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WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Cast a Long Shadow

HATE

"I don't care if she is a woman," Shafter said. "We oughta string her up."

Matt Keenan looked at Shafter, whose right hand hung at his side not far from his gun. "There's a wrong smell about you getting back here just at the time you did," Keenan said. "Now if you want to back up what you're saying, go ahead. I don't think you will. I peg you for a fraud, Shafter, a liar and a coward."

Shafter's dark thin face turned pale. There was no doubt about how much he hated Keenan, no doubt that the feeling was mutual—no doubt about anything except who would draw faster and come out alive....

CAST A LONG SHADOW

★

by Wayne D. Overholser

Author of:

DRAW OR DRAG
THE VIOLENT LAND
VALLEY OF GUNS

A DELL BOOK

In memory of my pioneer parents,
Stephen and Emily Overholser

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE TREATY OF GUADALUPE HIDALGO which ended the Mexican War provided that the United States must recognize the old Spanish and Mexican land grants. Unfortunately, the boundaries of these grants were sometimes indefinite, a situation which naturally led to disagreements over the size of the grants. Even many of the customs which had been followed for generations were puzzling to the Anglos who were moving into the country. A will, for instance, might contain a provision leaving a fruit tree to one heir, but giving the land from which it grew to another.

To add to the confusion, some departments of the Federal government did not seem to know what others were doing. Disputes inevitably followed. Many were fought through the courts, and all too often the results were tragedy and heartbreak and even bloodshed. *Cast a Long Shadow* is based upon such a dispute, but the reader is asked to consider it as a novel, not as a historical account.

If he chose, the historian could tell of events similar to those recorded here; he could tell about people who struggled bravely for land which they honestly believed belonged to them but which the law said belonged to someone else; people who felt strongly about what seemed to them a great wrong, so strongly that they were willing to give their lives for an issue which was far greater than the gaining or losing of a piece of land.

The characters presented herein lived only in the author's imagination; the events described are fictional, although he believes they could have happened this

way. But the issue is as important in the twentieth century as it was in the nineteenth. It will always be important as long as there are free men who feel that some things are worse than death, free men who are driven by a compulsive urge to struggle for what, to them, is the intangible thing we call justice.

WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

CHAPTER ONE

I SHALL NEVER FORGET the day my father and I left the Santone Grant. I was fourteen, an age when little things seem important, when hills are as big as mountains; but that day was like no other day. It was a mountain day, not a hill day, for my father even more than for me. It influenced my life; it ruined his.

I have no memory of anything that happened before we moved to the grant. I was just a toddler then; my mother had died when I was born. A Mexican woman took care of me. She fed me, clothed me, fished me out of Wild River when I fell into it, and looked after me, I'm sure, with as much concern as she did her boy Chico.

When I was old enough to get along without a woman's attention, my father took me. He had a dobe house that was perhaps fifty yards downstream from Pierre Santone's great mansion, small, but large enough for the two of us. He kept it as clean as any woman could have kept it, far different from the filth and stench of the jacal hut in which I had been living.

I have a very vivid memory of that first evening in my father's house. In spite of the care Chico's mother had given me, I was ragged and dirty. He looked at me sadly, shaking his head and muttering to himself, then he stripped me and threw my clothes into the fireplace and gave me a bath. After he dried me, he put his hands on my shoulders and said sternly, "Matthew, from now on you're going to be clean, and I'm going to teach you to read, and by God, you're going to be the best man on all the Santone Grant!"

He put me to bed and left the house. When I woke

in the morning, a suit of buckskin and a pair of moccasins were on a chair at the head of the bed. I'm not sure why my father suddenly realized he had some responsibility to me, but I think Mrs. Santone scolded him for his neglect. Or it might have been Pierre. As long as we lived on the grant, my father was inordinately sensitive to anything that either Pierre or his wife said.

Regardless of what brought about the change, from that night my father worked at being a father. He kept me relatively clean, saw that I had all the clothes I needed, and taught me to read and write. More than that, he taught me to ride and shoot and take care of myself in the mountains so that if I had been left alone, I believe I could have survived.

To me my father was a fabulous character. I knew beyond doubt that he could outdrink anyone else on the grant; he was the best poker player, the best rifle shot, the fastest man on the draw, the best scout and tracker, the best hunter in the Southwest, and, on occasion, he could outswear any of the freighters who stopped overnight on their way to Santa Fe.

With a little luck and better timing and perhaps different leanings, my father might have become another Jim Bridger or Kit Carson. But he was born too late. The day of the mountain man was gone. He could have scouted for the army, but he swore he wouldn't take orders from a shavetail just out of West Point who didn't know a Comanche from a Cayuse. He fought with the New Mexico Volunteers at Glorieta Pass and had a part in driving Sibley's Texans out of New Mexico. Later he fought under Kit Carson against the Navajos, and when the excitement was over he attached himself to Pierre Santone.

As long as we lived on the grant, I never saw him wear anything but buckskins. He was tall, six feet two inches, and he must have weighed very close to two hundred pounds. His muscles were not the knotty muscles of a

man who did hard labor for a living; they were long and flowed smoothly under his skin.

He was not a handsome man if perfection of features must be used as a standard. His nose was far too long and sharp, his chin too wide, and his lips were too thick. But handsome or not, there was no more popular man with the single women than my father anywhere on the grant, and I'm sure any of a dozen would have married him if given the slightest chance.

I have often wondered how many half-brothers and half-sisters I had that I never knew about. Years later, when he'd had too much to drink, he'd describe some of his conquests with great satisfaction. And he'd speak of what a nervous, high-strung white woman would do to a man.

"They'll work hell out of you every time," he'd say. "Never be satisfied no matter what you give them: big house, silk dresses, diamonds around their necks; but it'll never be enough. Always shoving. Pushing. Getting you in ahead of the other fellow. You know what's the matter with the country? I can tell you mighty quick. It's the God-damned women."

At other times, when he talked about the Mexican or Indian women, he fell into a rhythm that was little short of poetry. Round soft dark-skinned bodies giving freely because it was their pleasure to give without stint, without reluctance. When he sobered up the next day, he would invariably look at me with misgivings, plagued, I suppose, by the knowledge that a father should not talk so to a son.

In many ways he was a mass of contradictions. The truth was, he came at the tag end of a wild period of history; he knew the men who had helped make that history, but the horizons were closing in. I think that was why he attached himself to Pierre Santone. Here on the grant there was no law but Santone's law. Here were the fights and drinking bouts and horse races that had been characteristic of the mountain men's rendezvous

on the Green; here there was a tiny, dying segment of life from the past. My father loved it, and he loved Pierre Santone.

Just as I worshiped my father through those boyhood years to the point of idolatry, so he worshiped Pierre Santone. My father was in his middle thirties, but for all of his strength and varied skills he was still an adolescent. He never looked ahead; he didn't want to look ahead. To him Santone would never change; life on the grant would never change; for that was the way my father wanted it to be.

I remember exactly how it was the day we left the grant. I was playing along the river with Chico and a Ute boy named Onero. Through most of the year a band of Utes camped on the flat beside the river a short distance below the settlement. Santone understood and liked the Indians, and they liked him. In earlier years they had formed a striking force against the raiding Plains Indians that had been of great service to Santone. Now he repaid them by acting as agent and handing out government rations to them.

I'm not sure what Chico, Onero, and I were doing, probably damming up an *acequia,* which we were not supposed to do. I do remember that suddenly we heard a wild yell from the road in front of Santone's store. It was my father's voice, and from the tone of it I knew he was headed for a fight.

We started for the store on the run. There was a crowd in the road, fifty men or more: Utes, Mexicans, cowboys, and a few travelers bound for Santa Fe who had decided to lay over for the night because the food here was plentiful and free. Because they had formed a tight ring around my father and the other man, it took me a moment to worm my way through the forest of legs. Then I was inside the circle beside Chico and Onero.

My father stood spread-legged, his long shadow on the dust beside him, for it was well into the afternoon.

He was bareheaded as he usually was, his long red hair tousled, his blue eyes bright with the excitement of the moment. He held his heavy knife in his left hand, the sunlight glittering on the shiny blade.

I knew with as much certainty as a boy can be sure of anything that he would kill the man before him, and I think the man knew it, too. He was a stranger to me, shorter than my father, but fully as heavy. A freighter, I judged, on his way to Santa Fe, a journey he would never complete.

"Hogan," my father said, "you are a liar, a by-God liar to whom the truth is a complete stranger. I don't care where you came from or who you talked to. I say you are a liar. Pierre Santone will never sell the grant."

Hogan had his knife in his hand then, a broad heavy blade that matched my father's. He was trembling a little, the corners of his mouth twitching. I saw sweat stand out on his forehead in little drops, and then it rolled down his face, making it shiny in the afternoon sunlight. He looked at my father and he saw death and he was afraid. I was old enough to sense that. I had seen men die, for death by violence was no stranger to the grant. Now my only real fear was that my father might be injured.

"I ain't wastin' my breath on a bastard like you," Hogan said.

I think he intended to speak forcefully to make my father see he was not afraid, but his voice cracked and ended on a shrill note. My father laughed and motioned with the knife that was still in his left hand. I knew what he would do, a trick I had never seen anyone else use. He was right-handed, but probably Hogan, a stranger on the grant, did not know that.

"You're a tough one, Hogan, a real tough one," my father said. "Half woman and half rainwater. Tell them you lied and you can walk away from here. Tell them Pierre Santone will live his life out right here on his grant."

But Hogan was caught between fear and pride. I was old enough to know that, too. Knowledge is not always a matter of age. With me it stemmed from necessity, from the need to survive. My father often said: "Stay on the side of the big men, Matthew. They are the ones who rule the world. Fight for them, not against them, and never run. Once you run, man or boy, you'll always run."

That summed up the creed by which my father lived. Hogan, I suppose, subscribed at least to the part about not running. What happened here would follow him wherever he went, and he would be better off dead than to make the mistake of running.

For one long moment Hogan remained motionless as he stared at my father, and there was no sound from the crowd. Then Hogan, unable to stand the strain any longer, lunged forward, swinging wildly with his knife. Dust boiled up around them, but I knew what to expect. My father wheeled sideways, making Hogan's knife miss. He moved his left hand. Hogan pivoted away, but the knife was in my father's right hand.

I was never sure how my father made the change, but it was a sort of sleight-of-hand. Perhaps, like the old shell game, it proved that the hand was quicker than the eye. In any case, Hogan was totally unprepared for the slashing, upswinging blow from my father's knife. The steel caught him squarely in the belly and sank blade deep, my father's left hand warding off an instinctive thrust from Hogan's knife.

Hogan went down into the dust. He must have died almost instantly. Blood burst out of him in a great stream, and a strange sustained sound broke from the crowd, a sort of "Ah" that seemed suspended in space until my father wiped his knife clean by making a quick thrust along his pants leg, then turning the blade and wiping it again. He shoved the knife into his scabbard, looking around the circle of men confidently.

A man stepped out of the circle, a very young man in

a black broadcloth suit, slight of build with a ridiculous shadowy mustache across his upper lip. He was plainly an Easterner and unused to violence.

"My name is George Linscott," the man said. "I did not interfere because this seemed to be a personal matter between you and the man you just killed, but now I will tell you that what Hogan said was not a lie. The Santone Grant has been sold to a company that will develop it. You may kill me, Keenan, but killing men does not change facts."

I saw my father's face go gray. His mouth seemed to spring open as if he had no control over it, and spittle ran down his chin. He wiped a sleeve across his face and swallowed.

"I don't believe it," he said. "I won't believe it until Pierre Santone tells me so himself."

"Santone will be back late this afternoon," Linscott said. "He can tell you then. I represent the new owners. Again I say you may kill me. I'm sure you're capable of it; but whether you do or not I can tell you one thing: the new owners will not allow lawless men like you to remain on the grant."

My father did not stay to hear him out. The ring of men broke apart to let him through, and I followed at a distance, vaguely sensing that his world had fallen apart, but not realizing at all what it would do to him.

CHAPTER TWO

MY FATHER went into his house and sat down on an elkhorn chair he had made the previous winter. He just sat there, staring at the cold fireplace. I remained outside, looking at him through the door, afraid to go in but for

some reason feeling that I should stay, that he might need me.

An hour went by, perhaps two. I had no way of knowing how much time passed, but the sun dropped lower toward the mountains and shadows grew longer and the wind became cooler. Then I saw Pierre Santone ride in from the south and rein up in front of the great house. He dismounted, and Chico's father took the horse and led it toward the stable. I saw the stranger who called himself George Linscott come out of the big house and say something to Santone; then they went inside together.

