have already said that Nat drew first—on Caulder's back.”

“And who are those two witnesses?”

“Doc Gurney and Steadman's bartender, Harry Korn.”

“Fine witnesses! The doctor was undoubtedly sleeping it off, and for a price Harry Korn will remember things a mite differently.”

“You sure about Korn?”

“He's been wanting to buy out Steadman for the past five years. You know that. Now he'll be able to.”

“Steadman's asking a pretty stiff price.”

“And Korn will have it.”

“What about the doc?”

“What about him? If he doesn't see reason, we'll keep him away from his bottle for a while. He'll come around. Besides, once Caulder is in the jail, there's a

good likelihood that a few of the boys are going to be mighty anxious to see to it that the killer of Nat Love gets a private hanging."

"It's neat, all right. The only thing is—will Caulder stand still for it?"

"He won't know what hit him. You sent that rider for Gulch?"

"Yes, I did."

"Good. Then it's settled."

"I said it was neat, Frank. But I didn't say I liked it."

"Hell, Steve, I don't like it either! But what's that got to do with it? In this world you do what you have to do—not what you like to do." Sanderson placed his cigar back onto the ashtray. "Bring Gulch in as soon as he gets here."

The foreman started to go, then hesitated, obviously still troubled.

"Anything else, Steve?" Sanderson asked, making no effort to conceal his impatience.

The man sighed. "Guess not, Frank. I'll let you know when Gulch gets here."

"And see about the cattle. I want them all rounded up first thing tomorrow."

As the door closed behind Barton, Sanderson turned his swivel chair so he could face the open window. With the sun low in the sky, a breeze had sprung up. It cooled the perspiration standing out on his brow. The palms of his hands, he noticed, were clammy.

But he refused to ask himself why he was so

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worked up and was diligently not thinking of Nat Love when he heard a horse gallop in through the main gate. A moment later he heard Tara's rapid footsteps approaching the house.

XIII

Sanderson had turned his chair back around and was facing the door when Tara stormed in. As she pulled up in front of his desk, she said,

"I've just come from Ellen Bowman."

Sanderson leaned back in his chair and waited.

"It's terrible!" she cried in genuine dismay. "That poor woman! Do you realize she's now tied to that awful man for the rest of her life? And he enjoys it, he really does. He just sits around looking down at those stumps of his demanding first one thing and then another, while he drinks himself into a stupor. I just don't know how Ellen is going to be able to stand it."

"I'm sorry," he managed. "They . . . the boys certainly went too far."

"I want you to get rid of Ruel Tyson, Dad," she said firmly. "You know how I detest that man. The others were content to rough Bowman up, but it was Tyson who broke both of Bob's legs. Deliberately. At the knees. He's *filth*! The thought of him on Diamond T land turns my stomach. I can't believe we need scum like that to run this outfit."

"I've already seen to it, Tara. Tyson will be leaving with the sheriff as soon as Gulch gets here."

"The sheriff?"

"Since Gulch thinks so highly of Tyson, I've told Gulch he should be the one to find employment for him—as a deputy in town perhaps. But of course you are right, Tara. Tyson no longer belongs on Diamond T."

That took the steam out of her. There was a momentary pause, then he heard her pulling a chair up to the desk. "All right, then," she said, her voice quieter now. "But that still leaves Ellen with a crippled husband trying to run the Circle M. I've told Ellen that you will give her twice what you gave Bowman for the Circle M."

"You told her *what*?"

"You heard me, Dad. It's the least we can do for her. She thinks maybe she could set up a dressmaking shop in Fort Buford. It was my idea, but she took to it right away. You remember those dresses she used to make for me?"

"Tara, do you realize I gave Bowman three thousand dollars for the Circle M. Twice that is six thousand dollars!"

"Take it out of my share of the Diamond T."

He shook his head. "That's too much money, Tara."

"You want that land, don't you? This will all be mine someday, and I'd like that land also. But this is the only way I'll allow us to gain it. I wish we could give her three times that amount."

He knew he would have to agree to her proposal. And as he adjusted his thinking to the idea, he realized that Tara was making sense—though of course

he had no intention whatever of dipping into her account for the money.

"I'll give Ellen Bowman five thousand, and that's my limit," he said.

"You've agreed then! Fine!"

It was always a pleasure to come around to Tara's way of thinking, to hear the delight in her voice. He leaned back in his chair and reached for his cigar. It was out.

"Here, let me light it, Dad," she said.

He leaned forward. She scratched the match against the box and held the flame to the end of his cigar. As he was drawing the pungent smoke into his lungs, she shook the wooden match out and sat back. He sat back also.

"And now, Dad," she said quietly, seriously. "I think you owe me an explanation."

Her tone took Sanderson by surprise. He continued to puff on his cigar. "And just what does that mean, young lady?"

"Who is this Smith fellow?"

"Smith?"

"Yes. Seems to me that isn't his name. He knows you from somewhere, Dad. And you know him. I don't like him. He's trouble. But he's thrown in with the Bowmans now—and I want to know why. I think you can tell me."

"You're coming at me pretty hard, young lady. First you want me to get rid of Tyson, then throw away a small fortune on the Bowman spread—and now this."

"I think that man means to kill you, Dad. And I have a right to know why."

Since that encounter the day before, he knew he was going to have to tell her something—the truth was out of the question; but something plausible would have to be told her.

He took a deep breath and placed his cigar back onto the ashtray. "It happened a long, long time ago, Tara," he began. "Ten years ago, after that '86 winter—you remember that one, Tara—I lost better than 90 percent of my stock. An old pack-mate of mine—Charlie Goodnight—heard about it and wrote me to come on down and meet him at Fort Sumner in New Mexico. He said he'd be glad to loan me what I needed to replace my stock; so I met him there. He was delivering his beef to the army, who were feeding it to the Navajo."

"I remember when you left, Dad. I remember now."

"You were almost eleven—and already a big girl. You didn't want me to go, as I recall."

"And that's when you met this Smith fellow?"

"I got the money from Charlie and headed north. But in Pueblo, a cowtown south of Denver, I got myself into a card game. The stakes were pretty damn high. But I was lucky. I won and kept on winning until a puncher who'd been losing the most called me. He said I was cheating. We drew while we were still at the table. When the smoke cleared he was dead."

"Is that when—"

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"Let me finish, Tara. He had his kid along, a sixteen-year-old who grabbed his father's gun and started blasting at me. Before the rest of them in the place could disarm the kid, he nicked me in the forehead. A Denver sawbones told me it wasn't serious, so I continued north. But by the time I got here, the infection from that wound had traveled to my eyes. You know the rest, Tara."

"Why did you tell me it had happened here at the ranch—that it was an accident?"

"I was gambling with Diamond T money, Tara. I was ashamed of that. And I'd had to kill a man. Finally, it was a snot-nosed kid that shot me. Do you think I wanted you to know all that? It was easier just to tell what I did."

"And this kid. This is the one who is now working for the Bowmans?"

"He grew up some—but that's who it is. His name is Caulder, Wolf Caulder. And you're right, Tara. He is out to kill me for what I did to his father."

He leaned back and waited for her response, anxious that she believe him, fearful that she would find some hole in his story.

"He's been pretty well banged up," Tara said at length. "It looks like he's fought a war single-handed. I've never seen his likes before. But there's something about him. I want to hate him—but I can't."

"There's one thing," Sanderson went on. "He doesn't know for sure if I'm the one who killed his father. I used the name Frank Joplin in that cow-

town—and that's the name of the man he's looking for—not Frank Sanderson."

"Then how could he have traced you here, Dad?"

"I don't know, Tara. The man's some kind of devil the way he found me after all these years. And just ask Steve what he did to our boys this afternoon."

"I heard," she said grimly. "Can't say I'm sorry for what he did to Tyson, though."

"Tara, once he finds out for sure I'm the Frank Joplin he's looking for, nothing will stop him."

"No, Dad. We'll stop him. Steve and the rest of us."

"You just stay the hell out of it, if it comes to that. Hear?"

She got out of her chair, leaned close and kissed him on the cheek. "Now just relax. I'm going to find Cookie and see what's holding up supper."

"You do that."

As soon as Tara left, Sanderson stubbed his cigar out in the ashtray and swung around again to face the open window. Tara had believed him, simply because she loved him and wanted to believe him.

That was what hurt—having to use Tara's love in that way—to deceive her. So long ago that he hardly remembered when actually, his deceptions and lies to his daughter had begun, until now the picture that she had of him bore absolutely no resemblance at all to the man he really was. And someday soon she might find out that the face he presented to her was

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a lie, a monstrous deception—unless Wolf Caulder could be stopped forever; and to accomplish this he was willing to ally himself with any man, willing to commit any crime.

Nat Love put down the dime novel he was reading and looked up as Ruel entered the small room and pulled the door shut behind him.

“Hi, Ruel,” said Nat, sitting up cautiously in his bunk to face his visitor. A dim kerosene lamp was hung on a hook over his bunk, and the smell of it filled the room.

“Got your own private room here, huh?” remarked Ruel. “Ain’t you the lucky one.”

“I’d just as soon be out of here, Ruel. But this side where that bastard shot me is really hurtin’.”

“I can imagine. What were you reading?”

He reached back carefully and retrieved the magazine and slowly read the title on the cover aloud: “*A History of the James Boys.*”

“Good?”

“I’d rather be outside. Out of this room.” Love smiled up at Ruel. “I understand you met Caulder yourself today.”

“The boys been in here blabbing, huh?”

“They didn’t mean nothing by it, Ruel. They said you put up one hell of a fight.”

“I should have killed the sonofabitch. And I will, too.”

“Sure, Ruel. You will. And I’ll help you.”

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Ruel took out his sixgun. "Yes," he said, "you will."

Nat looked at the gun in Ruel's hand. "Hey, what you got that out for, Ruel?"

"Shut up. Just shut up."

Ruel took the blanket roll at the foot of Nat's bed and hefted it. It was heavy enough, he concluded, as he thrust the muzzle of his Colt into it.

"Ruel!" Nat cried. "What are you doing with that blanket? You want that blanket, you can have it!"

He started to get out of bed. Ruel swore, withdrew the gun from the blanket and struck Nat across the right temple with it, the barrel raking a clean line all the way to Nat's cheekbone. Nat crumpled back onto the cot, still conscious, but groggy.

He groaned as Ruel pulled the bandage off his wound. The doc had sewed the wound up crudely but effectively. Poking the sixgun's barrel into the wound, he ripped upward. The stitches came out and a rich dark flood followed after them. Ruel walked back to the door, opened it, and looked out into the rest of the bunkhouse. It was still empty.

Returning to Nat, Ruel wrapped the blanket securely around his Colt, thrust the barrel well up against the freshly opened wound, and fired. The explosion filled the tiny room with a deafening *whomp*, but there was little if any reverberation. Ruel withdrew his Colt from the blanket, holstered it and returned once more to the door to look out. The bunkhouse was still empty. Carefully, he folded the

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blanket so as to hide the hole in it and the blood, and then placed it back on the foot of Nat's cot.

The gash on the side of Nat's face worried Ruel. He thought it over for a moment and decided that Nat had discovered that he was bleeding and had jumped out of his bed to get help and struck the side of his face when he went down. Ruel took Nat by the hair and spilled him out onto the floor.

Nat's head fell with the gash resting on the floor, his side pulsing a slow, rich torrent onto the floorboards and down through the cracks. As Ruel turned to go, he heard the clatter of horses coming through the main gate. He left the room and hurried from the bunkhouse.