Pierre Santone belonged to the age in which my father should have lived. He must have been close to seventy, still very tall and straight, with a plume of white hair and a tremendous sweeping white mustache and features that reminded you of the granite peaks back along the Continental Divide. He usually was mild and soft-spoken, but he could, on occasion, be as violent as my father.

I remember hearing Santone tell about coming west on the Santa Fe Trail when the trade was a mere trickle. He had been a good friend of the Bents and St. Vrain and Kit Carson, who had often stayed here; he had known Governor Armijo in the days before the occupation; and he had been in Santa Fe when General Kearny led his troops down from Raton Pass.

Santone had seen history made; he'd had a part in the making of it; and yet he seemed to have no knowledge of the forces that combined to make history. At heart he was still a mountain man, a trapper, an Indian trader, transformed by luck and circumstances into a man of great wealth and power. I have no doubt he found his responsibilities burdensome, and that he would gladly have returned, if he could, to the careless and violent life of his youth.

Santone had married a daughter of one of the old and powerful Santa Fe families. Somehow, perhaps by bor-

rowing from his father-in-law, he had been able to buy the grant that carried his name. I don't know what he paid for it, but it could not have been any great sum. The improvements which had been made were his; the wealth that he had accumulated was his and had been earned by him.

Even during his lifetime he had become a sort of legend. The Utes worshiped and obeyed him. Mexican families that lived on the grant worked under a sort of peonage system, but as far as I knew they did not in any way resent it. He owned twelve thousand cows, two thousand horses, and more sheep than he could count. At least that was the answer he always gave if he were asked how much stock he owned.

Every evening twenty or more men gathered around the long table in his great dining room. My father always sat at his right hand, the most important visitor on his left. Often there was a second table for the least important people.

Famous writers and travelers were among his visitors, and I suppose that was the reason so many articles about him appeared in Eastern magazines and newspapers. He was called the "baron," the "king," or the "duke," and I suppose his reputation was far greater back East than it was here in New Mexico. Neither Santone nor his friends took the articles seriously. He was Pierre to everyone, and I'm sure that his wealth and power never gave him exaggerated ideas of his own importance.

My father, along with others who had worked for Santone for a long time, men like Tom Risson, who managed his store, and Jerry Webb, his range boss, added to the stories which were told about Santone, stories that became so exaggerated they bore little resemblance to the truth. Like the time he held off fifty-odd Comanches singlehanded for forty-eight hours, killing so many that the survivors finally fled to safety. Or the time he trailed a band of Kiowas that had stolen a beau-

tiful Spanish girl, stampeded the horses, killed every Kiowa brave, and brought the girl safely back to her home in Mora. When her father offered him a fantastic reward, he turned it down, saying with great dignity, "I only did what I would want any man to do for my daughter." The fact that he had no daughter was a point no one ever thought to raise.

There were others, ranging from the tale in which he killed two giant grizzly bears at the same time when he was armed only with his Bowie knife, on down to his spectacular ride over mountains and deserts, one hundred and fifty miles in ten hours, to warn a town of an Apache attack.

If one of the Easterners, not knowing quite how to take such stories, which were told with great gravity, went directly to Santone and asked if they were true, he always insisted on finding out who had told the yarn. "That redheaded fellow, Keenan, I think his name is," the Easterner might say. Then Santone would smile and say gently, "I would never call my good friend Patrick Keenan a liar."

Of all the things that happened to me while I lived on the grant, I remember one most poignantly. I was ten, old enough to be curious and young enough to yield to my curiosity. I had heard many times of the vast amount of money Santone kept in the great desk in his office which opened into his living room. Thirty thousand dollars. Forty thousand. Fifty thousand. The figure, like all stories about Santone, grew with the telling. But the amount wasn't important. The fact that he did not lock the drawer and had no one guarding it did seem important.

I told myself I didn't believe the stories, although Chico swore that his father had actually seen the money, and Chico said there was nothing to keep a thief from walking into the big house and stealing the money and walking out again. I kept thinking about it until I had to know whether it was true, or just another of the big

stories that were told about Pierre Santone.

I waited until a group of Englishmen came to the grant for a hunt. My father took them back into the mountains, and I thought Santone went with them. I waited until midmorning, then slipped into the big house, tiptoed across the front room to his office, and pulled out the top drawer of the desk.

I had to tug hard, for it was heavy, and when I got it open I saw why. Money, more money than I had ever seen in all my life, more money than I even thought existed: gold, silver, greenbacks. I knew that all the stories I had heard were understatements. I was looking at a million dollars. I was sure of it.

He would not miss any if I took just a little. He would never know. There were things in Tom Risson's store I wanted. Boots. A saddle. A gun. Then I heard Santone's voice, "What do you think of it, Matthew?"

I froze. I could not believe I had actually heard him speak. He should be far back in the foothills by now. I pulled my hands back from the drawer and turned. I saw his feet, then his legs, and I tipped my head back and slowly raised my eyes to his face. He looked ten feet tall.

I wanted to run past him and keep on running, but I couldn't move. He smiled, saying, "Well?"

I asked, "Don't you want to count the money?" I swallowed. "Or search me?"

He shook his head, the smile leaving his lips. "I don't need to, Matthew. Patrick Keenan's son would not steal."

"But—But what's to keep anyone from coming in and taking your money?"

"Nothing," he said, "except the knowledge that I would kill him."

I walked out then, holding my stride until I reached the front door, and then I ran, out of the settlement and down to the river, and I did not stop until I was unable to run another step. I lay down on the bank in the shade

of a great cottonwood and sobbed for breath.

Later, when I could think, I realized he had been watching me all the time, and then I wondered if he would have killed me if I had taken some of his money. I began to cry, for I was certain he would have. I never told my father. I never even told Chico. After that I was always a little afraid of Pierre Santone.

All the time I waited there, outside the door of our house, my mind was filled with thoughts about Santone. I began to understand what was happening to my father, that his thoughts, too, were warm with memories of the years he had worked for Pierre Santone. My father was a restless man, seldom sitting still unless he was in a poker game. Now he acted as if he had been stunned by a blow on the head.

I heard someone scampering along the road toward me, and I turned to see Chico, his bare feet digging into the dust of the road, his black hair flying in the wind. When he reached me, he panted, "The *patrón* must see Señor Keenan, pronto." Then he whirled and ran back the way he had come.

My father had not heard him. He sat there exactly as he had been sitting since we returned. I took a long breath, afraid to touch him or to speak to him, but more afraid not to. I went through the door and, crossing the dirt floor, put my hand on his arm and shook it.

"Pierre is back," I said. "He wants to see you."

He turned his head to look at me. I retreated, expecting a cuff from his big hand, but he made no move to strike me. He looked at me for a long time, his blue eyes dull. Then he said: "That bastard lied about Pierre. He had to."

He got up and went striding out, his moccasins making a faint, whispering sound. I hesitated, choked-up and worried. I had no idea what would happen, for I had never seen him so. He might kill Linscott. If he did, he would hang. No one, Pierre Santone or the

United States marshal in Taos or anyone else, would look upon it in the same light in which they would view the killing of the freighter Hogan. For the first time in my life I felt that my father needed me. I ran after him, not knowing what I could do, but somehow feeling I ought to be with him.

We passed the big store with the heavy bars across the windows, passed the dozen or more Ute braves who were squatting in front of the dobe building, their expressionless black eyes on my father, passed the bar which stood next to the store, and approached Santone's house. The door was open, and my father went in without knocking. I slipped in behind him, and stood with my back to the wall.

The furniture in the room must have been the same furniture Santone had brought from Taos when the house was built a generation ago. The chairs had rawhide bottoms or were made from elkhorn; the couches were flat and hard and covered by Navajo blankets. The one piece which might have been freighted across the Plains years ago was the massive oak table in the center of the big room.

George Linscott was talking to Santone when we went in. My father said, "Get out."

Linscott set his shoulders and threw out his insignificant chest. He said, "Don't tell *me* what to do, Keenan."

"Vamos!" my father said.

Santone motioned toward a door that opened upon a grass-covered square around which the house was built. "Go on, George," he said.

Linscott stood his ground for a moment, glaring at my father and hating him with every nerve of his slight body, then he whirled and left the room.

"That son of a bitch said you'd sold the grant," my father said. "It isn't true, is it, Pierre?"

"Sit down, Pat," Santone said. "Will you have a drink?"

"No. I want to hear an answer to my question."

"A cigar?"

Santone lifted a box from the table, and my father took a cigar and began to chew on it. "Pierre, you know I don't beat around the bush. I want—"

"Yes, I know," Santone said. "I know you very well, Patrick. I heard you killed a man today. You like to kill. It'll get you hung someday. Or shot."

"You've got a lot of ground to stand on. I've done your by-God dirty work to protect the grant. I've run men off your land. If they didn't run, I killed them for you, but now—"

"That's enough!" Santone broke in harshly. "Sure you've been of service to me. I've paid you for it, too; but there never was a time when you killed a man at my request."

"Not in words," my father shouted in a great gust of anger, "but you knew what had to be done, and I knew it, and I did it!"

"All right, Pat." Santone began walking around the room. "I've got to talk before I can answer your question. We're a lot alike, you and me. When I first came over the trail to Santa Fe, I was younger than you, but I felt the same way about things. I took what I liked. There was no law. Not for me, so I lived the kind of life I wanted."

Santone made a motion as if thrusting all that was in the past behind him. "My friends are gone. I tried to keep my kind of life here on this grant, but I can't. I'm too old."

My father pointed a forefinger at his chest. "I'll hold it for you, Pierre. I'm young. You know what I can do. . . ."

"Yes, I know," Santone said. "Like this man Hogan. You're smart, Pat, and somewhere along the line you picked up an education, but you aren't smart enough to see that my day and the life you like are gone. Sure, I know there's still plenty of places that haven't settled

down; but they will, and you've got to settle down with them."

My father asked around his cigar, "Have you sold the grant?"

"Yes. To a company that will develop it and give homes to a thousand families. I had to, I tell you. I'm buying a ranch on the other side of Mora. I want you to run it for me. I want to be free to travel if I take the notion, and I'd like to leave a man in charge I can trust."

My father stared at Santone, affronted by this request. He said: "You think I'll live on a by-God ranch and nurse a bunch of cows? Me, Patrick Keenan?" He whirled and went out, taking long, angry strides.

Santone stared after him, not looming nearly as tall as he had the time he'd caught me looking at his money, and then I saw him wipe his eyes. I wanted to leave, but I didn't think he knew I was there, so I waited a moment for him to turn his back.

But he saw me, and came to me, an old man whose shoulders were suddenly bent. He said: "Matthew, stay with your father. He could be a great man. All he needs is taming, and maybe you are the one who can do it."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"A long time ago the Mexican government gave this grant of land to two men," he said. "Almost one hundred thousand acres. Twenty-two square leagues. It isn't right to hold it the way I have been and the way your father wants it held. I had to sell, Matthew, but your father doesn't understand."

He was turning to me, a boy, the great Pierre Santone, turning to me for understanding because my father could not understand. They had been together a long time, and I think Santone loved him more than he loved other men who had served him for many years, men like Chico's father and Tom Risson and Jerry Webb. Perhaps the reason was what he had said about

them being alike when he'd first come over the Santa Fe Trail.

I think I sensed what was in Santone's heart, but I was worried about what my father still might do. I said again, "Yes sir," and fled from the room and ran down the road to our house. It was empty. I stood there panting, not knowing what to do or where to go, but having no doubt about one thing. We were leaving the place that had been my home as long as I could remember, and I was afraid.

I did not wait more than five minutes until I saw my father leave the stable at the upper end of the settlement. He was riding his big black gelding and leading the paint pony that had been given to me the year before by Onero's father, a war chief in the Ute band that often camped below the settlement.

When my father reached the house, he dismounted and brushed past me without a word. He put on his broad-brimmed hat that he seldom wore unless he was making a trip; then he took his gun belt down from the wall and buckled it around him. The gun, like his hat, was something he did not habitually wear.

He opened the top drawer of our oak chest, took out a few things, including a small iron box that he kept locked, put them into a sack, and tied them on the black behind the saddle. I had often wondered what was in the box, but he never told me and I never asked.