Not too long after, Ruel knocked on Sanderson's office door. Sanderson's booming voice told him to come in. Stepping into the large room for the second time that day, Ruel saw Sheriff Gulch and the foreman standing by Sanderson's desk. The owner of the Diamond T was staring in his direction, his blind eyes narrowed with concern.

"That you, Tyson?" the man wanted to know.

"It's me, Mr. Sanderson," Ruel said. He smiled thinly at the blind man. "I came to tell you. Nat Love just died. He bled to death in the bunkhouse."

With some satisfaction Ruel noted the grim approval that lit Sanderson's gaunt face.

XIV

Repairing the fence kept Wolf and Abe busy until sundown. As they rode into the modest Circle M compound, Wolf saw the rocker Abe had fixed for Bowman sitting empty under the cottonwood and found himself wondering how Ellen had managed to get Bowman back into the house.

Abe took care of their horses as Wolf headed for the bunkhouse to wash up. Wolf had a man-sized hunger building in him. As he crossed the yard, Ellen appeared in the kitchen doorway.

“Why don’t you wash in here?” she called to him.

Wolf changed direction and walked across the yard and entered the kitchen to find Bowman sitting at the table. His face had a pronounced whiskey flush, and Ellen appeared very nervous. She bustled about the kitchen, apparently without a care; but there was a fixed, mechanical smile on her face, and he could tell she was close to tears. Bowman, however, appeared to be in very good spirits.

Abe came into the kitchen as Wolf finished washing himself off. Feeling uncomfortably like an intruder, Wolf pulled out a chair and sat down at the table across from Bowman. Glancing at Bowman, he caught the undiluted hatred in the man’s eyes. Wolf did not look away. He understood hatred. He smiled thinly at the man.

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"How do you feel, Bowman?"

The man snorted and looked at Ellen. "Smith wants to know how I feel."

"Tell him, why don't you," she said bitterly.

Wolf looked sharply at her to see what he could read in her face. But she was stirring something on the stove and her back was to him. But Abe too had caught the bitterness in her voice, and he also was looking over at her.

Wolf looked back at Bowman. And waited.

"Ellen's unhappy because we're getting out of this mess," he explained, smiling grimly. "But I'm not unhappy at all. Tara Sanderson was here this afternoon. She is a very fine woman."

Ellen turned to look at Wolf, her face grim but determined. "She's made a very generous offer, Michael," she said to him.

"Just how generous?" Abe asked from the sink.

"What the hell business is it of yours, hired man?" Bowman snapped. "It was generous—damn generous, and Ellen's going to take it. That's all."

"You're selling out to Sanderson?" asked Wolf to Ellen, ignoring Bowman.

"I think it's best," she said simply.

"Let's eat," said Abe, moving to the table, his eyes resolutely avoiding Bowman's, his expression grim.

The supper was Ellen at her best: thick beef stew followed by steak and greens, with cherry pie and thick coffee laced with cream for dessert. But it was a meal eaten in strained silence as Wolf found him-

self on an island surrounded by his own private thoughts.

The Diamond T's incursion that afternoon had been a deliberate attempt to draw him out and perhaps gun Abe and him down in the process, which meant he had a promise to keep—one he had made to Sanderson the day before. But if Ellen was giving up her fight for the Circle M, there was no longer any real urgency in his confrontation with Sanderson, which suited him since he had yet to make it absolutely certain that Frank Sanderson and Frank Joplin were one and the same.

In fact, Wolf realized, he should be relieved that Ellen was pulling out. If Sanderson was Frank Joplin, allowing her and Abe to get tangled any further in his business with the man would only complicate matters unduly. When and if the time for action came, it would not do for Ellen or Abe to get caught in the inevitable crossfire.

By the time the meal was finished, Wolf had decided that he would be wise to move out first thing the next morning. He said as much to Ellen as she began clearing off the table.

"I'll be moving out too," Abe said.

"I wish you'd stay on until the sale is completed," Ellen said to the old man. "I haven't told Tara anything definite yet."

"We don't need him," said Bowman. "Let him go."

Abe got up quickly and stalked out the door. Wolf nodded curtly to Bowman and Ellen and followed after the old man. He overtook Abe at the corral.

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"Don't get your dander up," Wolf told him. "The fight's been taken out of her—and maybe it's best this way."

"I don't believe that, Michael. And you don't either. She loves this place—always has. But what really hurts is to see Sanderson win this way!"

With an angry shrug, he moved off toward the bunkhouse. Wolf watched him go, then leaned back against the corral fence and took out his sack of Bull Durham and built himself a cigarette.

He had about finished his solitary smoke when Ellen appeared in the kitchen doorway. It was dark by this time and her slim figure was outlined clearly in the light from the kitchen.

"Michael? Is that you?"

He flicked away his cigarette and started across the yard toward her.

"It's Bob," she said apologetically. "He's been at the whiskey all day. Would you help me carry him into the bedroom?"

"Of course, Ellen."

He followed her into the kitchen. Bowman, his head down on the table, was snoring loudly. Wolf walked over to the other side of the table, pulled Bowman's chair back, then lifted the man easily in his arms and carried him into the bedroom. The stench of whiskey hung heavily about him. Putting him down on the bed none too gently, Wolf was pulling the covers up over Bowman when Ellen stopped him.

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"I have to change his dressings and undress him yet," she told Wolf. "Thank you, Michael."

As he followed her back into the kitchen, he asked, "How did you get him into the house this afternoon?"

"Tara helped me."

He nodded.

"Tara was very kind, Michael. All she wants is to end this terrible business, and even though Bob gambled away almost three thousand dollars—all that Frank Sanderson gave him for the Circle M—Tara has offered to pay me twice that amount out of her own savings."

"She'll get it all back easy enough," Wolf remarked. "There's a lot of fine cattle out there and plenty of lush, well-watered range."

She ignored his remark and slumped down at the table. "I'll open a dress shop in town with the money," she went on with little enthusiasm. "I'm good at sewing. It's the only way I'll be able to take care of Bob."

Wolf nodded. Of course she had no choice now. Sanderson had defeated her with Tara—unwittingly he was sure—serving as his agent. "I don't see how you could do anything else, Ellen," he said to her.

Suddenly she put her head down on crossed arms and began to sob. It was the first time Wolf had heard her cry since before Bowman's operation, and he knew it was a good thing for her to get it out. But he could not listen to her sobs without a cruel ache arising in his own throat.

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Awkwardly, he placed a hand on one of her shoulders, stood beside her for a while, then left her to her tears.

The next morning Abe and Wolf brought Bowman out to his seat under the cottonwood tree. Bowman was bleary-eyed and irritable, but they paid little attention to him. Then the two men saw to their horses and rode out together after Wolf said his good-bye to Ellen.

Abe was on his way to the Diamond T. Ellen had asked him to tell Tara that she was accepting her offer. As they rode, Wolf questioned the wisdom of Abe riding alone to the Diamond T ranch.

"I can take care of myself," the old man grumped.

"I don't doubt you can, Abe," said Wolf. "But those hardcases are going to remember what happened yesterday."

"Fine! Sometimes you have a clobber a mule on the head just to get his attention. The same with people." Abe patted his sidearm. "I know how to use this—and they know it. Besides, one long gun won't rile anybody. Not the way two would."

Wolf saw the wisdom in that. "Makes sense," he admitted. "I guess if I went with you, I'd only draw lightning."

Abe nodded. "So you just go ahead into Fort Buford and don't worry about me. When Sanderson hears what I got to tell him, he'll be some pleased man. It sure as hell don't make me happy, under-

stand. But I'm bringing Frank Sanderson the kind of news he likes to hear."

They argued no further and a mile or so further on, Abe left Wolf and rode south into Diamond T territory. Wolf sat his black, watching the old man ride until he was out of sight, then clapped his spurs to his black and headed north for Fort Buford.

The sun had climbed pretty high by the time Wolf reached the town. As he clopped down the well-baked main street, he attracted more than casual interest. But he paid little heed to it, attributing it as usual to his singular appearance. It was an appearance he would never be ashamed of. In fact, he wore the eye patch, the deep scar, and the slightly twisted left shoulder proudly, for this was perhaps the most important thing that Diego Sanchez had taught him:

Walk proudly, my son; ride tall so that all may see the scars you bear. A man does not live well if he goes to his grave without such marks, such badges of honor.

Wolf dismounted in front of Stiles Livery and gave his black to Hoss, then visited Latimer's Barber Shop, looking for Doc Gurney.

"Try Steadman's," Latimer said wearily.

Gurney was in Steadman's, but this time Wolf found him sitting up under his own power at a table in the back.

"Mind if I sit down, Doc?" Wolf asked, pulling out a chair and joining him at the table.

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The doctor was nursing a brandy. He almost spilled it when he looked up and saw Wolf sitting across from him. If he had been looking at a ghost he would not have been more startled.

"Why does the fact that I am still living surprise you, Doctor?"

"What's that? Why . . . I am not at all surprised that you are still alive. You jest, sir! By Gad, but you do come on strong!"

The doctor, Wolf realized, was hiding behind his phony diction—his Eastern education and manners. Something had frightened him and frightened him badly, and that was the sight of Wolf sitting across from him at the same table. Wolf looked quickly around the saloon.

A card game had been in progress when Wolf entered. It was breaking up somewhat hastily, Wolf noted, as one of the men left the saloon quickly. Wolf glanced at the bartender. The fellow had been looking at him, and at once looked away, but not before Wolf was able to catch his eyes and see the shame in them. And the place had become quiet too; ominously quiet. Wolf could hear the bartender putting his glasses away.

Wolf looked back at the doctor. "Cut out that phony talk. You sound better when you're drunk. More honest."

The doctor stared unhappily across the table at him. "What do you want, Mr. Smith?"

"I've left the Bowmans, but I've been thinking of that woman trying to carry Bowman in and out of

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the bedroom. I want you to get hold of a wheelchair and some crutches and send them out to the Circle M. You must know someone in town could do the job. I'll pay whatever it costs."

"A capital idea; most generous, Mr. Smith," the doctor said with hollow enthusiasm. "I'll see to it at once." He started rather hastily to get up and almost fell flat on his face.

Wolf reached quickly over and steadied him, then pushed him back down into his chair.

"What's the hurry?" Wolf asked.

"Hurry? Nonsense."

"Let me buy you another drink."

"My limit, sir. My limit has been reached. I have many patients."

Wolf leaned forward and fixed the doctor with his one eye. "All right, Doc. When you decide you've had enough, there's trouble around. Who's after me?"

The man swallowed and moistened suddenly dry lips. He looked around for help, but everyone was very busy looking elsewhere. The doctor looked back at Wolf's lean, impassive face. "The sheriff," he managed.

"What does Gulch want with me?"

"Murder. The murder of Nat Love."

"Love is dead?"

"I saw him last night. He had bled to death in his bunk. There was a massive internal hemorrhage."

"My bullet didn't cause that hemorrhage, Doc. Nat Love was murdered."

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"Well . . . I certainly cannot verify that assertion, Mr. Smith."

"Did you look at the wound, Doc? He was your patient. If he bled to death after you sewed him up, I'd say that made you a pretty lousy doctor."

The man looked quickly away and studied his glass. "The boy was calling for someone to go in after me all that day. I verified that, sir."

"But you didn't examine your patch job."

"There was no need. He was bled white, dead."

"And that's why you want to get out of here, Doc, isn't it. It's all been arranged. Sanderson and his boys have already measured me for a rope. And you're part of it."

"I don't know what you are implying, sir."

"No. Of course you don't." Wolf got up and looked down at the man. "Now get the hell out of here and see to that wheelchair for Bowman." Wolf took out four silver dollars and dropped them onto the table in front of the doctor. "This should see to it."

"You are most gen—"

"Get out of here!"

The doctor scuttled hastily past Wolf. With only one backward glance, he disappeared out through the batwing doors. Wolf walked over to the bar and ordered a beer.

Wolf watched the bartender draw the beer. The man kept his face averted and did not look at Wolf directly when he slapped the glass of beer on the bar and accepted Wolf's coin in payment. Wolf took the beer and cleared his throat.

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"How much is Sanderson paying you to say I went for my gun first?" Wolf asked the bartender quietly.

Harry Korn's startled glance told Wolf all he needed to know: if it came to a trial, the bartender was prepared to swear that Wolf had drawn on Nat Love first.

Wolf smiled at the bartender, his scar deepening, the right side of his face seeming to close up as he did. "You can testify to anything you want, mister. But if you don't tell it like it was, I'll kill you."

"You can't threaten me," the man rasped.

The bartender's words carried throughout the now silent saloon, and the man's dark eyes flickered anxiously about, searching for help. But everyone was busy drawing quietly away from the bar.

"That's not a threat," Wolf replied, sipping his beer. "That's a solemn promise."

At that moment the batwing doors were pushed open and Sheriff Gulch strode in. Behind him came the fellow who had left the card game a moment before. And then a third entered: Ruel Tyson.

Gulch's weapon was out and leveled at Wolf's belt buckle. As Ruel Tyson took a stance beside the sheriff, he slowly drew his own sixgun. Wolf noted the shiny new star pinned to the gunslinger's faded red vest.

"Draw, why dontcha?" said Ruel. Yellow teeth gleamed in his pasty face.

Gulch looked at the bartender. "This the sonofabitch, Harry?"

The man nodded eagerly. "He just threatened me.

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Everyone in here can testify to that." He looked back at Wolf. "Sure, he's the one. He drew on poor Nat Love while Nat was sitting at that table over there, drinking his beer. Before Nat could get his weapon out, that ugly sonofabitch fired at him twice."

"That's good enough for me," said Gulch, striding toward Wolf. "Nat Love is dead, mister," he said to Wolf. "Looks like you're going to hang for it."

Wolf was still bellied up to the bar, the mug of beer in his right hand. As Gulch reached for the six-gun in his holster, Wolf brought the mug around with all the force he could muster and caught the lawman on the side of the head. He went down like a felled ox.

Wolf caught the man before he reached the floor and held him up in front of him as a shield as he slowly backed down the bar. Tyson aimed his gun and seemed about to fire. But the deputy that had entered with him knocked Tyson's gun hand down.

"You'll hit the sheriff!" he cried.

"Goddamnit!" cried Tyson in an agony of frustration. "Get the sonofabitch! Don't let him get away! That's Wolf Caulder!"

Wolf stopped in his tracks. *That's Wolf Caulder!* The words echoed and reechoed in his brain. Outside of Ellen and Abe, only Frank Joplin knew who he was—and these men moving in to take him now were Frank Sanderson's men.

He'd found Frank Joplin at last; there was no longer any doubt of that.

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But his pause had been a mistake. Out of the corner of his eye, Wolf saw the bartender's arm descending in a wicked arc, a full bottle of whiskey in his hand. Wolf pulled away as swiftly as he could, but the bottle caught him a numbing blow on his left shoulder. He twisted away in pain and let the sheriff drop.

At once the bar's patrons joined the forces of law and order and fell upon him. A swarming multitude of arms encircled him and tried to pull him down. Punches, thrown in such haste and confusion as to be almost without force, rained upon his back and neck.

Tyson, his face a livid mask of hatred, was moving through the crush toward Wolf. Wolf waited just long enough and then struck out at the man's face and caught him flush on the nose. A fountain of blood spouted from it. Tyson staggered back, pain and dismay contorting his face as he tried to stem the flood. Spinning away then, Wolf flung one little man from him, picked up a chair and brought it down on the suddenly cringing back of another.

The chair shattered under the impact and the citizen collapsed. Another one flung himself at Wolf, and still another, but Wolf—towering over them all—flung them about like so many hollow men. As if he had been born and bred for this purpose alone, he raged among his tormentors like some kind of awesome elemental force. A quick swipe of his right arm caught the deputy on the side of the neck. He

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sagged to the floor. Another, grappling him from behind, suddenly lost heart as Wolf twisted suddenly and flung him through the air.

And then all at once he was alone. Tyson was pulling back, watching, his nose flowing unchecked. Wolf turned. The bartender was raising a double-barreled shotgun to his shoulder. Hurling himself to the floor and the protection of an overturned table, Wolf drew his weapon. As he struck the floor and rolled behind the table, the bartender fired and a fist size load of shot slammed into the table. Wolf, still moving, aimed and fired at the man.

The bartender's face exploded as the .45 slug struck him just under the right eye. As the man went tumbling back, his arms flew up and the shotgun went off a second time, tearing a hole in the plaster above Wolf's head.

Wolf started to get to his feet, but before he could move he was pinned to the floor by two, then three men, including the now fully conscious Gulch. As Wolf struggled, Tyson hustled over to finish the job with a vicious kick to the side of Wolf's head. Something bright detonated deep within his skull. He remembered reaching out feebly for Tyson's foot as it came at him a second time. But he missed and the force of Tyson's boot lifted his head up off the floor and slammed it around.

From deep within his skull he heard Diego screaming. Tyson kicked him again someplace in the back. The screaming stopped and he fell into blessedly silent darkness.

XV

Someone was poking at Wolf's face, not gingerly, but the way one would poke at a piece of steak frying in a pan over an open fire. Wolf opened his eyes and saw only the crumbling plaster of a cell wall. A single, barred window dominated the wall above his head, and he saw it was night, a dust of stars faintly visible.

He turned over on the bunk and started to sit up. Doc Gurney, startled, stumbled back in the darkness. But Wolf's stamina was not equal to his intentions. As soon as he exerted himself, the cell spun sickeningly around him and he had to hold onto his head to keep it from falling off and rolling across the floor. He heard himself laughing softly at the madness of it, and immediately became aware of just how bruised his face and jaw were. As the cell slowed its whirligig, he fixed his one eye on the doctor.

"What are you doing in here, Doc? Come to see if Wolf Caulder is maybe already dead?"

The doctor moved closer. "Amazing," he said. "You took a fearful beating in that saloon."

"I guess you're right, Doc," Wolf replied, feeling the side of his face where Ruel Tyson had kicked him. It was swollen and raw to the touch. Tyson could have broken his jaw and shattered his cheekbone if

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he'd aimed with a little less passion and a bit more precision. Wolf was sore all over. Every muscle and bone in his body was protesting, it seemed; but it was nothing he couldn't live with.

He adjusted his eye patch and looked at the doctor. "I asked you before, Doc. What are you doing in here?"

"You answered your own question. I came to see if you were dead or dying. You seem to be neither."

"The sheriff sent you in?"

The man nodded,

"Before you make your report, Doc, I want you to answer a few questions."

"Ask away, sir. But I promise nothing."

"You told me Sanderson had wounded himself and that Tara was his witness. You lied, didn't you?"

"Yes, I lied. Tara and her father wanted that to be the accepted explanation. Tara wasn't sure what exactly had happened to her father. He just came back from a long trip, wounded. But she accepted her father's explanation. And I saw no reason not to go along with it myself."

"Does the name Frank Joplin mean anything to you?"

The doctor sighed. "That was the name Sanderson used whenever . . . he went away for any length of time."

"To raise money."

"Yes. To raise money."

"Thank you, doctor."

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"Don't thank me. I have done nothing for you."

"If it comes to a trial, you'll testify that I shot Nat Love in the back."

The doctor shrugged. "I'm a weak man, Caulder. And I know it. It is a difficult fact to live with, but I manage."

"You and the bottle."

"Yes. The bottle and I manage."

The doctor picked a tin drinking cup up off the floor and raked it across the bars a couple of times. A door opened at the end of a short corridor, and a deputy Wolf had not seen before entered and unlocked Wolf's cell to let the doctor out.

As the doctor left, Wolf lay back slowly, carefully on the bunk and closed his eye. Frank Joplin had a choice. He could risk a trial or try to kill Wolf before one could be held. The second course seemed much more likely.

But perhaps they would let him sleep through this night undisturbed. He relaxed his long frame and fell almost immediately into a deep sleep.

The stifling heat of the day was only just beginning to abate when Wolf heard the door at the end of the corridor open. Brisk footsteps started toward his cell. He opened his eye and swung his feet off the bunk. When he saw Ellen approaching the bars, he got to his feet and walked across the cell toward her.

"Thank you for coming, Ellen," Wolf said. "But I wish you hadn't. This is no place for you."

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"Is it a place for you then?"

He preferred not to answer that. "Did the doctor bring out a wheelchair for Bob?"

"Someone he hired did, a boy who works at the livery in town here." She smiled wanly. "I knew you must have had something to do with it."

"It was something I kept thinking about while I rode in yesterday—you out there alone trying to carry Bob in and out. How does he like it?"

"He hates it, of course. But he uses it."

"How's Abe?"

Her pale face almost broke then. Her hands went up to close about the cell's bars. "That's what made me come in," she said. "Abe didn't return last night from the Diamond T. I thought he might have gone straight on into town here. He wasn't happy about my decision to sell out to Sanderson, you know."

"It wouldn't be like Abe to leave the Circle M without a proper goodbye, Ellen."

"I know that now, of course. Michael, I'm worried."

"So am I. I was afraid of this yesterday, but Abe wouldn't let me ride along with him."

"What could have happened?"

He looked at her, considered a moment, then concluded she was a big enough girl now to hear the truth. "Diamond T riders might have seen him coming and bushwhacked him—just to keep their hand in. Or they might have riled Abe unduly. You know what an old bear he is. If he went for his gun . . ."

He saw the tears coursing down her cheeks, and

looked quickly away so as not to embarrass her. He didn't like the sound of it himself.

"I knew it," she said, her voice ragged. "But I thought—I've always thought—that Tara's friendship for me would stand between me and her father, and those men of his. I see now how wrong I was. It's all my fault—Bob a cripple, Abe perhaps dead. And you—why are you in jail, Michael? Is this my doing as well?"

"No."

"Why then? The whole town is talking about you—about the terrible fight in the saloon yesterday, the death of Harry Korn. Everybody liked him, Michael."

"Nat Love, the puncher I shot, died. Gulch and his new deputy, Ruel Tyson, came for me."

"In a way it is related to Circle M, isn't it?"

"I said it wasn't, Ellen." He spoke sharply and turned away from her and sat back down on his cot.

"It's still none of my business. Is that it, Michael?"

He looked at her. She had been asked to take a very great deal in the past few days. The truth about him shouldn't hurt that much. She already knew most of it. "I came to Fort Buford to find Frank Joplin," he said. "To find him and kill him. I found him, but I haven't killed him yet. You know him as Frank Sanderson."

"My God, Michael! What did he do?"

"He and four others killed my mother and father, shot them down in front of me. When I went after them, they shot me as well."

"Frank Sanderson? And four others?" She was incredulous. "But why?"

"Robbery. My father had just sold his biggest herd. There was twenty-two thousand dollars in his strong box."

"Robbery? But why would Frank Sanderson need —"

"Whenever he needed money," Wolf broke in, "he went south—as Frank Joplin. Maybe you had some Indian trouble back then?"

"Ten years ago?"