Because the key always hung from a whang string around my father's neck, I had never had a chance to use it, but I had examined the box when my father was gone from the settlement and I was alone in the house. I had often turned it over and over in my hands, and shaken it, but I had been unable to make the slightest guess as to its contents. As far as I knew, it was the only secret my father kept from me; and because it was, my curiosity had grown with the years until it was out of all proportion.

He slipped our rifles into the scabbards, filled another

sack with food, and tied it behind my saddle. Then, coming back into the house, he shut the door and barred it. There were only two windows, both on the street side and deeply inset in the thick dobe walls. Now he motioned to one of them.

"Stand there," he said. "If you see anyone coming, tell me."

I obeyed, not having the slightest idea what he was going to do. He crossed the room to the fireplace, but when he glanced at me and saw that I was watching him he said harshly: "You can't tell if anyone is coming by looking at me. Now, do what you're told."

After that I pretended to keep my eyes on the road, but by standing sideways I was able to snatch a quick glance at him now and then without his knowing. He moved a heavy box that we used for wood back from the wall and, taking a butcher knife, began digging into the dirt floor. He went down about a foot, then tunneled under the wide flat stone that served as a hearth for the fireplace, and a moment later pulled out a heavy money belt.

He removed his gun belt, fastened the money belt next to his skin, yanked his buckskin shirt back into place with a quick, nervous motion, and for the second time buckled the gun belt around him. He kicked the dirt into the hole and pulled the box back to its former position. "Don't ever tell anyone about this, Matthew," he said. "You understand?"

"Yes, sir," I said, wondering about it as I wondered about so many things on this strange and terrible day.

We went outside and mounted. The sun was almost down behind us, with only a brilliant red arc showing above a great peak. We rode out of town, neither of us looking back. The darkness was not quite complete when my father said: "I figured on getting clean off the grant before we made camp, but, hell, old Pierre doesn't know how far his land goes. A mountain here, a big rock there, and a creek over yonder. That pipsqueak

Linscott will have a tough time finding out where his boundaries are."

We camped along the river, and the next day we crossed into Colorado and rode down a long grade into the little town of San Marino that had grown up along the Venito River. We camped under the giant cottonwoods that had sheltered travelers of the Santa Fe Trail for many years. My father never returned to New Mexico.

CHAPTER THREE

TWO THINGS HAPPENED in the years after we left the Santone Grant, and both were inevitable: I grew up, and my father gradually deteriorated. He got a job, or, I should say, a hundred jobs, each illustrating the principle he said he lived by. He was always on the side of the big fellow.

For a short time he kept me with him, but because he soon found that I was a burden he put me in school in Denver. That was expensive for a man who gambled and drank as much as my father did. Somehow he managed to keep me there until I was eighteen; then, saying I was big enough to work, he took me out and I went with him to Leadville, where he had a job as bodyguard of one of the new-rich of which Leadville at that time had a surplus.

I did a number of things during the year I lived in Leadville. I worked in a store, in a mine, for a stage line, in a livery stable. Although my father made three times the money I did, he was always broke, and always trying to borrow from me. There were days at a time when I didn't see him. At first I didn't care; then I discovered I preferred not to see him.

It was a slow and painful process, like the gradual

wearing down of a clay idol that once had been worshiped in the belief it was God. Because I had worshiped him, I was reluctant to admit that he was only the shell of the man who had worked for Pierre Santone, that he cared nothing for me, and that the sooner we parted, the better.

All I needed was an incident to force the break. It came one night just after I'd come home from working all day in a mine, so tired I didn't feel like getting supper. My father banged in, drunk, and wanted to borrow fifty dollars. When I refused, he hit me. I was taller than he was by an inch, and almost as heavy. The last year had put hard muscle on me, and I knew I could break him in two. But I didn't. I told him I was leaving. As far as I could see, he didn't care, one way or the other. That night I headed south for Canon City.

After that I drifted, working enough to live and not caring much beyond that. I took land on the Ute reservation after the Indians were moved out of the state and gave it up a few months later, too restless to settle down to farming. I rode shotgun on a stage between Silverton and some of the outlying mining camps. I taught school for one term, and then I got a job keeping books in a mine office. I was there, adding a column of figures, when a man came in and told me my father was in Ouray and wanted to see me.

I stared at the man. I had hated my father when I'd left Leadville, but now the hate was gone. I simply didn't care. When I thought of him, I remembered Pierre Santone saying that my father could have been a great man; but no, he had preferred to throw his life away.

"If he wants to see me," I said, "he can come to Silverton."

"He can't," the man said. "He's dying."

So I went to Ouray, riding the chestnut gelding I had owned for more than a year, impelled, I suppose, by a sense of obligation. I told myself that the fact that he

was my father was not the reason I went. I would have gone, I thought, to see any man who had sent for me under the same circumstances.

I left my gelding in a livery stable at the lower end of Main Street, asked about the Pritchard rooming house where I had been told I would find my father, and was directed to it. I found the place without difficulty.

A middle-aged woman opened the door. I said, "I'm Matt Keenan."

"Come in," she said gravely. "I'm Mrs. Pritchard. Your father is still alive." After I stepped into the hall and shut the door behind me, she went on: "He came here six weeks ago and hired a man to find you. Someone had told him you were in the San Juan. He was sick when he came and he's been steadily getting worse. You'd better see him right away because I don't believe he'll last much longer."

I followed her up the stairs and along the hall to a room in the back. She went in first. The light was very thin because the sun was down and dusk was rapidly turning into night. I waited just inside the door until Mrs. Pritchard lighted a lamp on the bureau, and then I saw my father's face. In that instant all the bitterness went out of me and I was glad I had come. He was a skeleton, yellow skin pulled tightly over his great bony frame. Only his eyes seemed alive. If it had not been for them, I would not have recognized him.

"Your son's here, Mr. Keenan," Mrs. Pritchard said, and left the room.

I stood there staring at my father. His hair was white, and he looked as if he were ninety years old. My throat was so tight I couldn't say anything for a moment. I had been thinking of him as he had been the last time I'd seen him, big and strong and capable of doing anything he wanted to do if he were sober. But now . . .

"Hello, Matthew," he said, and raised a claw-like hand from the covers.

I crossed the room and gripped his hand. I held it a moment before I let it drop, suddenly aware that tears were running down my cheeks, and I was ashamed. I could not remember when I had last cried. That was one of the things he had taught me when I was a boy. A woman could shed tears, but not a man.

I turned to look for a chair, and when my back was to him I ran a sleeve across my face. I found a straight-backed chair and, pulling it up to the bed, sat down. I asked, "How do you feel?"

He smiled. I think it was a smile, or meant to be, but actually it was a sort of grimace, just a bare movement of his liver-brown lips against his teeth. "Like hell. I've done a lot of lying to you Matthew, but there's no time for it now. I've got some talking to do; then the sooner I go, the better."

I filled my pipe and lighted it. I felt all caved in, as if there were nothing in my middle at all. My pipe gave me something to do. I was nervous, and I had a feeling the tears were about to start again. You're a damned old woman, I told myself, and then I was no longer ashamed. I could have brought my resentment into his room if he had been shot or knifed, or if I had found him looking the way I remembered him. But his abject weakness, together with the smell of death in the room, was too much.

"You're a fine-looking man, Matthew," he said weakly. "You were tall the last time I saw you, but you've filled out. You've got a lot of your mother in you, and not too much of the by-God Keenan strain."

He was silent then, as if he had to gather more strength to go on. There wasn't anything for me to say, so I pulled on my pipe and waited.

"I've gone downhill since I saw you," he said. "Like a sled headed for hell with bear grease on its runners. I've still got my knife and gun, if you want them. Throw them away if you don't. Anyhow, there's a couple of

things I know you'll want to keep. Open that top bureau drawer."

I got up and pulled the drawer open. The first thing I saw was the little metal box that used to excite my curiosity so strongly. I lifted it out of the drawer and would have handed it to him if he hadn't said, "Open it."

I laid the box down on the marble top of the bureau and opened it. In it were a gold wedding ring, a piece of white lace, and a tintype of a young woman, a beautiful, laughing woman who must have enjoyed life.

"Your mother," he said. "It's her wedding ring and the lace is from her wedding dress. If she had lived, everything would have been different, but after she was gone, I didn't give a damn."

He shut his eyes and was silent for a long time. I stood there, staring at the tintype in the lamplight, and wondering if what he had said was true. Or, restless as he was, would he have gone off and left her?

"That money belt," he said. "It's got five thousand in it. It's your mother's money. She lived three days after you were born. The last thing she said was: 'Give that money to Matthew when he's old enough to have it. I can't raise him, so it's all I can do for him.' " He was silent, then he added: "I deposited it in a Denver bank after we left the grant. I didn't take it out until I came here to look for you."

There, in the back of the drawer, was the same heavy money belt he had dug up the night we'd left the Santone Grant. I lifted it out of the drawer and laid it beside the box, and then I sat down. Of all the fantastic, unbelievable things my father had done, this was the most fantastic! There were times when he had needed money, or at least wanted it. But he hadn't touched it. Not in twenty-three years.

He turned his head on the pillow so that he could see me, and the smile touched his lips again. He said, "I wanted to give it to you when you were twenty-one, but

I didn't know where you were."

I couldn't say anything. He hurried on: "I made a mistake not staying with Pierre. I could have run his ranch and made it pay. We'd have been well off, you and me both, but no, I was too smart."

Again he stopped, his eyes closed, and I sensed that his strength was going out of him. Somehow it was like him, to fight off even death until I came. I thought, too, that it was a great concession for him to admit, even at a time like this, that he had made a mistake in not staying with Santone.

"You heard what they've done with the grant?" he asked.

"No, I haven't heard."

"The company's made it big. Almost two million acres. The settlers claim it's a fraud, but the big fellows are back of it. They've taken it to court and they'll make it stick. You'll see."

Two million acres! Why, it was ridiculous. Pierre Santone had said the grant had been given to two men just before the Mexican War, twenty-two square leagues. Nearly one hundred thousand acres, he had said. But two million!

"You remember George Linscott, the pipsqueak who was on—"

"I remember."

"He's the resident agent for the grant company in San Marino. Ask him for a job. He'll give it to you so he can beat you into the dirt because you're my son. Only he won't, Matthew. You're too good a man for him to whip. You'll be general manager in five years. It's a young company. You can grow up with it."

Stay on the side of the big fellows. That had been my father's guiding principle as long as I could remember.

"I'm dying," my father whispered. "Promise me you'll do it?"

"I don't know..."

"Matthew." He held his hand out to me again, and I

took it. "I've thought about this a long time. It'll be kind of like sending you home. Making up for the mistakes I've made. Promise me, Matthew."

What else could I do? I didn't know how soon he would die, but it didn't make any difference if it was to be an hour or a day or a week. I couldn't stand there holding his big-knuckled hand and staring down into his face that looked as if he were already dead except for the eyes that were begging me.

I said, "All right, I promise."

"Thank you, Matthew."

They were the last words I heard him speak. His hand went slack and I let it drop. Presently I realized he had slipped into the in-between land. I sat there thinking about Linscott and the Santone Grant Company. I'd keep my promise. I'd ask for a job. There was nothing to hold me in Silverton. It was time I was moving on, but I didn't expect to get the job I was going to ask for. Linscott would laugh in my face.

Suddenly I realized that the faint whisper of my father's breathing had stopped. He had gone off very quietly for a man who had lived as noisily as he had.

CHAPTER FOUR

I LEFT OURAY immediately after the funeral, quit my job in Silverton, and rode out of town. I traveled slowly, south to Durango and eastward over the Continental Divide and on across the San Luis Valley, then over La Veta Pass and up the Cucharas. I felt no need to hurry. Whatever was waiting for me would be there tomorrow or next week or next month.

I camped along swift flowing mountain streams. I

listened to the whisper of delicately beautiful aspen leaves. At other times I heard the creaking groan of pine limbs as a hard gust of wind caught them. The San Luis Valley was a different world, the Sangre de Cristo range far ahead of me, the Continental Divide behind me. Here was solitude, empty miles, flat miles embroidered by the silver thread of the Rio Grande with its twin willow-crowded banks, a slash of color that broke the monotony of the green-gray valley.

I did not attempt to read the future, but for some reason I had great confidence in it. When I had made the promise to my father, the idea of working for the Santone Grant Company had not appealed to me, particularly if I had to apply to George Linscott; but now, having thought about it, I found myself looking forward to it. The company was young, but it was big and its potential was tremendous. I could grow as it grew, just as my father had said. If Linscott turned me down, I'd apply somewhere else. I was sure there were more important men in the organization than George Linscott.