Wolf nodded.

She thought a moment. "No," she said. "Not Indians. It was a blizzard, a terrible blizzard. It was late in the spring and it went on and on. It wiped out most of the cattlemen. That was one reason my first husband was able to purchase the Circle M for such a reasonable price."

Wolf smiled thinly. It was all coming together nicely now. "But Sanderson was able to hold on," he reminded Ellen. "He had all the capital he needed to buy new breeding stock."

She saw it then. She shook her head in sudden distaste—as if she had been forced to witness something unclean. "And you've come all this way to kill him."

Wolf nodded.

"But he's blind."

Wolf did not reply.

"And those others. You said there were four others. You have already killed them, haven't you?"

"Yes," he said quietly, unable to hide the satisfaction he felt.

She stepped back from the bars. For a moment she seemed about to say something; then she turned and hurried down the dim corridor to the door. Opening it quickly, she vanished through it without a backward glance.

Not long after, Ruel Tyson came through the same door. This was his third visit of the day. There was a leer on his pale face as he stopped in front of Wolf's cell.

"Just had a nice long visit with your little chippie, eh?"

Wolf said nothing.

"These bars must have been quite a problem though. Too bad." He grinned. "I'm gonna take that woman one of these days. Yessir. I'll make her think it's you, so she won't mind."

He spat suddenly through the bars at Wolf, but his aim was bad. Then he turned and started to walk back to the office. "By the way," he said, pausing in front of the door. "The town's filling up with Diamond T riders. There's some talk among them of taking the law into their own hands." He smiled. "But don't worry, we'll protect you."

He pulled the door shut behind him.

Wolf lay flat on the bunk, his arms folded under his head, and closed his eye. There was nothing he could do now but rest up.

And wait.

XVI

Since dusk the town had been getting noisier. Lying quietly on his bunk, Wolf listened to the raucous shouts of liquored-up cowboys and the occasional gunfire that punctuated the night. A celebration of some kind seemed to be building in Fort Buford—a necktie party, perhaps.

Wolf was not so sure. Ruel Tyson had seemed anxious enough to give that impression—too anxious. There was little doubt, however, that Sanderson could not permit a trial. He would not want revealed in open court what Wolf knew of Frank Sanderson alias Frank Joplin. So there would be no trial then. And no lynching, either. Sheriff Gulch could not really stand aside for that.

All of which pointed to only one other alternative.

The town quieted at last. Judging from the piece of the moon Wolf could glimpse through his window, it was well past midnight. Wolf folded his arms under his head and waited.

He did not have long to wait. The door at the far end of the corridor opened and Wolf heard a pair of footsteps approaching his cell. He turned his head. The doctor was standing beside the deputy, Stan Betts.

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The doctor cleared his throat. "Just thought I'd check that face of yours, Caulder—where you got kicked."

Wolf sat up and grinned. "At this hour, Doc?"

"I admit I have been remiss in not coming sooner."

"Oh, that's all right, Doc."

The deputy unlocked the door and the doctor stepped into Wolf's cell. Without locking the cell door behind him, the deputy left.

The doctor leaned close and spoke in a hoarse whisper. "The town is filled with Diamond T riders! They might try to lynch you tonight!"

"That so, Doc?"

"Yes . . . but I have something to tell you. I have —"

"Before you get into that, Doc, I'd like to thank you for sending that wheelchair out to the Bowmans'."

"It was nothing," the doctor mumbled distractedly. "You gave me the money—a matter of principle."

"Of course, Doc. I should have realized. You have a bottle for a backbone, but plenty of principle. Now what's that something you have to tell me?"

"I . . . I bribed the deputy, Stan Betts. And I have a gun with me."

"A gun, Doc? Now where would you get a gun?"

"Abe."

Wolf reached out and took the doctor's arm, his fingers closing about it like a vise. "All right, Doc. Let's have it all. What about Abe?"

"Diamond T riders ambushed him on his way back

to the Circle M. But he was able to make it to Fort Buford and to my room at the hotel."

"How badly wounded is he?"

"He has two gunshot wounds, one in the back, the other in the leg. I have removed both slugs."

"Go on, Doc."

"When Abe heard of your . . . difficulties, he gave me what money he had and his gun. He told me to bribe one of the deputies and get his gun in to you."

Wolf nodded. "You have the gun in that little black bag. Is that right?"

The doctor nodded.

"Let me have it."

Reaching into his bag, Gurney pulled out a Colt, single-action Peacemaker. Wolf hefted it. He could not be sure, but it looked like Abe's sixgun all right. He checked the cylinder and found it fully loaded. Then he inspected the pin. In the dim light from the lamp on the wall outside the cell, it was not easy. Satisfied at last, he aimed the Colt at the astonished Gurney's chest, cocked, and fired.

Nothing happened.

But the doctor's face—white when Wolf raised the sixgun—was a faint shade of green now. Wolf got up, sure now that Gurney had not known the weapon had had the firing pin filed away.

"All right, Doc," he said. "When I get beside that door I want you to call for that deputy. And I want you to do it with plenty of spirit."

The man was having difficulty with his voice, but he nodded his understanding of what Wolf wanted.

Then Wolf stepped out of the cell and moved with catlike silence to the end of the hallway. He nodded to Gurney.

The doctor yelled, "Betts! Come in here, Betts!"

Wolf heard a quick, confused parley just behind the door. He had guessed right. They weren't going to take any chances. They were going to nail him before he left the jail. Abruptly, the discussion behind the door ended and the door opened a crack. Betts stuck his sixgun in first, then followed it with his head.

Wolf brought the Peacemaker down on the back of the deputy's neck. As the deputy dropped his gun and sagged forward, Wolf caught him by the vest and pulled him quickly through the doorway. But before he could close the door, two quick shots thundered behind him and Wolf saw the deputy's body buck twice. He pulled the man out of the line of fire and snatched up the sixgun he had dropped. Someone on the other side of the door pulled it shut again.

Discarding the Peacemaker, Wolf hefted the deputy's sixgun, lifted the inert form of the lawman and held it in front of him like a shield. Then he squared around in front of the door and fired three quick shots through it. He spaced them judiciously, and was rewarded with the sound of a cry on the other side.

A fusilade answered his shots, but only one bullet came close and that the deputy's body absorbed. Wolf cried out and flung his burden at the closed door, then stood with cocked gun and waited. There was

silence on the other side, followed by a sudden lament, as whoever it was Wolf had hit pleaded for some kind of decisive action to bring this business to a rapid close.

"Doc!" Gulch shouted through the door. "You all right in there?"

Wolf brought his sixgun around and aimed through the bars at the doctor. Then he nodded.

"I'm all right!" the doctor called, his voice quavering.

"That sonofabitch shot?"

Wolf nodded sharply and indicated with a quick glance the body of the deputy still wedged against the door.

"He's shot, all right!" Gurney cried. "He's lying against the door!"

Wolf brought his weapon back around and waited. The door opened slowly, encountered the deputy's body, and stopped. This sparked a jubilant conversation, and a sudden powerful shove pushed the body back to let the door swing wide.

Sheriff Gulch was standing there, gaping at Wolf. Wolf fired twice. The first bullet smote the sheriff in the chest, the second caught him in the neck. The lawman staggered back against his desk, grabbed at his throat to stem the guttering flow, then slowly sagged to his knees.

His deputy, his left hand clutching his right shoulder, took a step backward and then started clawing for his weapon. Wolf fired quickly, reluctantly. The bullet tore into the deputy's stomach and slammed

him back against the wall, where he slid down it to the floor. Obeying some crazed, dogged impulse, he found his gun and fired wildly at Wolf. Wolf aimed coolly at the man's head and fired. At that distance half of it disappeared into the plaster.

As the sheriff slumped forward onto the floor, Wolf quickly pulled his gunbelt down from the wall and strapped it around his waist. He found his own gun and his Winchester in the wall rack by the window, swept up a box of .44-40's for the rifle, then stepped to the door and opened it a crack.

A small crowd of Diamond T punchers, alerted by the shooting but obviously expecting a different outcome, was moving down the center of the now deserted street toward the jail. Ruel Tyson was in the lead. A raw burst of laughter split the night air.

Closing the door, Wolf dragged the deputy into his cell and threw him face down on the floor. The doctor tried to disappear into a corner. Ignoring him, Wolf returned to the office and knocked the lamp off the desk. The flames guttered for a while on the floor, then flared up suddenly, roaring up the side of the desk, then leaping to the wall.

"Doc!" Wolf cried. "Get out of here!"

The doctor scrambled through the office, and out into the night. By this time the crowd of punchers had seen the flames. As the doctor rushed out, they broke into a run. Wolf slapped his hat on and darted from the jail, stepping into the shadows at once as he cut down the street away from Tyson's men.

Wolf kept low to disguise his height, and in a voice

he hoped resembled one of the deputies, yelled: "Fire! The jail's on fire!"

Behind him there was sudden confusion as the Diamond T men suddenly found themselves debating whether to put out the fire or pursue whoever had just run from the jail. They had to make sure it was not Wolf. A strong, assertive voice settled the matter and two men broke from the rest and started running after Wolf, while the rest went for buckets and still others ducked into the flaming building.

As the two punchers called out to him, Wolf cut behind a large general store, then across a vacant lot, and in behind the barber shop. His two pursuers raced down a side street and out of sight. Moving out of the shadows, Wolf hurried back to the livery. As he kept in the shadows, the town awakened, and a glance over his shoulder revealed a brightening red glow in the night sky.

Stepping into the livery, he found Hoss asleep in a cot beside the big door. "Where's my black?" Wolf demanded.

Hoss sat up and fumbled sleepily with the lantern tered angrily, "What the hell time is it anyway?"

"Never mind," said Wolf, as he located his horse and saddle. Saddling his horse quickly, he dropped his Winchester into the scabbard, secured his blanket roll to the rear of his saddle and led the horse out. As the owner began to protest, Wolf tossed him two bits.

He saw the two punchers then. They had doubled

back and were hurrying down the middle of the street, still searching for him.

Wolf swung into his saddle and galloped straight down the street toward them. When they saw Wolf bearing down on them, they stopped in their tracks. Confused, they started to go left—then right. Abruptly, in desperation, they went for their guns. But before their weapons could clear leather, Wolf ran the nearest one down and clubbed the other with the butt of his sixgun as he rode by. Then, cutting down an alley and up a side street, he headed out of town, keeping the glow in the sky well behind him.

Not long after, as he rode due west through a small clump of cottonwood, he saw the badlands—a distant line of peaks and misshapen bluffs—shouldering into the night sky ahead of him.

As good a place as any to lose the Diamond T riders who would soon be on his tail.

XVII

Throughout that night Wolf rode, and well into the next forenoon. He was careful to leave tracks. If he found that he traveled for any distance over hard ground, he would be especially careful to find a soft spot to travel through as soon as he had left the dry ground. He kept a steady pace, however, and did not halt except to water his horse.

He was well inside the badlands by daybreak but kept to as straight a path through the narrow defiles and canyons as he could, choosing whenever possible to pass under overhanging ridges or along the foot of rock walls.

At mid-day he camped by a thin stream that trickled out from behind a rock formation at the foot of the butte. In the rocks' welcome shade he used his blanket roll for a pillow and relaxed beside the cool stream, his hobbled black grazing nearby. Closing his eye, he rested but did not sleep.

He kept track of the sun carefully, and after about an hour he remounted and rode on, this time traveling up the bed of the stream. He was looking for hard ground to emerge onto, or an extensive outcropping of rock. He found a ledge soon enough and guided his horse onto it. Forcing the animal to a slow

walk so as not to chip the stone with its shoes, he kept going until he saw a stand of juniper crowding the ledge. He rode carefully to it, then guided his horse off into the brush clustered about the small trees.

Wolf kept to the brush for a mile or so, gaining altitude steadily. At last he came out onto a gray sandstone ridge that ran for a considerable distance along the topmost elevations of the badlands. He had been aware of it all along. Now he traveled back along the rocky spine, retracing the course he had just followed—but from a much higher vantage point.

Pushing his horse to its limit, he reached the end of the ridge with at least six hours of sun left in the sky. Tethering his horse in a clump of stunted cedars, he crept well out onto a narrow ledge which gave him an unobstructed view of the grassland he had crossed that night.

Peering into the shimmering distance, his eye saw nothing; and since he had caught no sign of any pursuers as he traveled back along the ridge, he began to wonder if Sanderson had decided not to send anyone after him. But this hardly seemed likely, and at last Wolf's instincts were rewarded when his eye picked out the tiny figures of five riders strung out in single file as they rode closer across the undulating surface of the grassland. Wolf smiled as he reminded himself that the confusion he had left in his wake the night before could very well account for the tardiness of this pursuit.

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Five of them. *Single them out one by one, my son, like the wolf you are, and cut them down.*

Wolf watched the five riders for a while longer, noting that they were driving their mounts hard in their effort to make up for lost time. And they seemed to be following his trail with no difficulty at all.

He climbed back off the ledge and saw to his horse. It appeared to have plenty of forage, at least for the time he would be gone. Taking just his rope and a sixgun, he descended to the floor of the badlands, moving with speed and yet infinite care to see that he not dislodge anything—not even a pebble. At last he reached the spot he had noted when first he entered the badlands—a confusing maze of man-sized boulders, a shiny obsidian in color, that seemed to have grown out of the canyon floor. He slipped in among the cool stones and hunkered down to wait.

The lead rider was Steve Barton. Wolf was disappointed. He would have preferred Tyson to the Diamond T foreman. Barton rode with his eyes searching the ground intently. As he clipped past Wolf and on into the canyon, he leaned back in his saddle and yelled to his straggling riders to close up.

They nudged their laboring mounts without enthusiasm. They were well strung out by this time, the last rider in the file a good two hundred yards back. Wolf let them ride on past him into the canyon after Barton. It was the last rider he wanted, and as this one passed Wolf and entered the narrow canyon still

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well behind the others, Wolf stood up and strode quickly out from behind his hiding place, his *reata* held ready.

Wolf had already removed his spurs and with quick loping strides he closed to within twenty feet of the rider, brought his *reata* up and with one quick toss looped the thin rawhide noose over the man's head. A vicious, snapping tug closed off the rider's throat. Able to utter only a barely audible cry, the man was pulled violently backward off his horse.

For a moment Wolf was afraid the horse would spook and take off down the canyon after the others. But the animal reared and then, finding his saddle lighter, slowed down, then stopped and looked back at his fallen rider. By that time Wolf had reached the man and loosened the rawhide from around his neck.

He had not moved after striking the ground, the *reata* having snapped his neck, killing the puncher almost instantly. Wolf flung his coiled rope over his shoulder, took the rider by the boots and dragged him to the edge of the canyon and dropped him behind some large boulders. He did not want the vultures to advertise the corpse's presence too soon.

Then he went back for the horse, pulled off its saddle, turned it about and sent it back out of the canyon with a sharp slap to his rump. With almost welcome relief, his tail high, the horse galloped off toward the lush grassland it had so recently quit. There was plenty of water out there and the horse would find it, Wolf knew; and when eventually it

rode into the Diamond T yard minus its rider and its saddle, Frank Sanderson would know who had sent it.

It was not long before—as Wolf expected—a rider returned to find out what had happened to their drag. Wolf had lugged the saddle out of the canyon and dropped it at one side of the entrance. Clattering out of the canyon, the rider spotted the saddle almost at once and flung off his horse to investigate. His six-gun was in his hand as he knelt by the saddle to examine its markings.

Wolf stepped out of the shadows behind him and spoke quietly.

“Drop it, mister.”

But this hardcase had no overpowering desire to spend his declining years in a rocking chair. With a violent oath he spun about, his sixgun blazing. His first shot went wild, his second nicked Wolf in the right side under his upraised arm a second before Wolf brought the barrel of the gun down on the side of the man's head, just above the ear. The man sighed—as if he'd just loosened his belt after a full meal—and sagged to the ground. He lay on his back, his breath coming in short, painful gasps, a thin trickle of blood streaming from his left temple.

The two shots would bring the three others—fast. Wolf relieved the injured rider of his gun belt, tossed his sixgun away, and then returned to his earlier hiding place to retrieve his spurs. His entire right side was heavy with blood, and he knew he'd be leaving

a somewhat bloody spoor for the rest of them to track. He started to climb to where he'd left his black.

He was better than halfway up to the ridge when the remaining three riders clattered out of the mouth of the canyon below him and discovered their fallen comrade. Leaping from their horses, guns drawn, it didn't take them long to find Wolf's bloody tracks. One of them followed the trail to the rocks and then to the side of the bluff, Wolf climbing swiftly and watching all the while.

The fellow ran back a few yards to get a better view. Wolf tried to keep out of sight of him as he climbed, but it was impossible. With a shout the man announced to the others what he had found and then started pumping lead after Wolf. He did not get off more than a couple of shots before he realized that Wolf was now out of range. He holstered his gun and raced for the foot of the bluff, the others following.

Wolf climbed swiftly now, without care, perfectly willing to dislodge tiny avalanches of pebbles and debris. He reached the ridge quickly, found his black still tethered in the cedars and mounted. Just as he started back along the ridge, one of his pursuers climbed into view and began firing. Reining about, Wolf pulled his Winchester from its scabbard, levered a cartridge into firing position, and with cool, thoughtful deliberation, squeezed off a shot. The man firing at him threw his hands up into the air, staggered back a few steps . . . and disappeared.

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When the other two men reached the crest of the ridge, Wolf was gone.

Barton and his single remaining Diamond T rider had built their campfire against a rock face and then had carefully fashioned two dummy sleepers out of boulders and blankets, setting them a small distance from the fire. As the dancing light played upon the still forms, they looked surprisingly lifelike. The only thing wrong with the scheme was that Wolf had expected just such a threadbare deception.

Crouched atop an overhanging ledge almost directly above the fire, Wolf knew that somewhere—halfway up the slope facing him perhaps—Barton and his partner were waiting in the darkness for Wolf to make his move.

Wolf made himself comfortable on the ledge and waited until the fire had died down considerably before tossing a single cartridge into the fire. The sound of it clocking against the rock could be heard, he was certain, by the two men waiting in the darkness, but this did not mean they knew what it was they heard. Not sure the cartridge had remained in the fire, Wolf tossed three more. Only when he noticed a slight disturbance in the embers was he sure that one of the cartridges had reached the fire. He waited a while longer and tossed two more, then stood up on the ledge, his Winchester loaded and ready.

For an uncomfortably long period of time it seemed his ruse was not going to work as the fire continued to burn itself out. Finally it was just a sin-

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gle, guttering flame surrounded by an irregular star of fading embers.

Abruptly, the fireworks began.

In quick succession the fire was blasted as two cartridges went off. The sound of the bullets ricocheting off the rock face filled the air. And then another cartridge went off. All this within the space of four, perhaps five, seconds. During this time Wolf kept his eyes on the slope below him.

Suddenly a dark figure bolted from behind a clump of scrub pine, guns blazing as he fired at something to the right of the fire. Wolf lifted his Winchester, tracked quickly, aimed just behind the gun flashes, and squeezed. The figure buckled and tumbled head first down the slope.

At once Wolf flattened himself on the ledge as another flash from higher up on the slope sent a slug whistling past his left ear. Another one followed the first, striking the lip of the ledge, sending tiny shards of stone at Wolf's face. He looked quickly away, then sighted at the flashes and squeezed the trigger. He heard the slug ricochet off rock. Then another flash from a different position on the slope and another bullet whispered past his right shoulder.

Cautiously, Wolf backed off the ledge, dodged through a cleft in the rock and then climbed to the ridge where his horse was tethered, well out of sight. Dropping his Winchester into its scabbard, he swung into his saddle and rode off, grateful for what moonlight still remained.

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Early that same morning before the sunlight had reached the floor of the badlands, Wolf watched a single rider leaving the place, his right arm in a makeshift sling, his body hunched forward over the pommel. Wolf left his black and climbed closer to the canyon floor to get a better look at the rider. It was Barton's partner, the one he had winged the night before. Wolf climbed back up the slope, remounted, and headed for higher ground.

He had hoped it was the foreman, though good sense had told him that Barton would not have spooked so easily and broken from cover like that. No. Barton was a cut higher than that; and he was staying on in the badlands alone to finish the job Sanderson had sent him to do. Which meant that by this time the foreman had about the same advantages that Wolf had—at least in terms of surprise and terrain. Thinking this, Wolf rode with great care, his eye inspecting every bush, every overhanging ledge.

It did not come as a complete surprise, therefore, when he rounded an odd-shaped finger of rock and found himself facing a mounted horseman, a rifle barrel leveled at his head. Even as Wolf's eye took it in, Barton's finger tightened on the trigger.

Without hesitation Wolf flung himself forward over the head of his horse. The rifle fired a split second later, and Wolf felt a slug tear through the soft flesh of his right shoulder. But he paid no attention to it as he caught the head of Barton's horse and used it to break his fall. Clinging to the horse's bit, he yanked the head violently around. The animal reared in sud-

den panic, pulling its head free of Wolf's grasp—at the same time unseating Barton, who tumbled backward off the horse.

The man came down heavily on his back. Wolf flung himself upon him. They rolled over twice before a wall of rock stopped them. But they kept at it, throwing punches that missed for the most part, Wolf's wound effectively smearing dark blood over them both. At last Wolf stunned the foreman with a hard right to the chin, stood up and drew his Colt. But as he steadied himself to shoot, Barton snatched up a fist-sized rock and hurled it with murderous precision at Wolf's head.

The rock struck Wolf flush on the forehead. He felt as if he had ridden into the side of a mountain. Still clutching his sixgun, he staggered backward. The ground slammed up into him. He lost consciousness momentarily, then tried to open his eye; but all he could manage was a tiny flicker of the eyelid. Yet it was enough to enable him to see through a reddish haze the panting, blood-smearred figure of the foreman—a grim smile on his battered face as he calmly and deliberately reached back for his own weapon.

But you still have your gun! Wolf told himself as the paralysis that had fallen over his limbs began to fade. Almost without willing it, he felt the sixgun in his right hand pulsing as he poured shot after shot up into the figure looming over him. Then, as the burly, bloodied figure of the wounded man crumpled, Wolf tried to roll away. But he was unable to move in time and Barton collapsed onto him. Still partially

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paralyzed, Wolf's limbs would not respond to his efforts to pull himself free of the man, and when at last he was able to open his eye completely, he found himself looking deep into the wide, staring eyes of a dead man.

At last the paralysis lifted from his limbs and he rolled out from under his grisly burden. His horse had not spooked. Holstering his weapon, he caught the hanging reins and pulled himself into his saddle. As he started to ride, he realized that what he needed now was a place where he could lick his wounds.

He needed to be ready, entirely fit, before he went after the one man who had started him so long before on this bitter journey into hell.