I turned up the Cucharas after I crossed La Veta Pass. I don't know why, because I could have gone on to Walsenburg and then turned south to San Marino, but I had been that way when I was a boy and this was new country. I dreamed my dreams, and for the moment I was alone, and content.

To the east I could see the Spanish Peaks, beacons that had guided travelers on the Santa Fe Trail for as long as the mountain branch of the trail had been used. The Utes called them Huajatollas, meaning "twin breasts." My father had told me about them when we had ridden north from the grant. I could see why the Indians called them that, for I had never seen two more beautiful, symmetrical mountains. It was a wonder, I thought, that the whites had not renamed them "Nellie's Nipples," or something else as irreverent.

In late afternoon I passed a small alkali-tainted lake

with a tall monument-shaped rock projecting upward from the water. Shortly after that I came down through the pines, and I saw the Wall. As long as I live, I shall not forget the impact it had upon me.

I had heard about it. To the people who lived here there was only one wall in the history of the world. Not Hadrian's Wall. Not the Wall of China. Just this, the Wall, a masterpiece of nature that defied description, an upthrust that rose skyward to my left from the round hills, then struck off southward as far as I could see.

As I rode parallel to it, I wondered if I would have to go fifty miles out of my way to get around the end; then I saw that it was not a solid slab such as I had first thought. The trail ran through a gap ahead of me. A stream, one of the forks of the Venito that must have headed high up in the Sangre de Cristo range, raced through the gap.

I reined up for a few minutes and sat there, slack in the saddle, studying the Wall. I was impressed first by the size of it, by the way in which it lifted upward from the valley, which ran on southward for miles. Then I began noticing details. There were streaks of gray moss, some that might be called russet. Too, there were deep checks which gave the impression that the Wall was built of huge, irregularly shaped blocks. Wider at the base than at the top, it gave a stairstep effect until it reached the high point above the creek. A surprising amount of vegetation, brush and small pines and spruce, was rooted in what seemed to be solid rock.

I rode on through the gap and, looking back, saw that the east face was less broken and less checked than the other side, and more sheer. I had a better view to the south now, and I saw that there were more breaks, more scattered boulders along the base, and bigger pine trees growing out of the Wall itself and from the talus slope at the bottom. I was surprised at the size of the valley, running on to the south until it was swallowed by distance. I learned later it was called the Valley of

the Wall, or, in the vernacular of the people who lived there, simply "the valley."

I turned back, settling again into the saddle. Ahead of me was the long trough of the Venito Valley, cedar-covered hills rolling back on both sides of the stream. Somewhere on down there was the town of San Marino and George Linscott's office. At the moment it seemed as if it were nothing. Here, at the base of the Sangre de Cristo range was *the* valley, a green gem which I had stumbled upon, so perfect that it reached out and held me with its siren call. At the moment it seemed to me that I did not want to go on, and that I could find no better place to live.

A moment later I rode into a settlement, hardly enough of a settlement to be called a town. Apparently it had sprung up at the crossing of the road that ran on to San Marino, and the north-south road that paralleled the Wall. A church with a cross atop the steeple, a blacksmith shop, a store, and a schoolhouse. No more.

The place seemed almost lifeless. A dog dozed in the road, the slanting sunlight falling on him. Half a dozen hens had wandered from a pen back of the store and were dusting themselves with considerable ado. At first I thought the settlement was deserted of all human inhabitants until I was squarely in front of the store. Then I noticed an old white-bearded man sitting on a bench under the wooden awning, his rifle leaning against the front of the store. He sat absolutely motionless, his eyes on me, his drab, worn clothes as gray as the unpainted weathered storefront.

For a time I'd had the feeling of absolute tranquillity; I had dropped down from the mountains and had ridden through the gap into a pastoral scene that held no hint of violence or greed or evil. I could see a dozen or more farms scattered south at the base of the Wall and east along the river, most of the houses log cabins with dirt roofs, a trickle of smoke rising from their chimneys into the cool mountain air. It was evening, suppertime,

and here and there men were moving from the fields toward their houses, driving their teams in front of them.

Then I was past the store. I looked back. I don't know why, but it may have been a sense of danger warning me, or perhaps it was the practical knowledge that there could not be a place in the world as idyllic as this seemed to be. But whatever the reason, I thought at the time I saved my life by turning around, for the old man was on his feet, bringing his rifle to his shoulder.

I let out a yell that even to my ears sounded like a squall of sheer panic. I certainly didn't say anything. It was just sound. I swung back, digging my spurs into my chestnut's flanks. The old man lowered his rifle and stood there glaring at me, his eyes filled with righteous indignation.

I pulled up not more than ten feet from him. I shouted, "You were going to shoot me in the back, but you don't have the guts to shoot me now, do you?"

He stared at me, his white beard fluttering in the breeze. He said: "I've got the guts to shoot you back or front if I was real sure you was the right man. Now give me a straight answer. You grant or anti-grant?"

I didn't have much idea what he was talking about. I knew vaguely there was a dispute between the settlers and the land-grant company, but I didn't know the lines were so sharply drawn as they were. At the moment all I could think of was the rifle he was holding across his belly, and the fact that my father's Colt was rolled up in my slicker and tied behind my saddle. My Winchester was in the scabbard, but I wouldn't have had a whisper of a show if I'd made a try for it.

"Well?" he snapped.

"I'm neither one," I said, "if that answer's any good to you."

He set the rifle down and, holding it by the barrel, squinted at me. Finally he said: "Might be you're telling the truth. Might be. You came through the gap, which

don't mean anything. You're not packing a gun, but that don't mean anything, either. Where you from?"

"My business," I said. "Where I'm going is my business, too. Now you can answer a question for me. Is there a hotel in this burg?"

He nodded down the road. "Yeah. Ruth Hadley's place, if you can put up with her." He made a quick turnabout and stamped into the store.

The hotel was fifty yards from the store on the hill side of the road, a square, graceless house, two stories, and as weathered as the store building. Behind it were a log barn, several corrals, and a number of outbuildings. I dismounted at the trough in front of the hotel close to the road, and let my horse drink. As I stood there, a girl galloped through the gap and came on past the settlement, a pole and string of fish in one hand, the reins in the other.

At first I don't think she saw me, or at least she had every intention of ignoring me. I stood there at the trough, staring boldly at her, perhaps rudely. She was, I judged, about twenty, rather slender with bright yellow hair that had come unpinned and was flying behind her. I had only a moment to look at her, for she was riding fast. She was even with me, and then past me, but there was enough time to see her face. I had never before seen such an expression of sweet serenity.

She was at least ten yards past me when she looked back at me as if only then aware of my presence. She smiled and rode on. I watched her turn off the road and ride up a lane to a house beside the river, a house as large as the hotel, and, from what I had seen, the only painted building in the valley other than the church.

I was still standing there when a Mexican boy came out of the barn. He called to me: "You stay the night, señor? Señorita Hadley, she is one good cook."

"Maybe I will," I said.

He held out his hand, smiling, his teeth very white against the brown skin of his face. "I am Manuel Tru-

jillo," he said.

I shook hands with him, guessing he was eighteen or nineteen. "I'm Matt Keenan. Who was the girl who just rode by?"

"Janet Calvert," he said. "Her father is Señor David Calvert. He leads the anti-grant men."

There it was again: grant or anti-grant. I had the feeling that a man was one or the other if he lived here, that he could not be "neither," as I had told the old man at the store I was. I helped Manuel put my horse away, rubbed him down myself, and saw that he had a double feeding of oats. Then I went around the hotel and through the front door.

No one was in sight. The room, a sort of parlor, was much like the front room of any farmhouse except for the small desk in one corner with its open register. There were a settee and a chair to match, the seats covered with a scarlet silk cloth that had a gold thread woven through it; a rocking chair with a small blue cushion on the seat, and a number of straight-backed chairs scattered around the big stove in the center of the room. The one picture on the wall was apparently designed to represent the gap, but it was done with little skill. The only feature that reminded me of a hotel was the bunch of sickly-looking geraniums at the front window.

I walked to the desk and tapped the bell. An archway to my right led into the dining room. The maroon drapes were not quite closed, and through the narrow opening I could see the long table covered by a white cloth.

A woman slipped through the drapes and stepped behind the desk. "I'm sorry if I kept you waiting," she said. "Now, if you'll just sign . . ."

She turned the register, dipped a pen into the ink and, as she handed it to me, looked up. I don't know what she expected to see, but it was evident I wasn't it. She simply stopped talking and stared, her full red lips

lightly parted. She was a handsome woman of average height and a little on the plump side, roundfaced with eyes that were almost violet, or so they seemed to me. Her hair held a reddish glint, chestnut I suppose it would be called. She was over thirty, I guessed, possibly thirty-five.

Suddenly she lowered her eyes. "Just sign your name and address."

"Who's the old man who sits in front of the store?" I asked as I wrote my name.

"Old Will Rigdon," she answered. "His son is called young Will. They own the store."

"He was going to shoot me in the back."

She laughed and shook her head. "He acts that way with strangers. Draws a bead on them, but he never actually shoots anyone. David Calvert has warned him that he'll get himself killed, but he goes on doing it."

"He said something about me being grant or anti-grant."

She glanced at the register. "Silverton. That's a long ways off. I guess you wouldn't know. You see, the Santone Grant Company claims all this land. They're talking about evicting us, even those of us who have patents to our land. Well, you sit down and smoke a cigarette. Supper will be ready in a minute."

She disappeared through the drapes. I turned and walked to the door and looked down the valley. I suppose I had known from the instant old Will Rigdon had asked me whether I was grant or anti-grant that he was referring to the Santone Grant Company. Yet it seemed inconceivable that it could claim this valley and all the miles between it and Wild River where I had lived as a boy. And that was the company I was going to work for if George Linscott would give me a job.

CHAPTER FIVE

YOUNG MANUEL was right about Ruth Hadley. She *was* a good cook. I suppose her meal tasted particularly good because I had been on sparse campfire fare from the morning I had left Silverton. I ate a second piece of strawberry pie, then leaned back in my chair and filled my pipe, perfectly at peace with the world for the moment.

Ruth had set three places at the end of the long table. She got up and went into the kitchen for the coffeepot, filled my cup and hers, and took the pot back into the kitchen. She returned to the table and sat down as young Manuel got up and slipped out through the back door.

"You probably wonder why I have a big dining table like this," she said, "but there are times when we fill it up, generally over Sunday when people from San Marino come up to fish or hunt. We get a few tourists who just want to see the country, greenhorns from the East, and once in a while an English lord."

She looked at me over the top of her cup as she drank her coffee. I was a little uneasy under her stare. I don't think she intended to stare, but that was what she was doing, even as she had when I was registering. I got the impression that I reminded her of someone, as if my presence had stirred to life an old, almost forgotten memory.

She set the cup back in its saucer. "George Linscott, the grant agent in San Marino, comes up quite often, and he always brings his man Friday along. Sometimes he has other guests with him, usually some of the head

officers of the company. At times like that we get into an awful tizzy around here, cooking and washing dishes and cooking again. Beds to make. Vegetables to get out of the garden and fix. I make Manuel help me, but he has the horses to take care of and wood to saw."

She finished her coffee and rose. "Let's go out on the porch and sit down."

She walked alongside the table and went through the drapes into the front room without looking to see if I was following. I did, wondering if she visited with all her guests in this way. When I reached the porch, she was sitting in a wicker rocker, her hands folded on her lap.

"It's a beautiful evening, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, and dropped into the other rocker beside her.

"I'm like a lot of men," she said. "Born restless. I've lived here three years, the longest I ever stayed in any one place. I've seen a lot of country, but I like it here better than anywhere else."

The sun was down, with just a faint rose glow in the sky above the mountains beyond the Wall. Twilight was settling upon the valley, and the stars seemed to multiply in the dark velvet sky as if someone were swinging across the heavens lighting them with an invisible torch. The last of the rose glow left the horizon, darkness settled down, and the Wall became a tall, indistinct curtain drawn between us and the mountains. In the valley tiny pinpoints of light in farmhouse windows might have been reflections of the stars overhead.

For a long time we sat there, neither speaking. It was a very welcome and companionable silence after the loneliness of my campfire. I smoked my pipe, filled it, and lighted it again, for this was the time of day above all others when it was a good and comforting friend.

Ruth's chair made a steady creaking as she rocked. From the crest of the ridge behind us a coyote gave his short bark, and another answered from the other side

of the Wall. In front of us a night hawk swooped down and away, a quick darting streak of blackness against the lesser blackness of the sky. From somewhere along the edge of the porch a cricket was chirping.