XVIII

Wolf rode for the rest of that day until he was beyond the badlands, heading into the foothills of the Big Horn Mountains. Following a wide, lazy stream, he came to a quiet valley, the floor of it rippling with lush grass. At the head of the valley Wolf found an abandoned line shack, a one-room affair built into the side of a hill, its two side walls fashioned of logs chinked with mud. The winter snows and the many rains had washed the mud from between the logs and the old cowhide blanket that served as a door was in tatters.

Wolf ripped down the blanket and stepped into the cool interior. Yes, this would do.

A full week later Wolf arrived back at the Circle M. He rode in from the west, having cut across Diamond T land. He had ridden across Diamond T range cautiously, not ready yet for any showdown with Diamond T riders. He wanted to speak to Ellen once more before going after Sanderson. He didn't know if it was possible; she might already have left the Circle M, but he felt a need to try to make her understand why he had to go on until either he or Frank Sanderson was dead.

That she could or would understand was a for-

lorn hope at best, and it surprised him that this had become so important to him. But it had. She and Abe had saved his life. Sure as hell he owed her some kind of explanation, one that would go beyond the brutal assertions he had loosed upon her when she had visited him in jail.

He heard the shots just before sundown as he was riding out of a thick stand of cottonwood. They came from over the next rise—from the direction of the Circle M. He dug spurs into his black, and soon he could hear the shooting above the sound of horse's thudding hooves. When finally he came in sight of the Circle M compound, he snatched his rifle from its scabbard and leaped from the still moving animal.

As his horse pulled up and trotted away, Wolf ran the remaining distance to the rear of the corral, cut inside the horse barn through the back door, and looked out through the windows beside the wide-open main door. A column of thick black smoke was pulsing from a shattered kitchen window, and two riders—one of them Ruel Tyson—had roped Bob Bowman in his wheelchair and were charing around the yard pulling Bob behind them. Bowman, screaming and crying out in rage, had a gun and was trying desperately to bring them down.

As Wolf watched he saw Bowman hurl his empty revolver in desperate fury at the nearest rider, Ruel Tyson. At once Tyson doubled back and yanked the rope, tumbling the hapless Bowman from the wheel-

chair. Bowman screamed as he struggled to get away from the tumbling wheelchair, and it looked for a moment that he was actually walking on his stumps.

Then Wolf saw the other rider—coming up from behind Bowman. Wolf stepped out of the barn and yelled a warning; but he was too late as this second rider ran down Bowman deliberately. The sound of the hooves as they thudded into the man's body came sickeningly across the yard.

Wolf's cry of warning to Bowman alerted the two riders to his presence. Tyson flung a shot in his direction as the other, pulling up on his plunging horse, tried to turn away from Wolf. Wolf strode forward, lifted his Winchester, sighted, and fired. The rider threw up his hands and went flying backward off his still plunging horse.

Tyson turned his animal with a vicious snap of the reins, spurred it brutally and fled through the main gate.

Wolf raced to where Bowman was lying on the grass. The man's eyes were closed, but he was groaning fearfully.

"Where's Ellen?" Wolf asked.

The man's eyes flickered open. "I tried to stop them. I tried!"

"Where's Ellen?" Wolf demanded.

"Inside . . . inside . . . they've killed her . . ."

Wolf jumped up and raced into the burning single story structure. The kitchen stove was in flames, the smell of raw kerosene heavy in the place, and half

the wall beside it was being consumed by the fire. But the flames had not yet reached the bedroom, and he darted past the flames and into the small room.

Thick, eye stinging smoke hung in a heavy cloud from the ceiling. An oddly serene lamp was lit and sitting on the dresser, casting a soft glow over Ellen's naked body. She was lying on her back on the bed, her legs and arms roped to the four corners of the bed. She had not submitted to Tyson easily. Her face was swollen so that her eyes seemed but slits. And her puffed lips were cut and bleeding.

But she was not dead. As he bent to untie her feet, she groaned—and then shrieked out at sight of him bending over her. He hurried back into the kitchen for a knife, found one, and cut her loose. She kept screaming, hunching up like a fetus on the bed while he pulled some dresses and shoes from the closet.

Then, ignoring her screams, he flung her over his shoulder and ran from the place.

While the fire leveled the ranch house, Wolf buried Bowman out behind the main barn alongside the man who'd killed him. Then, as soon as the house collapsed in on the flames, he helped Ellen onto the flatbed and drove into Fort Buford, his black trotting behind, a now silent, staring Ellen sitting beside him on the seat.

It was a little past nine o'clock when he rode down the main street of Fort Buford and pulled up in front

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of the Buford Arms Hotel across the street from Steadman's saloon. As Wolf helped Ellen down from the flatbed, he collared a youngster and directed him to go across into Steadman's and bring the doctor over to the hotel.

"But . . . I can't go in *there* mister! I ain't even supposed to be out this late! My mother, she'll . . ."

"Pronto, boy!" Wolf snapped. "Now, git!"

The boy turned and raced across the street and on into the saloon.

The clerk frowned slightly as he noted Ellen's disheveled appearance, but Wolf forced himself to ignore it.

"I want a back room facing away from the street noise," Wolf told the clerk, "and not too small."

"That'll be . . . two dollars. In advance," the clerk said, turning to pull down the key.

Wolf took the key, dropped two silver dollars onto the desk, and started to help Ellen up the stairs. The clerk came out from behind his desk and cleared his throat.

"Does the . . . er lady have no luggage? I'm afraid if . . ."

By that time Wolf had the clerk by the throat, his Colt out and thrusting none-too-gently into the man's flabby midsection. The clerk's face lost all color.

"I don't like you," said Wolf. "I just paid you twice what the room is worth. Bother me and this lady any more and I'll probably kill you."

Then he left the clerk go. The fellow almost col-

lapsed, but he managed to keep himself erect long enough to scuttle back behind his desk. As Wolf turned again to assist Ellen up the stairs, the boy Wolf had sent after the doctor burst in, Doc Gurney on his heels.

"Come upstairs with us, Doc," Wolf said. "You got a patient."

The doctor pulled himself together when he saw Ellen's appearance and fought back the questions that obviously clamored within him for answers, and accompanied Ellen and Wolf up the stairs. As Wolf finished the climb, he looked down at the boy, still standing in the small lobby, gaping up at them. Wolf called down to the boy. "The clerk there has a quarter for you. Don't you leave without it."

The clerk nodded quickly when Wolf looked his way, and then Wolf followed Ellen and the doctor down the hall to their room.

When the doctor had finished his examination about fifteen minutes later, he called Wolf back into the room and asked if he could speak with Wolf in the lobby downstairs as soon as possible. The doctor's sobriety had already impressed Wolf, and he nodded assent. Then he closed the door behind the doctor and turned to look at Ellen.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed like a forlorn little girl, staring straight ahead. Her face was scarlet from the examination, but aside from that there was no sign she was aware of anything that was going on about her.

Wolf sat down carefully beside her. As he put one arm around her shoulder, he was remembering another time—long before. It was Diego who had his strong arms around him while he shuddered, holding himself rigid, trying not to scream at the phantoms that returned night after night and that had returned this night to accuse him once again as he saw over and over again the figures of his mother and father crumbling to the floor of the low front porch . . .

You could do nothing, my son, to stop those carrion. You are but a boy, but you fought bravely, like a young wolf cub protecting its mother. Yet you are still but a wolf cub. Now you can cry, my son. You can cry so that you may grow to become a wolf—to finish what you started on that evil day.

Cry, my son. Loosen the spirit within you. Soften your soul. Cry, and be healed . . .

And Wolf had finally allowed himself to duck into the old man's arms and to cry—to cry great, convulsive, shuddering sobs that shook both of them to their foundations.

After that, Wolf slept—and there were no more nightmares.

Wolf held Ellen tightly.

“You should cry,” he told her, as softly as he could, trying to remember Diego's fierce softness. “It will do you good to cry. Loosen up, Ellen.”

He looked into her eyes. They seemed not to see him. He had an impulse to pass a hand across her

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eyes to watch her reaction. Instead he put his other arm around her shoulder and held her tightly, as close as he could. He felt her awaken and begin to pull away from him.

But he would not let her. He spoke soothingly, softly to her as a part of him came awake he had thought long since dead. And then she stopped pushing against his strength and collapsed into him. Her head struck his shoulder as she buried her face into his chest. She began to shake then, trembling all over. After that came the sobs, the awesome, soul-wrenching sobs of terror, of dismay, and of shame.

At last she quieted and pulled gently away from him. He looked at her and saw in her eyes a sudden, fierce, cleansing anger. With withering vehemence, she cried, "That bastard, Michael! Oh, that filthy bastard!"

He almost laughed as he pulled her to him again and nodded. He was immensely relieved, certain now she would be all right. In a moment he suggested she get some sleep. She agreed readily.

As he left her he surprised himself by leaning over and kissing her lightly on the forehead. She blushed, and made that movement that always affected him: brushing back an errant lock of hair from her forehead.

The doctor was pacing in the lobby as he waited for Wolf. He stopped when he saw Wolf descending the stairs and hurried toward him.

"Ellen's injuries—physical, that is—were not serious," he told Wolf. "What I'm worried about is her mental state."

"She'll be all right," Wolf assured him. "She's angry as hell at that son of a bitch, Tyson. And that's a good sign."

"Angry, you say?"

Wolf nodded.

"Well, that does sound like a good sign at that." He frowned. "Tyson, eh?"

"Ruel Tyson."

The doctor shook his head. "He's been going around here like a deranged Roman Emperor. Since the death of the sheriff, he's been the only law in town, really. When the last wounded Diamond T rider returned from chasing you and Barton failed to return, Sanderson gave Ruel the foreman's job at the Diamond T—and with it a completely free hand. I understand Tara is not at all happy about it."

Wolf nodded. "Would you see that someone looks after Ellen, doctor, I'll be moving out soon."

"Of course. Abe should be able to look in first thing tomorrow."

"Abe?"

The man smiled. "Abe's been sharing a cot in my office for the past four days."

Wolf frowned. "At the barber shop?"

"I've taken a large office above the feed store. Apart from the rats, it's an excellent location."

"What's come over you, Doc?"

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The man frowned and looked away for a moment, then squared his shoulders and looked back at Wolf. "It was one thing to tell myself I was a coward. It was quite another to know I was."

"Why did you throw in with Tyson and the sheriff?"

"That had not been my intention. In fact, quite to the contrary. Abe had come to me sorely wounded—as I told you. It was he that had given me his gun to bring to you. But it seems our elaborate stratagem was not only poorly conceived, but transparent as well. As I was on my way in to see you, I was purposely delayed. It was at that time that Gulch discovered my gun when he searched my bag."

"And filed down the firing pin before giving it back to you."

The man nodded unhappily. "They gave me quite a going over. Meanwhile I wasn't aware of what he was doing with the gun. You seemed to know, however—almost from the beginning."

"I was expecting just such a play from Gulch."

Not long after, Wolf rode quietly out of town, past the small knots of curious townspeople who had gathered as soon as the word spread that he had returned. No one seemed overly anxious to get too close to him, or to meet his gaze. Tipped back on a chair in front of the burned out jail, a young man with a shiny deputy's badge kept his arms folded and his eyes straight ahead as Wolf rode by.

Wolf would have liked to have stayed longer so

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he could stop in and see Abe, or check once more on Ellen. But all that mattered now was what lay ahead of him. Even if he wanted to, there was no way for him to turn back. He was a bullet that had left the firing chamber long before and was only now approaching its target.

XIX

Frank Sanderson was standing on his front porch with one hand resting on a post, facing Ruel Tyson. Tyson had dismounted and remained beside his horse. Even at this distance Sanderson preferred the horse's smell. The new foreman of the Diamond T shuffled his feet hesitantly as he prepared himself to answer Sanderson's last question. But the reply was too damn long in coming.

"Well, damnit!" Sanderson demanded. "What happened to him then?"

"I just ain't sure myself, Frank."

Sanderson winced at Tyson's familiarity, but he covered his irritation with another brusque question. "What the hell do you mean, you don't know? Mac-Donald is dead or he isn't."

"Well, he's shot. That's for sure."

"Who did it?"

Tyson paused and again Sanderson exploded:

"I asked you a question, man!"

"Looks to me like it was Caulder."

Sanderson's gnarled hand closed a little tighter about the post. Caulder was back then. Barton and three others were dead, most probably, but he was back.

"Maybe you better start at the beginning, Ruel," Sanderson said, a little gentler.

"We went over to the Bowmans' like you said, to maybe see if Miss Ellen would settle for a little less for her land." He paused unhappily.

"Go on, damnit!"

"Well, she was willing, but Bowman, he was like a wild man. He took a gun he had hid in that wheelchair and he began firing at us while we was still in the kitchen. First thing we knew the kitchen lantern was splattering kerosene over the stove."

"There was a fire?"

"Yessir, that's what happened. The whole house was ablaze in no time."

"And Ellen Bowman?"

Tyson hesitated a moment.

"Goddamnit, Ruel!"

"She was in the house, Frank. She couldn't get out, neither."

"And you—you left her in there!"

"Well, it was this damn Bowman, Frank."

"I see. He chased you in his wheelchair."

Tyson didn't reply.

"And Bowman's dead, as well. Is that it?"

Tyson started to reply, but Sanderson stopped him. "You don't need to answer that, Ruel." He snorted contemptuously. "And while you two heroes were burning the Circle M ranch down, with Ellen Bowman trapped inside, you whiled away the time devil-ing Bowman until you tired of your sport and killed the poor sonofabitch."

When Ruel didn't answer, Sanderson went on: "My God! And you let Wolf Caulder catch you at it." He laughed, a short, bitter laugh. "He will not be gentle with a butcher such as you, Tyson. As he will not with me, either. Now, what about the other hands?"

"I sent Dekin and Farley to the badlands to look for Barton, like you said. So, outside of Collins, who's in the bunkhouse moaning about that shot-up shoulder he's got, we only got three riders we can count on."

"Then keep them close by. It's a pretty good bet that your activities this afternoon have pretty well assured us of a visit soon." He paused. "And remember, Ruel, Caulder is surely as anxious to get you as he is to get me."

"I ain't worried, Frank."

"Of course you're not," Sanderson said, moving about cautiously and reaching for the door that led back into the house. "You don't have that much imagination."

Even as he fumbled for the doorknob, the door was pulled open from the inside. It was Tara, he knew.

"Father! I was wondering where you were."

"I heard Ruel ride up, so I went out. It was good for me. We had a nice chat." He turned blindly in Ruel's direction. "Didn't we, Ruel?"

"Sure, Frank."

"Is there some coffee?" Sanderson asked Tara.

"Freshly made," Tara said, taking her father's elbow and leading him quickly inside.

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While Tara went back to the kitchen for the coffee, Sanderson took the old Colt Peacemaker out of his desk drawer and felt of it with both hands. It smelled of good oil and there was still clinging to it the faint, almost indefinable aroma of black powder.

Caulder was coming tonight. He was certain of it, more certain of it than he had been of anything in his life. He was out there now, riding closer through the night. The woods were coming to Dunsinane at last.

At the sound of his daughter's quick step approaching his study door, he placed the heavy weapon back in the drawer and closed it. As Tara entered, she asked,

"What shall we read tonight, father?"

"Do you want to?"

"Of course. You know I love it." He heard her place the tray down on the table beside his desk.

"Macbeth."

"Oh, Father! Not that again. Shakespeare is so gloomy."

"Do you know anything funny to read?"

"How about a game of chess?"

"Fine."

She poured him his coffee, lightly guided his hand to the cup, and then went for the chessboard. He had gotten quite skilled now at visualizing the board, and playing with Tara was always a challenge. He found himself looking forward to the game as he sipped his coffee.

Tara was returning across the room with the chess-

board when Sanderson heard the pounding of heavy feet on the porch and then the sound of someone bursting into the house. As Tara quickly put down the chessboard and headed for the study door, it was flung open.

"Frank!" cried Ruel. "It's Wolf Caulder! Smiley saw the sonofabitch riding right in!"

Sanderson just sat for a moment. And then he felt a surge of his old power animating his limbs. He seemed to catch fire.

"Thank God!" he said. "At last!"

The moon was a large and baleful silver eye that hung over Wolf's right shoulder, casting a bright sheen over the fields and sparse woodlands through which he rode. He knew he was getting close to the Diamond T when he heard a rider galloping furiously away through the night.

He had kept to a steady trot, nevertheless, and now as he topped the last rise and started down the long slope toward the Diamond T, he was impressed. In the bright light of the moon he saw a large, two-story house of logs and planking, complete with a wide, house-length front porch; a separate mess; a large bunkhouse; what looked like a dairy; and a blacksmith shop. It was a miniature village set in a lush valley with high, rolling hills behind it, the seat of the mighty Diamond T.

He was almost to the floor of the valley when off to his right a rifle cracked and Wolf saw a rider bearing down on him out of the night. At the same time

Wolf saw someone run from the big house, leap astride his horse, and spur directly toward him.

But this rider coming at him across the slope had to be Wolf's first concern. With one quick twist Wolf secured the reins to his pommel, lifted the Winchester from its scabbard, sighted and fired. But the moonlight played tricks on his sight and he missed. The rider kept coming at him and sent another shot toward him, the bullet sounding like an angry hornet as it rushed past him in the darkness. Levering another cartridge into firing position, Wolf stood straight in the stirrups, sighted a second time, and fired. This time the rider peeled backward off his horse and vanished into the dark grass.

Two more riders, clearly outlined in the bright moonlight, made themselves known as they galloped down on him from his left, firing their sixguns in rapid fire. Slapping his Winchester back into its scabbard, Wolf snatched his reins and cut away from the two riders, heading for a small gulley to his right.

He dug his spurs and the black responded magnificently. Wolf lengthened the distance between himself and his two pursuers. Then, once into the gulley, he cut sharply left and flung himself from his horse. He was crouching behind a boulder when his two pursuers topped the small ridge, both of them clearly outlined in bright silver. Wolf sighted on the foremost rider and squeezed the trigger of his Winchester. The rider grabbed at the pommel with both hands, then pitched forward into the gulley.

His companion pulled up violently, his horse rear-

ing. Hanging onto the plunging mount, the rider managed to wheel it quickly around. As Wolf threw a shot after him, he disappeared back into the darkness beyond the rise.

Wolf moved out from behind the boulder and listened to the gradual fading of the pounding hooves. One less Diamond T hand to worry about. Then he caught his black's reins and swung into the saddle. The horse was trembling, its flanks quivering. The animal had gone a long way this night.

Just one more run, he whispered to the horse, patting its neck gently. *We'll make it to the house this time.*

Charging back out of the gully, Wolf saw the lone rider he had noticed earlier heading directly for him across the dark meadowland. From his hat and the way he rode, Wolf knew at once that this was Ruel Tyson. Wolf spurred his mount to greater speed and saw Tyson's horse began to waver as Tyson tried to decide what to do. Wolf knew if he kept straight on there might be a collision; but if he cut to one side, he would leave his flank open to a shot from Ruel.

At the last possible moment it was Ruel who cut right. As soon as he did, Wolf cut left, slapped his horse's flank sharply and lit past the man on a straight line to the big house. His way was clear. He regretted leaving Ruel behind, but it was Sanderson he wanted now. Ruel could wait.

But Ruel had a fresh mount. By the time Wolf reached the main gate of the Diamond T compound,

his black was laboring. He glanced back. Outlined in the moonlight, Ruel was almost upon him and even as Wolf turned back around, Ruel threw a shot at him—and then another. Wolf leaned forward over the black's neck to urge him to greater speed.

Ruel fired again and this time a bullet sledged into Wolf's left shoulder, slamming him forward over the pommel. Wolf's sudden shift of weight threw the exhausted black off stride. The horse stumbled once, then went down, throwing Wolf clear. But even as Wolf fell from his horse, he was reaching back for his Colt. He hit the ground hard and when he stopped rolling, Tyson was almost upon him, an enormous hulk of horse and rider charging at him out of the bright night sky.

In one single motion Wolf raised his gun and fired. The bullet thunked into the horse's chest and the animal appeared to disintegrate under Tyson, spilling the man almost at Wolf's feet. Tyson scrambled free of the thrashing animal and was on his feet in an instant, charging Wolf like a wildcat let out of a potato-sack.

Wolf had no time for finesse. Regaining his feet in time to meet Tyson's charge head on, he clubbed viciously downward with his gun, catching the man on the crown of the head. Tyson rocked back. Wolf stepped closer and struck him again, this time dragging the heavy gun barrel across the man's face. Tyson went down on one knee, snarling in sudden pain, then reached out and managed to catch hold of Wolf's gun hand. Wolf yanked his hand free and fired de-

liberately into the man. Tyson spun to the ground, scrabbling frantically through the dark grass for his own sixgun. Wolf saw it gleaming in the moonlight beside the now still horse and kicked it away from Tyson.

Tyson tried to get up. Wolf looked down at the slowly twisting form at his feet and remembered Ellen. And Bob Bowman fleeing before Ruel on his stumps. Aiming carefully at Tyson's right knee, Wolf fired. Then he aimed just as carefully at the left knee and fired again. With each shot Tyson screamed. After the second one he lunged out with his right hand in an effort to grab Wolf and pull him down. Wolf stepped back and kicked the man in the face and left him on his back in the grass, mewling helplessly.

Turning carefully, he started for the house. He walked slowly. The ground had become a bit unsteady under his feet. He realized dimly that he could well pass out before he got to the house. Holstering his weapon, he placed his right hand over the pulsing hole in his shoulder in an effort to staunch the flow, and kept going.

Turning from the study window, Tara cried, "He's still coming!"

"Yes, of course he is," said Sanderson. "Now leave that window and get out of here. I'll handle Caulder myself."

"No! I won't leave you!"

If ever Sanderson had wanted Tara to obey him

without question, it was now. He reached out, felt swiftly for her wrists and pulled her to him.

"Do as I tell you," he told her. "I don't want you with me when I meet Caulder! All he wants is to kill me—and God help me, Tara, all I want is to kill him!"

"But you're blind! How can you possibly . . ."

"This is my fight, woman! Get out of here! Let a blind old man make his peace in his own way!" He pulled her still closer to him, not caring how cruelly his powerful fingers closed about her wrists. "Do this for me, Tara!"

When she did not answer, he pushed her abruptly from him.

"Get out!" he told her. "Do as I say!"

Sanderson heard the sob that broke from Tara's throat, and then the sound of her stumbling backward across the room. She reached the door, flung it open, and ran out.

As he heard her go, Sanderson's face lit grimly, and he reached for the lamp on the corner of his desk and turned up the wick.

Wolf kicked open the front door and walked with some difficulty into the dimly lit hallway. There was a room to his right. The door to it stood open and a long rectangle of much brighter light ran from it across the carpet. Wolf headed for the open doorway.

"Come in! Come right in!" Sanderson called, as Wolf paused in the doorway.