A faint breeze ran down through the gap, a breath of mountain air that would sweep on toward the desert beyond San Marino and finally lose its mountain smell. The scent of pine and spruce was in it, cool and a little penetrating even now, in July.

"Mr. Keenan," she said suddenly. "That is your real name, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I don't mean to dig into your business," she went on hurriedly, as if she had to speak before she lost her courage. "Lots of men come through the gap and stay overnight who have forgotten their real names. They have to look at their hatbands to remember what name to sign on the register. I was just wondering if you had lived in Silverton very long."

"In or around there for several years," I answered. "I was on the reservation before they drove the Utes into Utah. I took a piece of land and gave it up. Before that I lived in Leadville for a year."

"Have you ever been in New Mexico?"

"When I was a boy. I lived on the Santone Grant before they pushed out the boundaries. My father worked for Pierre Santone."

"He did?" she asked, her voice suddenly high and excited. "What was his first name?"

"Pat."

The creaking of her chair stopped. I heard her take a long breath, almost a sigh, then she said: "It's kind of terrible when you think of how things change. I lived in Taos for a while. Everybody, including Pierre Santone, knew how big the grant was. I doubt that he could have told you exactly where his boundaries were, but he knew they didn't reach across the Colorado line."

"He didn't know it if they did," I said. "What's the

trouble here? Like with this old Will Rigdon at the store?"

"It's very simple," she said. "Some of the settlers, including David Calvert, came here fifteen years ago. The land-office people told them this was public domain, so they proved up and got title to their land. Mr. Calvert built this hotel and ran it for a while. I bought it and twenty acres of land from him three years ago. Now the grant company comes along and says the valley was part of the original grant and belongs to them."

"How can they, if you people have title to your land?"

"Yes," she murmured, "how can they? The answer is one of size. We're small. None of us have much money. Mr. Calvert has, or did have, more than anyone else in the valley, but most of it has gone paying court costs. But the company is big. It can afford to hire the best lawyers. It has an effective lobby in Washington." She hesitated, breathing hard, and then said: "Well, there you have it. We'll stay here as long as we can, but sooner or later we'll be evicted if we don't buy our land from the company."

I got up and knocked my pipe out against my boot-heel. There was undoubtedly another side to the story, and I'd probably hear it from George Linscott.

"I think I'll go to bed," I said. "I've done a lot of riding the last few days."

"I'll show you your room." She rose, but for a moment she didn't go into the house. She stood quite close to me, peering at my face, which I'm sure told her nothing, for her face, to me, was only a pale oval with no expression whatever. "Where are you going, Mr. Keenan?"

The question struck me wrong. It was not a question you asked a stranger, but the questions she had asked me a few minutes before were wrong, too. I answered sharply, "San Marino."

"And after that?"

"Quién sabe?"

"Yes," she murmured. "Who knows? I often wonder

where I'll be in another year. Or another month."

She walked past me into the house and crossed the front room to the desk. She found some matches, struck one, and lighted the bracket lamp on the wall above the desk, then opened a door and started up the stairs, calling back, "Come on."

The stairway was a tunnel of darkness. I followed her, and by the time I reached the landing at the top of the stairs she had opened a door into one of the rooms and lighted a lamp. I went in. It was a clean, good-smelling room, with new wallpaper, a pine bureau with a white bowl and pitcher on it, and a folded towel beside them. Even the metal bedstead had been freshly painted; there were two rag rugs on the floor, and green blinds and white lace curtains at the windows.

She turned back the covers and patted the pillows. "I hope you'll sleep well," she said, and, crossing the room to the windows, pulled down the blinds.

I stood by the bed waiting for her to go, but she didn't. Her eyes were fixed on my face as they had been so many times that evening, violet eyes that now appeared frankly inviting. Her round full breasts were rising and falling with her breathing, and then, rather suddenly, I had the weird feeling that she wasn't seeing me. Suddenly she gave a start and laughed shortly.

"I'll probably never see you again, Mr. Keenan," she said as she walked past me to the door, "except for a few minutes in the morning while I serve your breakfast. You'll get on your horse and ride down the road until you reach San Marino, and then you'll keep on riding."

She stood in the doorway facing me, the lamplight falling on her face. She smiled. "Because I'll never see you again, there's something I want to tell you. I knew your father when he worked for Pierre Santone. You were just a small boy then. I lived in Taos. He came to see me as often as he could. It was a long time ago and I was young, very young, it seems now. You look exactly like him. That's why I've been staring at you all eve-

ning, and that's why I was shocked when I looked at you for the first time. He was young, then, not much older than you are now."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "But there's a difference. I can't put my finger on it exactly, but you seem to be a little calmer. There was always something violent in your father. I was never quite sure whether it would break out when I was with him or at some other time. But it was going to. I was sure of that."

"Did you know my mother?"

She shook her head. "I've heard of her, though, and I've visited her grave. Everyone said she was a refined and beautiful woman. A lady. I think you look like your father, but you have your mother's spirit. You know, I never really possessed all of Pat Keenan. I don't think any woman did after your mother died. A part of him was buried in the same grave."

She put a hand to the side of her face and started to turn, then swung back. "Is he still alive?"

"No," I said, and let it go at that.

"I was sure he wasn't. He wasn't meant for a long life." She swallowed, her hand dropping to her side. "He was a great man when I knew him. There was never another like him."

She went out and closed the door behind her. I sat down on the bed and began tugging at my boots. I was remembering some of the things he had told me, when he was a little drunk, about Indian and Mexican women, and how Anglo women kept pushing you and were never satisfied with what you gave them. It could have been Ruth Hadley he meant. It could have been.

In the morning, when she served breakfast to me, she seemed very cool and distant. Flapjacks, bacon, two eggs, and black coffee. I did not see Manuel, and Ruth did not eat with me. When I was done, I paid her, and then the coolness fled from her. She looked up into my face, and there were tears in her eyes.

She put her hands on my shoulders, and, standing on tiptoe, kissed me. "God go with you, Matthew Keenan."

CHAPTER SIX

MOST OF THE BUSINESS BUILDINGS in San Marino were thick-walled adobe structures; a few were frame, but at the intersection of First and Main all four buildings were brick, the most imposing structures in the entire town. One was a bank, one a general store, one a hotel. The sign across the front of the fourth read, SANTONE GRANT CO., SAN MARINO OFFICE, and in smaller letters below the others were the words, *George Linscott, Resident Agent.*

The building was the largest in town; the sign was the largest on either street; and I had a feeling that the Santone Grant Company was the biggest single influence in the political and economic life of the county. Undoubtedly it was the biggest tax payer. All of which, I thought, made Linscott a mighty important man.

I dismounted in front of the company office, tied my horse, and went in. There were a number of desks in the big room. The men bending over them were working on ledgers and legal-looking documents of one kind or another. In the back was a door marked "George Linscott, Private," and below that were the words "Resident Agent." A man sat beside the door in a swivel chair, his feet on a desk in front of him, his hat pulled down over his eyes.

No one paid any attention to me. The clerks were working in a kind of tense haste, as if trying to beat the clock. There was no talk, no sound at all except that of men breathing, the rustling of papers, and the scratch-

ing of pens. I realized it was almost closing time, but I was determined to see Linscott tonight. If he didn't have a job for me, to hell with him. I'd ride back to the valley and find something that suited me better than working for the Santone Grant Company.

I walked down the aisle between the desks and pounded on Linscott's door. The man in the swivel chair must have been asleep. At least he hadn't heard me, but he did now. He started scrambling out of his chair as he tried to get his feet off the desk, but the chair was tilted back at a precarious angle and he didn't quite make it. He went over sideways, and hit the floor with a solid *whack,* the chair making a tremendous clatter. His hat rolled off his head. He sat up and stared at me, blinking owlishly.

"You can't go in there," he said.

I looked around. The bodies of the clerks were still turned to the front of the room, but their heads were twisted on their shoulders, looking back to see what had happened. The instant I looked at them, their heads pivoted around and bent over their desks again, and once more I heard the rustling of papers and the scratching of pens.

I laughed. I didn't really intend to. The sound of it simply rolled out of me. I couldn't have helped it if I had wanted to. I wondered what Pierre Santone would have said if he'd walked in here. All the scene needed to make it perfect was someone in the middle of the room cracking a whip over the company's crew of pen pushers.

The man who had fallen out of his chair got up and brushed his clothes. He reached down, grabbed the back of the chair, set it upright, and then looked at me. His dignity had been ruffled and he was surly. He asked, "Trying to knock the door down with your fist?"

"No," I said, and looked at him closely.

He was, I knew, Linscott's watchdog. He was the first two-gun man I had ever seen. He carried two .45 Colts,

bone-handled, both tied low down on his thighs, in the traditional manner; but there was nothing traditional about their appearance on him. On anyone else they would have looked like excess baggage, but not on him.

He was medium tall, rather slight, and at first glance there was nothing distinguishing about him except that he habitually chewed on a match; then I took another look, and noticed his eyes, which were slate-gray. Suddenly he was a man set apart in my mind. It was not the sort of thing that could be put into words, but something I felt, a vague prickle along my spine, warned me that here was a dangerous man.

He held out his hand. "I'm Chip Donahue."

"I'm Matthew Keenan," I said, and shook his hand.

He had been sizing me up just as I had him, but now he gave me another close look. He said hesitantly, "You wouldn't be any relation to Pat Keenan, would you?"

"His son."

"Well, what do you know about that? You favor him, boy. You sure do."

He smiled for the first time, and I noticed something else about him. The right side of his mouth turned up and the left side down, in the strangest smile I ever saw on a man. Then I noticed that at the same time his right eye widened and his left almost closed; but the moment the smile faded his eyes were perfectly normal again.

If my father were alive, they would be very close to the same age, I thought. I had no idea where they had known each other, but at the moment it didn't seem important. I said, "I've been told I look like him."

"I haven't seen Pat for a hell of a long time. How is he?"

"He died in Ouray a few days ago," I said.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Donahue jerked his head at a chair in the corner. "Sit down, Matthew. If you want to see the big muck-a-muck, you'll have to wait till he gets done with the lawyer he's got in there. A lot of red

tape in this business, you know."

He said it a little peevishly, and I had the impression he didn't entirely approve of what was going on. As I sat down, I said: "Maybe there's no use for me to wait. I was going to ask Linscott for a job. What are my chances?"

He looked at me as if he thought my brains were addled, and shook his head. He glanced at his watch, then called, "Six o'clock, boys." The clerks dropped their pens, capped the ink bottles, closed their ledgers or placed a paperweight over the piles of papers on their desks, got up and, taking their hats off the pegs near the door, filed out.

"It's the damnedest thing I ever saw," I said. "Like a bunch of boys in a schoolroom."

Donahue smiled. Then it was gone, and his face was as grave as it had been before he'd smiled. He said, "You want a desk job like those poor bastards?"

I shook my head. "I'm not right sure what I want, but it isn't that."

He shrugged. "You'd better wait and talk to the great man. He might have something. It's a big company and they hire lots of men."

"I stayed in Ruth Hadley's hotel last night," I said. "She told me Linscott came up there quite a bit and brought his man Friday. That you?"

"Friday?" He frowned. "Hell, no. I'm his Sunday man. I work seven days a week."

Then I understood what Ruth had meant: where Linscott went, Donahue went, at least when there was danger. If I was reading the sign right, there'd be danger for Linscott up there anywhere along the Wall.

The door of Linscott's office opened and a man came out, a satchel in one hand. He walked down the aisle, grabbed his hat off a peg by the door, and went out, giving the impression he was in a great hurry. Busy, I thought. Everybody around here had to appear busy

except Chip Donahue, and he probably wrote his own ticket.

"We'll try," Donahue said, "but I'm making no promises." He tapped on the door, calling, "There's a man out here who wants to see you."

"If he's the fellow who tried to knock the door off its hinges a while ago with his fist, send him away," Linscott barked.

"I think you'll want to see him," Donahue said. "He's Matthew Keenan, old Pat's son."

For a moment there was absolute silence, and I couldn't help wondering what was going on in the man's mind. He had not forgotten Pat Keenan. Of that I was sure.

"Bring him in," Linscott said finally.

Donahue opened the door and nodded for me to go in first. He followed, closed the door, and leaned against it, saying nothing, just watching as he put a match in his mouth and began to chew. I walked across the room to Linscott's desk, the thick maroon rug completely deadening the sound of my bootheels.