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Wolf could see Sanderson clearly enough. The man was seated at an enormous desk, his blind eyes seemingly fixed upon him, his craggy, beetling brows magnificent in their ferocity. Tara, he noticed, was not with him. Good.

Wolf stepped into the room and started toward Sanderson.

"I sit before you a blind man, Caulder," the old man cried, a calculating gleam in his dead eyes. "It was your bullet that blinded me. Isn't that enough? You robbed me of my sight!"

Remembering the other four, Wolf said quietly, "No."

"A blind man. You are going to murder a blind man."

"Call it what you want, Sanderson." Wearily, Wolf reached back for his gun.

"Have you thought," Sanderson demanded, "what it will be like after me? Who will you hunt down then? Do you realize what we made of you? Perhaps of all our crimes, that was the worst of all—to create out of that boy an Angel of Death. For that perhaps I should die."

"You will, Caulder."

"No, he won't!"

Wolf turned to see Tara standing in the doorway, a small pearl-handled derringer in her tiny white fist. She was holding it up in front of her, already aiming it.

"Tara!" Sanderson called. "I told you to stay out of this!"

She swept quickly into the room, a small, dark-haired fury. "No! You can't make me. This man—this killer—is not going to murder you. I don't care what he thinks you did."

Wolf let his Colt hang by his side as he looked at her. His left side was stiff from the steady flow of blood and his boot was filling with it. "Your father," he told her quietly, "shot down both my father and my mother—in the act of robbing them."

"Father!?"

"It's a lie! A damnable lie, Tara!"

With a sudden powerful swipe the man swept the lamp off his desk and yanked open the desk drawer. As the room was plunged into sudden darkness, Sanderson cried, "That makes us even, Caulder! Now we're both blind! Stand aside, Tara!"

But Tara—caught between Wolf and Sanderson—was confused by this sudden action of her father. Wolf could see her still standing in the darkened room, uncertain as to which way to go. Then Wolf caught the sudden gleam of her father's sixgun. Quickly he reached out and smashed the derringer from Tara's hand and shoved her to one side out of the line of fire. She lost her balance, however, and, falling, struck a wooden chair, causing it to scrape noisily along the floor with her.

Sanderson heard the sound, swung quickly, aimed at the chair and fired.

"No, Sanderson!" Wolf cried, ducking to the floor. "Over here!"

Aware instantly of his mistake, Sanderson cried out

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in sudden alarm: "Tara! My God, Tara! Are you all right?"

Tara was sprawled face down on the floor by the side of his desk, and it was obvious to Wolf that she had been hit and was in some pain. "I'm all right, Dad," she managed feebly. "I'm . . . all right . . ."

"It's your fault, Caulder!" the man cried, suddenly beside himself. "You did it!"

Sanderson began firing wildly in Wolf's direction. Wolf kept down as a bullet splintered a chair by his side. Another demolished a kerosene lamp sitting on a small table beside him. But Wolf waited. He had only two cartridges left in his firing chamber. One more furious shot Sanderson hurled wildly in Wolf's direction; then he lurched out from behind the protection of his desk—half out of his mind by now with grief and anger. As his huge bulk loomed between Wolf and the window, Wolf aimed quickly and squeezed off a shot.

The bullet appeared to hit Sanderson high, in the chest perhaps. It stopped him in his tracks and he sank to one knee. Dazedly, he raised his gun to fire in the direction from which Wolf's shot had come. But before he could get the shot off, Wolf stepped closer and knocked the man's weapon to the floor.

But Sanderson was not through yet. As dangerous as a wounded bear, he snatched out at Wolf and caught Wolf about the thigh. The man's strength was awesome as he reached up with his other hand and tried to pull Wolf down, his other claw of a hand groping for Wolf's throat. Wolf knocked the man's

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hands away and stood clear. By this time he was thoroughly sick of the business and did nothing to halt Sanderson as the man rose to his feet and blundered toward the door, crashing through chairs and tables as he went, calling to Tara that he would get help for her from one of his cowhands still in the bunkhouse—someone called Collins.

The moment Sanderson opened the door and started through, he was met by a sudden fusilade. Three quick shots were squeezed off and Wolf saw Sanderson stagger back, catch hold of the doorway, then crumple backward into the room. Through the open doorway Wolf saw in the hall's dim light the broken figure of Ruel Tyson lying on the floor of the hall, his sixgun still held in his lifted hand, a look of surprise on his ruined face—and then nothing, as his head dropped suddenly forward and his weapon thudded to the carpet.

Tyson had expected Wolf to be the first one out of that door.

Tara was still alive. She groaned and whispered her father's name. Wolf pushed himself to his feet. His left shoulder was no longer numb, and it protested each step he took; but he could flex his fingers and lift his arm. The shattered lamp Sanderson had hurled from his desk had set fire to a buffalo robe on a couch by the wall. As Wolf bent to lift Tara from the floor, the flames leaped from the robe to the wall tapestries and from there began to lick along the great ceiling beams.

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Carrying the barely conscious Tara gently in his arms, Wolf stepped over the body of her father, and then past Tyson and out into the cool night. As he descended the porch steps, he saw a lone rider, one arm in a sling, riding from the bunkhouse. When the rider turned in his saddle and saw Wolf leaving the house, he spurred his mount and galloped on out through the gate.

That would be Collins, Wolf reflected, the man Sanderson had been going to get—the last of the Diamond T hands. Needing a buckboard to take Tara into Fort Buford and Doc Gurney, Wolf continued across the yard, heading for one of the larger barns.

As he drove out through the gate a little later, Tara lying on a bed of straw on the floor of the buckboard behind him, he glanced back at the burning house. It was now almost completely consumed in flames, and its fierce glow gave the night and the trees and grounds around it a strange, ripe lushness.

Sanderson was to have a Viking funeral, it appeared. A dog at his feet.

XX

As Wolf swung easily aboard his black, he straightened his hat and smiled down at Abe.

"Thanks for everything, Abe. And you give my best to the doc."

Ellen was standing beside Abe, but Wolf was not anxious to meet her gaze.

"Sure you won't reconsider?" Abe asked. "We could sure use another hand on this spread."

"There's plenty of cowpunchers looking for jobs in Fort Buford," Wolf said.

"You know why he wants you to stay," Ellen said.

"Ellen, you talk to him," Abe said, turning suddenly and leaving her to stand there alone. She squinted up at him through the morning brightness, her freshly-washed face clean and warm to his gaze.

"After a breakfast like that," Wolf admitted, "a man sure would have to have a good reason for riding on."

"Knowing you, Michael," she said quietly, "I'm sure you do."

"And you probably know what that reason is, Ellen—if I know you."

She brushed a lock of hair off her forehead, and still squinting up at him, nodded. "You're like a knife, Michael. You've been honed to a sharp edge,

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terribly sharp—cruelly sharp. Now you don't have anything to . . . cut anymore."

Wolf nodded and smiled ruefully down at her. Of course. That was it, all right. He remembered Sanderson's question: *Have you thought what it will be like after me? Who will you hunt down then?* It was a question he would be able to answer in time, perhaps. But it would take a while, for nothing Diego had taught him had prepared him for this strange sense of emptiness.

"Come back to us, Michael," Ellen said, stepping back from the horse. "You'll always be welcome."

He nodded to her. Then he touched his hat to Tara standing beside Abe in the doorway of the Circle M's new ranchhouse. Tara waved back at him, and Wolf wheeled his horse and rode out.

He did not look back. And he knew that he would not come back to them—to Ellen, though he loved her, or to Abe or Tara. They had no need for him any longer, and all they would remember when he rode back into their lives was the men he had cut down, the terrible ruin he had been forced to leave in his wake as he slaked his thirst for vengeance. But it had also been a thirst for justice. Diego had taught him that certainly.

Wolf rode on through the bright morning.

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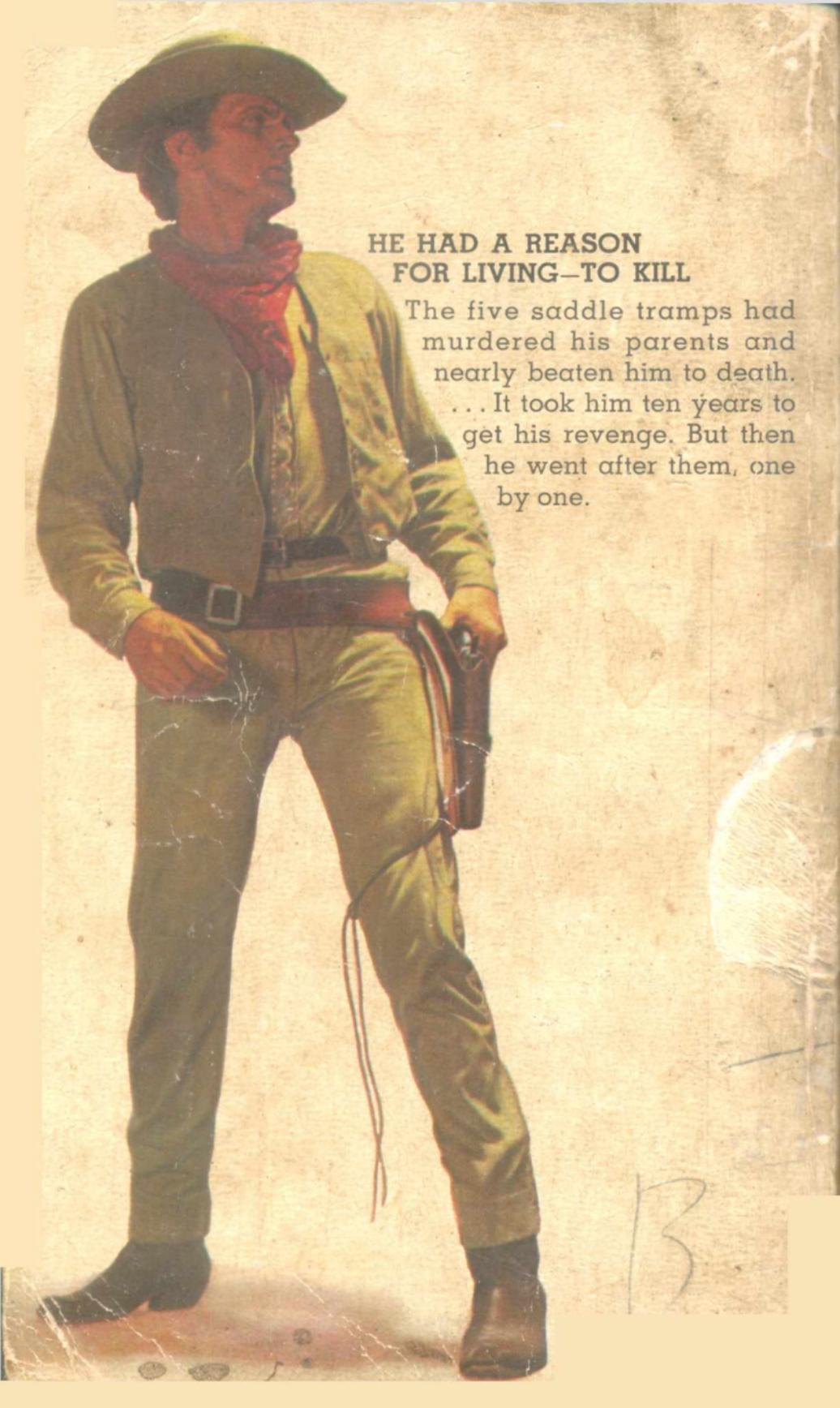
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