I held out my hand. "How are you, Mr. Linscott," I said.

For just a second he hesitated, his eyes on my face, then he stood up and, smiling, held out a soft-palmed hand. "I'm glad to see you, Mr. Keenan. You were quite young the last time we met." He motioned to a black leather chair. "Sit down."

The office was, by far, the most magnificent I had ever seen. The desk was a big one of solid mahogany, its surface shiny and surprisingly bare except for a gold-handled letter opener, a box of cigars, and a neat pile of papers near the corner.

There were several leather chairs in the room besides the one I was sitting in, and a leather couch. The walls were made of oak paneling. Across from Linscott on the wall were two pictures in ornate gilt frames, one an innocuous scene of water tumbling over rocks, the other

an oil painting of the Spanish Peaks from somewhere to the east. It was very good, I thought, and I wondered who had painted it.

The picture held my attention for a moment. When I sat back and glanced at Linscott, I was surprised to see him leaning forward, staring at me with strange intensity. He looked much as I remembered him except that he was considerably heavier, with round cheeks and a melon-like belly. He wore his hair long, parted on the right side and brushed up in a high roach, and I noticed that there was a definite line of silver around the edge of his hair.

To me the most surprising thing was his mustache, which was as silly-looking as it had been the first time I'd seen him. Almost as surprising were his eyebrows, which had grown enormously in the intervening years so that now they formed black awnings over his eyes and gave his whole face a sort of bristling appearance.

"I noticed you were looking at the picture of the Spanish Peaks," he said. "Do you like it?"

"Very much," I answered. "I was wondering who painted it."

"I did," he said modestly. "It's a hobby of mine."

"I'm surprised," I said, and I honestly was. "You should take up art seriously. I've seen a lot of pictures that people have painted of the Rockies, but nothing as good as that."

It was the best job of back scratching I ever did, and I fell into it quite by accident. Linscott glowed and glanced at Donahue for approval, but Donahue was chewing on his match and staring out of the window as if he hadn't heard a word that had been said. Linscott cleared his throat.

"It's very kind of you to say that." He cleared his throat again. "But whatever talent I have is in business, not art. Wouldn't you say that, Chip?"

"Certainly," Donahue said, still staring out of the window.

"I'm here to ask for a job," I said.

"A job?" Linscott stood up and glared at me as if I had insulted him by asking for a loan of a million dollars. "You mean you want to sit out there at a desk . . ."

I shook my head. "I've done a little of almost everything. My last job in Silverton was in a mine office, but I want something outside. I thought a company this large might be in the stock business, and I could get a riding job."

He reached for the cigar box and took one. "No, we have all the riders we need." He stared at me from under his long brows. "Mr. Keenan, you may not remember the incident, but I have no reason to love your father. He was—"

"He's dead," I said. "That's the reason I'm here. He made me promise to ask you for a job just before he died. Partly sentiment, I suppose, because he worked for Santone, but back of it was some good hard sense. He said that I was young and that I could grow up with the company. As I understand it, the grant is a very large one."

"Fantastic." Linscott lit the cigar and pulled on it. "Absolutely fantastic that Pat Keenan's son should come here and ask me for a job." He walked to the window. "What do you think, Chip?"

"He's only half Keenan," Donahue said around the match he was chewing. "But if he's got half his father's guts, you could use him."

"Yes, I think I can." Linscott gave me a speculative look, measuring me, perhaps, against the memory he had of my father. "Have you ever heard of the Valley of the Wall?"

I nodded. "I was there last night. I stayed in the hotel."

"Good, good. Then you have met Ruth Hadley." I nodded again, and he went on: "From the day old Pierre Santone sold the grant, we have had trouble with land titles and one thing or another. Pierre knew what was

coming. I suppose that was why he sold out." He took the cigar from his mouth. "I shouldn't say our trouble has been over land titles. The question of ownership has been fought through the courts, and just a few weeks ago the United States Supreme Court decided in our favor. There may be more litigation, but the basic question of ownership has been decided in our favor. I should have said the problem is one of possession."

He pulled on his cigar and found that it had gone out. He dug a match from a pocket of his flowered waistcoat and relighted his cigar. "We can and will in time serve eviction papers and gain possession. However, it produces less hard feelings if we can persuade the farmers to pay us for the land. Or, if they can't do that, accept a payment from us for their improvements. We have leaned over backward from the first to be fair because we have realized that public opinion is a potent force and we want to keep it on our side."

He returned to his desk and sat down. "Now then. Our trouble spot is the Valley of the Wall. One reason is that when it was settled fifteen years ago, the land office mistakenly gave patents on land that actually belongs to us. This long period of time has given some of these people an exaggerated opinion of the value of their improvements. Besides that, they have a sentimental attachment to their homes. The second reason we're having trouble is David Calvert. He's the leader of the settlers and, I'll have to admit, a remarkable man. So far I haven't discovered how to get around him."

Linscott leaned back and, taking the cigar out of his mouth, studied it. "Keenan, would fifty dollars a month and your room and board sound agreeable?"

"Sure," I said.

"And you aren't particular what you do? I mean, you're willing to get down on your knees and weed a garden? Clean a stable? Or guide an outfit into the mountains to hunt?" I nodded, and he went on: "You

said you had met Ruth Hadley. Could you get along with her?"

"Yes."

He rose. "Stay in town tonight," he said briskly. "Come back in the morning. I'll have a note for you to take to Ruth. You'll work for her."

I got up, thoroughly puzzled. Donahue opened the door. "Come on," he said. I nodded at Linscott, who had sat down again and was reaching for the pile of papers, apparently putting me completely out of his mind. I followed Donahue out of the room and along the aisle to the street door.

"You'll find a livery stable a block north of here," he said. "Put your horse up and get a room in the Commercial House. Wait for me in the lobby and we'll have supper. I'll be along in about an hour." He gave me his odd grin. "That was the damnedest job of butt slapping I ever saw. About the painting, I mean. Pat would have kicked your teeth in if he'd been here."

But I hardly heard him. I said: "This is the craziest thing I ever ran into. Why would the company pay me to work for Ruth Hadley?"

"She's a company agent," he said. "The only one in the valley."

"Agent?" I stared at him, slowly grasping the full significance of what he'd said. "You mean she's a company spy?"

"That's about it." Donahue spat the splintered fragment of a match out of his mouth. "No one will know it but you and her, not even the Mexican boy she's got working for her. If those people ever find out about her, they'll lynch her. That's your job: to see it doesn't happen. The great man is hoping you've got guts enough to do it."

The prospect appealed to me. If there was any excitement, I'd be in the middle of it. I hadn't expected a job like this, but I could have done a lot worse. I said, "Sounds good."

"Just one thing." He rammed a finger against my chest. "Watch yourself with Ruth. She's more woman than any other three females I ever met up with, but don't you get any ideas about trying her out."

"Why not?"

"The great man figures she's his private property, that's why. Trouble is, he's never been able to convince her. Now, if she was to finagle around with one of the valley men to get something out of them, that'd be one thing; but for a company man to go to bed with her . . ." He shook his head. "It wouldn't do, Matt. It just wouldn't do."

He walked back to Linscott's private office. I watched him until he went inside, a suspicion forming in my mind. Linscott had hated my father. Was this a trick to get back at him through me?

I turned to my horse and untied him. I'd take care of trouble when it came, I resolved. If it did come. Then I thought of Calvert's daughter riding past me as I had stood in front of the hotel, her blond hair flying behind her, and suddenly the prospect of living in the Valley of the Wall seemed very pleasant.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHIP DONAHUE appeared in the hotel lobby in less than an hour. He patted his stomach, and the strange one-sided grin changed his face. "Let's get a steak a foot long, douse it with ketchup, and finish off with a slab of apple pie."

"Sounds good," I said, and followed him into the dining room.

After we gave our orders, I asked, "How well did you know Dad?"

"Pretty well," he answered. "The truth is, the Santone Grant wasn't big enough for both of us. I was working for Pierre when Pat hired on. People were shoving in on the grant, figuring it was public domain, and were squatting all over the place. Pierre had to get mean, or they'd have swarmed him under." He shrugged. "I just didn't have no stomach for the work that had to be done. You know how most nesters are. It was like shooting sheep. Well, I got out; and from then on until the grant was sold, Pat was Pierre's Number One man."

I nodded, remembering the scene between Santone and my father the day we left the grant, my father saying: "I've run men off your land. If they didn't run, I killed them for you." And Santone: "There never was a time when you killed a man at my request." Then my father: "Not in words, but you knew what had to be done, and I knew it, and did it!"

I pondered for a time, staring down at the gravy-stained tablecloth, and I could not help wondering who was to blame, my father for the murders, or Santone for shutting his eyes to what my father was doing. Or was it murder if my father killed a man who was stealing something that belonged to his boss? If the something the man was stealing was a horse, and if the man who stole it was hanged, no one would call it murder. Was it murder, then, if the something was a quarter-section of land? A debatable question, and it occurred to me that I might be called upon to answer that question if I remained in the Valley of the Wall.

Donahue was staring absently across the room, and suddenly I realized he had started to talk again. "I didn't have any trouble finding work. A man with a pair of fast guns can always get something to do. I drifted around for a while; then, after Pierre sold the grant, he ran into me in Las Vegas and hired me to ramrod his ranch."

The job my father wouldn't take, I thought. The waitress brought our steaks. After she left, I said, "How did you get hooked up with Linscott after working for the Santones again?"

"Mrs. Santone sold the ranch after Pierre died," he said. "She didn't need me. I talked the company into thinking they did."

"What do you do besides take naps in front of Linscott's door?"

He grinned sheepishly. "The great man wanted to know what the racket was about when I fell over. I told him I was shaking hands with you and you had a hell of a grip. It impressed him." He shoved his plate back, his steak finished. "Well, I'm mostly protection. I stay in the office all day in case some anti-grant man gets a bee in his bonnet and decides to ventilate Linscott. I walk up the hill to his house every night. If he takes a ride to look the grant over, I go along, especially if it's the Valley of the Wall."

When we finished eating, Donahue stood up. Fishing a match from his pocket, he put it into his mouth and began to chew. "Looks like we've got an evening to kill. How about a game of pool?"

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

It was nearly midnight when we returned to the hotel. As we climbed the stairs, Donahue said: "My room's at the end of the hall. Number 12. Stop by on your way to breakfast."

When I knocked on Donahue's door the next morning, he called, "Come in." I turned the knob and pushed the door open. Donahue stood in front of the bureau mirror, slipping his guns into their holsters. He picked up his hat and put it on. He asked, "Ready to eat?"

"Yeah, but I've got a question to ask first. Are you fast enough to get your guns out of leather before the fellow in the mirror does?"

He laughed. "I keep trying, but I never do." He stepped into the hall and closed the door. "I practice

every morning and every night, but the one thing I can't whip is age. You know what will happen one of these days."

We went down the stairs and across the lobby into the dining room. I knew what he meant. The quickest way for a proddy kid to establish a reputation was to shoot a man who had one, like Donahue. So, like every man who lived by his gun, Donahue did not know from one day to the next whom he would have to kill, perhaps for no personal reason at all except that it was kill or be killed. But that was a question of self-defense. Working for Pierre Santone, and killing nesters who trespassed on the grant and who were, as Donahue put it, like sheep, had been something else. Obviously he lived by a strict code which had never bothered my father.

"Why don't you hang up your guns?" I asked.

He snorted. "That's a hell of an idea. How else could I earn a hundred dollars a month?"

"You said you ran Santone's spread for him."

"That was different." He motioned to a waitress and called roughly: "We're in a hurry, Sadie. I want ham and two eggs."

"Same for me," I said.

Sadie, standing at a nearby table waiting for a drummer to make up his mind, trotted into the kitchen. Maybe that was the sort of thing Donahue liked, I thought. He was used to being listened to, used to having people jump when he gave an order, used to having them afraid of him. Yet with me he had been altogether friendly. I was not sure why. Perhaps because he instinctively liked me. Or because of the Santones. Sentiment, I knew, could be a very strong force in a man like Donahue. It had been in my father. Twisted, perhaps, but still a characteristic that at times had influenced his actions.

I was still thinking about Donahue when we finished eating and crossed the street to the company office. I was convinced of one thing. As far as the trouble be-

tween the settlers and the company was concerned, he was utterly impersonal. Regardless of his friends or his personal feeling, he would do what he was paid to do.

We walked down the aisle between the bent heads. When we reached Linscott's office, we found the door open. Apparently he heard us, for he looked up and called, "Come in, Keenan." He was in a peevish mood; his round face, which had looked almost cherubic the night before, now seemed gray, and years older.

The instant I stepped through the office door, Linscott shoved a sealed envelope and five gold eagles across the desk toward me. He said: "You probably know I have always hated your father. He was a big-mouthed bad man, the kind who seem to flourish in this country. Whether he would have showed any real courage in a test is something I have always doubted. That's why I gave you a job. I intend to find out if the old saying, 'Like father, like son,' is true."

For a moment I stared at the desk top, too angry to speak. I picked up the envelope and saw that Linscott had written across the front, "Miss Ruth Hadley." I put the envelope and the money into my pocket.

When I had my temper under control, I looked at Linscott, who was studying me, a small smile under his ridiculous mustache. I said, "If there is any cowardice in your organization, it will be somewhere above me."

I walked out. Afterward Donahue told me that Linscott had said, with considerable satisfaction, "Ruth will be safe for a while at least."

CHAPTER EIGHT

AFTER RUTH HADLEY read Linscott's note late that afternoon in the kitchen of her hotel, she very carefully folded the sheet of paper and slipped it back into the envelope. She laid it down on the table and, walking to the window, stared at the green hills and the trough of the Venito.

"You don't know what this means, do you, Matthew?" she asked without looking at me. "You've taken a job with the company at fifty dollars a month, but you don't really know what it means."

"I think I do," I said. "Linscott told me. I'll weed the garden with you—"

"I don't mean that." She whirled away from the window and, walking to the stove, opened the oven and looked in. "That cake's about done," she said. Reaching for the broom, she picked out a straw, tested the cake, and then slipped it back into the oven. "Another five minutes."

She was talking to herself, I thought. She walked to the north window and looked out at the garden, its long green rows stretching up to the fence. Suddenly the thought struck me that she didn't want me here but didn't know how to get rid of me. I said, "Miss Hadley, if you don't want me to work for you . . ."

She turned around. "I want you to stay here more than anything in the world. I'm just trying to be fair." She returned to the stove, took the cake out of the oven, and set it on the table. "If you are going to stay here, you'll have to call me Ruth. Now, go get your things. I'll show you the room you'll sleep in."

I had assumed she'd put me back upstairs where I had stayed the first night I'd been here; but the upstairs rooms, she informed me, were for paying guests. Manuel slept in a shed back of the house. Ruth had a small room in the northwest corner of the house, and I had an equally small room beside it, both rooms opening into a hall that ran from the parlor in the front to the back door.

I had no complaint about the room. It contained a bed, a straight-backed chair, a bureau, and the usual pitcher and basin—all the furniture I needed. Like the upstairs rooms, it was clean. I could not understand how even a strong young woman like Ruth was able to do the work she did.

There was no lock on the door. Because I had deposited the money my father had given me in a bank in San Marino, I had nothing of any great value in the room. I wouldn't have given it any serious thought anyhow, because Manuel was never in the house except at mealtime, and I had no reason to doubt Ruth's honesty. But that night, as I sat down on a chair to pull off my boots, Ruth opened the door and came in without a knock or warning of any kind.

She lay down on the bed and laced her hands behind her head, looking at the ceiling. She said: "I'm tired. You know, Matthew, I could have married George Linscott any time in the last three years and settled down in that fine house of his in San Marino. How big a fool do you think I am for not doing it?"

I finished tugging off my boots, then sat there and looked at her. I had never seen a woman like her, and I was sure I'd never see another. She was an individualist if she was anything. She'd wander into my room at any time of night or day, and I was sure she wouldn't object if I went into her room. Standards by which ordinary people lived simply did not apply to her.

"Well?" she said.

"You're a remarkable woman."

She turned so that she lay on her side, and reached down with one hand to scratch her leg, her skirt coming up above the knee. "I know it," she said a little impatiently, "but you didn't answer my question."

"I guess you're a pretty big fool," I said. "If you were Mrs. Linscott, you'd be one of the most important women in San Marino."

"And have the biggest fool in San Marino for my husband! Why didn't you say that, too? You were thinking it."

"I don't say all I think," I said.

"No, I don't suppose you say very much of what you think." She turned over and lay on her back again. "I was going to talk to you before supper, but I couldn't. I'm going to now. I've got to. That's kind of funny, but you won't understand until you know me better." She motioned with a hand. "Come here, Matthew."

I went to the bed and sat down beside her. She looked squarely at me for a moment, and in the lamplight her eyes seemed more violet than ever, her hair quite red. She turned her head so that she was looking at the ceiling.

"Your father was my kind of man," she said. "He took what he wanted out of life. When he was done with me, he was done and that was the end of it. There was nothing I could do to hold him. I suppose he forgot me, but I never forgot him. I learned some things from him. The main thing was that a woman can live like a man if she wants to—wants to bad enough, I mean. You've heard men say they aren't the marrying kind. Well, I suppose this is the first time you ever heard a woman say it, but it's true. I like to work. I want people to know I'm independent and that I live the way I want to live. When I get tired of living here, I'll move on."

She reached out and took my hand. "There is one thing I've got to tell you before you get into this any deeper. Trouble's coming to the Valley of the Wall. Shooting trouble. I don't know how soon—not even

Linscott knows—but it's coming."

"What's Linscott waiting on?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she answered. "I think it's mostly that he doesn't want to appear unfair in the public eye. To the newspapermen in San Marino, for instance. He's evicted some families already. He'll go on evicting them, a few at a time. Right now he's trying to make a settlement with the people around here. He has with a few. He's sold some land to outsiders who don't know what the situation is. Calvert has a big organization. You can't understand how strong they are until you go to one of their meetings. One of the things they do is to make it hard on men who buy land from the company. They're called grant men whether they have any convictions about this business or not. Sooner or later there'll be bloodshed, and that will put the blame on Calvert's bunch. I think that's what George is waiting on."

I nodded. I never had had a very good opinion of Linscott, and I'd had a worse one after he'd told me he was giving me a job to find out if I was like my father, but I had to admit he was smart enough. He could afford to wait, knowing that the law was on his side, and that therefore time was, too. Once the settlers killed a man, the sheriff and his deputies would move in and within a matter of days the valley would be cleared of anti-grant men.

"I hope you won't be dragged into this," she said. "Maybe you'll get your belly full and ride on. That would be the smart thing to do." Suddenly she sat up and leaned toward me. "Matthew, I don't want to see you get killed. If either one of us makes a slip, and these people find out what we are, they'll hang us."

"My job is to protect you." I rose, went to the bureau, and took my father's gun out of the top drawer.

"Put it back. That's the worst thing you could do." She got up and opened the door. "You're sure you want to stay here?"

"I'm sure," I said.

"Good night, Matthew," she said, and left the room.

I stood there by the bureau a long time, and it seemed as if she were still in the room.

There was work enough to do around the hotel. I found that out in the next few days. Ruth had bought a steer from Calvert, and Manuel and I butchered it. There was wood to work up. The garden was never free of weeds. Then, on Saturday, a party came out from San Marino to go fishing. I helped Manuel load the pack horses and saddle up, and I stood beside Ruth on the porch watching the outfit until it disappeared through the gap.

"Well, that's what shows a profit." Ruth shook her head, frowning. "But it isn't big. It never will be until this thing is settled." She turned to the door, then paused and looked back. "You'd better shave, Matthew. It won't take long for me to get supper for just the two of us. There's enough stuff left from dinner."

I felt my chin. "What do I need to shave for? I shaved yesterday."

"It's time you were meeting David Calvert," she said. "I want you to go over there after supper."

CHAPTER NINE

I HAD NO IDEA what Ruth had in mind, but I didn't argue. As a matter of fact, I wanted to meet Calvert. It seemed to me I had heard of him from everyone I had talked to since I had come to the valley. Even George Linscott had mentioned him, and with high respect.

I found him sitting in a rocking chair on his front porch pulling steadily on a meerschaum pipe that had been browned by years of usage. I dismounted, tied my

horse at the hitch pole, and walked to the porch. I said, taking off my hat: "I'm Matt Keenan. I work for Miss Hadley."

"Of course, of course." He rose and stepped down from the porch. "I knew Ruth had hired a new hand, and I've been aiming to go over and get acquainted."

I shook hands with him, finding his palm hard and callused, his grip firm. The light was thinning, for the sun had dropped behind the mountains and shadows were a dark mass at the foot of the Wall, but the light was strong enough for me to get a good look at David Calvert.

He was half a head shorter than I was, a square-shouldered, muscular man who had gray eyes and brown hair and big hands with blunt fingers. He was, I judged, in his early forties. His voice was quite low and gentle.

I sat down in a rocking chair, and he dropped into his and filled his pipe again. I said, "That's a beautiful pipe."

He looked at the pipe, pleased by what I had said. I don't believe I would have pleased him more if I had said he had a beautiful daughter. He rubbed the ball of his thumb lovingly over the bowl, and then glanced at me.

"You are a discerning man, Mr. Keenan," he said. "I have twenty or sometimes as many as thirty men a month who sit in that chair and talk to me about our problems. Not one has ever mentioned this pipe."

I took my old briar out of my pocket and filled it. "Maybe it's because I'm a pipe smoker," I said. "Or because I've always wanted to own a meerschaum."

"The latter, perhaps," he said. "Not the former. Most of the men who visit me are pipe smokers." He struck a match and held the flame to the tobacco. When he had it going, he blew out the match. "Well, how do you like our valley?"

"Very much," I said. "I've been on the move most of my life and I've seen a lot of country, but this is the only

place I've ever seen where I'd like to settle down."

"Ah," he said gently, "you're the kind of man we want to settle here. To tell the truth, I'm relieved, now that I've met you. As Ruth may have told you, we are her good friends. She bought the hotel from me. I sell hay and beef to her, and, well, help her in any way I can. She does a fine job with the hotel. It's something we need in the valley. Manuel is a good boy. I've known him for years. I realized Ruth needed more help, but I was somewhat alarmed when I heard she had hired a man who was drifting through the country."

I was startled by his frankness. I had not lighted my pipe. I cuddled it in my hand, looking down at it and not knowing what to say. Apparently he had made his judgment of me in a matter of seconds, and it was favorable.

He rose. "I want you to meet my daughter Janet. Perhaps Ruth has mentioned her."

"Yes, she has," I said.

He stepped into the house, calling, "Janet."

A moment later she appeared beside him, wiping her hands on her apron. "Janet, I want you to meet Ruth's hired man, Matt Keenan."

I rose and started toward her, then stopped, sensing the hostility which seemed to form a wall around her. For a moment she stood motionless, saying nothing and making no effort to greet me. "I'm pleased to meet you," I said. "I saw you come through the gap the first day I was in the valley. You'd been fishing."

"I had some luck," she said. "Now if you'll excuse me, Mr. Keenan, I'll finish the dishes."

She turned and disappeared into the house. I dropped back into the chair again and lighted my pipe, feeling let down. For some reason which I did not understand, I had got off on the wrong foot with Janet Calvert, and that was the last thing I wanted to do.

Calvert sighed as he sat down. "My wife died four years ago," he said. "Since then Janet has kept the house

for me. I've been with her for twenty years, but I must admit I do not understand her moods. Perhaps she was vexed because I asked her to come out of the kitchen before she was done with the dishes."

She must be a girl of many and changeable moods, I thought. Yet, for some reason, I didn't feel that she was. I had not seen her face clearly just now, for the evening light was thin, but I had glimpsed her face that other evening as she rode by the hotel, and I was convinced she was a sweet-tempered, forthright girl. I found it difficult to harmonize that impression with the rudeness she had just exhibited.

"Ruth hasn't mentioned helping me with the haying?" Calvert asked after a long and awkward pause.

"No."

"I'll have to see her," he said. "Manuel has always helped me. Jan helps, too. At least she can do the raking, but I usually have to hire another man. Since you're here, I imagine Ruth will want you to help in return for the hay."

"I suppose," I said.

We smoked in silence for a time. Presently he said: "Haying is the big job around here. I milk several cows. We used to make lots of butter. In fact, it was the one product that kept us going. We shipped it as far away as Taos and Santa Fe, but it doesn't really pay now, so we've turned to other crops. Potatoes is one. Last year the purchasing agent for the Santa Fe Railroad came up here and contracted for a dozen cars of potatoes. It was a good bargain for both sides, and we're hoping he'll do the same this year."

Janet came out of the house and sat down on the top step. Her father rose at once, and I had the impression he had been impatiently waiting for her to appear. He said: "I'll leave you to entertain Mr. Keenan. I'm going over to see Ruth about the haying. If I have to hire a man this year, it's time I was looking for one."

"All right," Janet said, her voice showing her lack

of interest. "I'll be glad to entertain Mr. Keenan."

Calvert strode away into the twilight. I sat there, pulling on my pipe and staring at Janet's back, then I got up and, moving to the steps, sat down beside her. I said, "I apologize for whatever I've done that was wrong."

She laughed. "Mr. Keenan, as far as I know, you are a perfectly decent and respectable man. You have done nothing wrong. In the course of time, we might become good friends. You'll help Daddy with the haying. I'll cook the meals, and you'll be so hungry you'll think I'm a better cook than Ruth Hadley."

"Maybe you are," I said.

"M-m-m. I'll let you decide." She put both hands behind her head and leaned back. "Are you in love with Ruth yet?"

The question irritated me. I said, "No."

"You will be," she said. "I don't think there is a woman in the valley who likes her, and I don't think there is a man who dislikes her except old Will Rigdon at the store. He says she tells things to George Linscott when he comes up here. I don't mean the other men trust her, but she attracts them. I think you know what I mean."

I didn't say anything for a moment, but I was scared. I wondered if Ruth knew old Will Rigdon had guessed the truth, and if anyone else believed it. I said, "That's ridiculous, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. That isn't the reason I don't like her. She just can't leave Daddy alone." She took a long breath. "I won't burden a stranger with our local gossip. You'll work for a few days and go on. You might even stay several months, but one of these times you'll find out about our trouble with the grant company and you'll pull out because it isn't any of your business either way."

"No," I said. "I think I'll stay."

"You've heard about it?"

"Yes."

She was silent a long time. Then she said: "Mr. Kee-

nan, do you ever have the feeling you're headed for disaster and there's nothing you can do about it? I mean, that you have only two ways open for you. You can't take one of them, and the other one will bring nothing but trouble?"

I wasn't sure what she meant, but it seemed to me that what she had said was exactly the situation my father faced the day we left the Santone Grant. Because he couldn't stay and work for Santone, he took the other way, and after that nothing was any good.

"Yes," I said. "I've had that feeling."

"I shouldn't bother you with our trouble any more than I should tell you the gossip. But living here isn't as simple as you think. It's more than just holding a job. You'll be a grant man, or anti-grant. There's no room between."

Silence again, and I sensed the moodiness that had gripped her. It was time to go. I stood up. "Miss Calvert, I'd like to call again."

She rose, too. "I hope you will. Forgive me if I didn't seem friendly when you first came. It wasn't that I had anything against you. It's just the idea of working for Ruth Hadley."

"I see," I said. "Good night."

"Good night," she said.

I walked to the hitch pole, untied my horse, and rode away. But I didn't see at all. It was evident that Janet disliked Ruth, not because she suspected the truth, but because her father liked the woman.

As I rode past the front of the hotel, I saw that Calvert and Ruth were sitting in the parlor. I put my horse away and went in through the back door as quietly as I could, because I did not want them to feel restricted by my presence in the house.

I went to bed and had barely dropped off to sleep when I woke to find Ruth sitting on the edge of the bed. She put a hand on my shoulder, saying, "Matthew, are you awake?"

I grunted something and she laughed softly. "All right, Matthew. Tomorrow is Sunday. You can sleep late."

I sat up. "You're my boss and I'll take your orders, but I'll be damned if I'm going to have you coming into my room. . . ."

She put a hand over my mouth. "Hush, Matthew. Of course you don't like it, but I do. I haven't had anyone to talk to in the three years I've been here, so you can take it as part of your company job to visit with me and keep me happy. How did you like David?"

Putting a pillow behind her, she leaned against the head of the bed, pulled her feet up under her, and hugged her legs. I was completely baffled. I could not help liking her, but I had the feeling she considered me a callow boy, and I resented it.

"I like him," I said shortly.

"Janet?"

"I like her too, but she holds it against me because I'm working for you."

"So-o-o," Ruth murmured. "And why does she feel that way?"

"I'm not sure," I answered. "Does Calvert want to marry you?"

"Maybe." She looked at me with an indulgent, half mocking smile. "I never asked him."

"Would you marry him if he asked you?"

"I don't think so. I'd only hurt him."

"You're going to hurt him anyway," I said. "Old Will Rigdon made a good guess about you."

"Well, who believes old Will Rigdon?" She reached over and patted my cheek. "Good night, Matthew. I'll let you go to sleep now."

After she left, I lay there a long time, thoroughly awake. Finally I got up and sat by the open window while I smoked my pipe. It must have been near midnight. The cool scented air flowed in around me, and outside it was very quiet, with no light at all except the

starshine on the Wall and the dark opening that was the gap. I could not get Ruth Hadley out of my mind. She was a paradox. She seemed to have neither scruples nor inhibitions. And yet there was a basic honesty in her, I felt sure.

CHAPTER TEN

DURING THE NIGHT it rained, and clouds hung low over the mountains through most of the morning, even reaching down to touch the high point of the Wall. After breakfast Ruth called me to the window, nodding at Calvert, who was crossing the field east of the hotel.

"His wife's buried at the edge of the hill," she said. "I never met her. She died before I came here. About four years ago, but that isn't long enough for him to forget her. Sometimes I wonder if he ever will."

Ruth frowned, staring at Calvert, who had opened a small gate in the picket fence that surrounded the grave. He closed the gate behind him and sat down in the grass.

"He's reading the Bible," Ruth said. "Sometimes when the weather's nice he'll stay there all morning. If it isn't he'll stay just a few minutes, but he goes every Sunday morning if he's here." She looked at me. "He won't go to church. Not even if there's a preacher in the valley. But he'll take the Bible and read at her grave every Sunday morning. Why, Matthew, if he doesn't believe in church?"

"You know him," I said. "Ask him."

"I have," she said, "but I can't get an answer out of him that makes any sense." She turned to the window again, biting her lower lip. Then she added, "That's

one reason I couldn't marry David. I'd never have more than a small part of him. I couldn't be satisfied with that."

I looked at the profile of her face. I don't think she was aware that my eyes were on her, so completely was her attention fixed on Calvert. She was wearing a faded calico dress, and she had not even bothered to put up her hair. She had given it a few strokes of her brush and tied a narrow blue ribbon around it at the base of her neck. It hung far down her back, a reddish brown mass that was even more attractive than if she had pinned it up in a chignon as she habitually wore it.

"Donahue said that Linscott figures you were his private property, but that it's all right for you to finagle around with any of the valley men to get something out of them—"

She whirled on me like a tigress. It was the first time I had seen her lose her temper, but for the next minute or two it was thoroughly lost.

"That lying son of a bitch," she flashed, and cursed him for a full minute with every word she could lay her tongue to.

Suddenly she sat down, her face pale, her hands folded on her lap. She said: "I'm sorry, Matthew. It's wrong to take it out on you." She took a long breath. "I think you should go to Sunday school this morning. It'll give you a chance to meet the people who live around here. If you'll watch from the front door, you'll see Janet Calvert walk by in a few minutes."

She got up and began clearing the kitchen table. She said, "Bring in some wood before you go. I won't need you today if you want to go anywhere. Manuel will be back with his fishermen some time this afternoon and I'll have to get dinner for them, so I'll be busy in the house."

I filled the wood box, not understanding her attitude. Apparently she was encouraging me to see Janet, but I was also convinced she wanted me for herself. Then I

wondered if I was crazy, if my own desire was shaping my thoughts. No man, I was sure, could live in the same house with a woman like Ruth Hadley and sleep in a bedroom with only a paper-thin wall between them without wanting her. Then the thought of her and my father was like a chill wind.

I went into my room without saying a word to her. Somehow during the week she had found time to mend my clothes. She had patched them, and washed and ironed my shirts. I was clean enough when I went down the hall to the parlor, but I didn't have anything that resembled Sunday clothes. I would buy a suit the next time I was in San Marino, but that wouldn't help today, and I was uneasy about how Janet would feel if I invited myself to go to church with her.

But I did. I met her in front of the hotel and lifted my hat to her. I said, "I don't have a boiled shirt or a suit, and I don't want to embarrass you, but I'd like to go to church with you."

She laughed. "You won't embarrass me. I doubt if there will be a boiled shirt in the whole congregation." She tipped her head at me as if giving me a close scrutiny. "In fact, Mr. Keenan, I would say you are a handsome man. Come along."

So I fell into step beside her, walking in the grass at the edge, for the rain had turned the dust of the road to mud. She was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat with a black ribbon around it. Her dress was a white linen one, perfectly fitted to the curves of her breasts and hips. If she had made it herself, I thought, she had done a good job.

I'd had the one short glimpse of her face as she had ridden past the hotel that evening, but last night it had been too dark to see her. Now I could not keep from watching her as we walked to church. Her eyes were light blue and very expressive, but it was her mouth that particularly attracted me, for her full lips had a sweet set about them that was as natural as the forth-

right manner which marked everything she did.

She must have spent a great deal of time outside, for her face was tanned so that it seemed very dark against the sheer whiteness of her dress and her bright blond hair and straw hat. Her father said she helped him in the field, and I knew she went fishing. I wondered if she did any housework at all, for she walked with the easy flowing stride of a woman who was used to being outdoors and preferred it to the confining toil of housekeeping.

We had almost reached the church when she asked, "Will I pass?"

I felt my face burn with embarrassment. "I'm sorry," I said. "You'll pass, with a couple of miles to spare."

She glanced at me, with deviltry in her eyes, and I'm sure she took delight in tormenting me. "You'd better behave in church," she said, "or I'll never walk with you again. If you do behave, you're invited to dinner with us." She looked away, adding, "Daddy wants to talk to you again."

"I'll behave."

There were a number of rigs in the shed behind the church, and other teams and saddle horses were tied at the long hitch pole in front. Because Sunday school and church were two of the few social functions in the valley, both were well attended. We were a minute or two late, for they were starting the first hymn as we went in. We had to go almost to the front of the room to find seats.

We shared a hymnbook, Janet sitting very stiffly and properly beside me. If I glanced at her, she would whisper out of the corner of her mouth, "Behave." If I was not in love with her before we got to church, I was by the time we left.

The Sunday-school superintendent was a replica of old Will Rigdon, the man who had threatened me with a rifle the first day I had been in the valley, but about thirty years younger. He led the singing with great

gusto, stopped long enough to roar, in the general direction of Heaven, a prayer that was apparently aimed at a deaf God, then led some more songs. Presently we broke up into classes. Janet and I didn't have to move, but some of the adults, mostly women, got up to teach the children's classes. They were scattered all over, in the back of the room, in the corners, and up on the platform.

Old Will Rigdon was our teacher, and with his great voice and ragged hair and long beard he reminded me of an angry and vengeful God. Yet I sensed a goodness about him, too; but then, remembering the way he had drawn a bead on me with his rifle, I inclined to my former opinion.

The church service which followed Sunday school was very brief. It consisted of two hymns, communion, and another hymn. Old Will Rigdon and a lanky bald-headed man served as elders; the Sunday-school superintendent and an average-sized man with a more than average-sized mustache acted as deacons. The unleavened bread was served on a white plate, the wine in a thick glass. After the last hymn old Will Rigdon dismissed us with a prayer, and suddenly I found myself the center of attention. In the next five minutes I shook more hands than I had shaken in five years.

Janet introduced me to everyone who was there. Out of the hodgepodge of names I remembered two: Jake Kelsey, a lanky elder whose farm bordered Calvert's, and Will Rigdon, the son of the old fire eater.

I noticed that there were very few young men in the congregation, but there was a multitude of girls who did an uncommon amount of giggling when they were introduced to me. One of them, Sarah Rigdon, the daughter of young Will, invited me to a party at her house on the coming Saturday night.

After the crowd moved to the back of the building and began to file outside, old Will Rigdon came to me and shook hands. He said directly, as if there had been

nothing unusual about it: "I didn't really intend to shoot you the other day. Then I heard you'd gone to work for the Hadley woman, and I kind of wished I had. But now you show up with Dave Calvert's girl, and I'm glad I didn't. When Dave says a man's all right, he's all right, and you wouldn't be sparking Janet here if Dave hadn't said so."

I was embarrassed, but Janet wasn't. She laughed and said, "Will, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

He cackled. "Well, I ain't. Now then, Mr. Keenan, next Sunday afternoon we're having a meeting of the Settlers' Protective Society right here in the church house. You be sure to come."

"I don't own any land."

"Don't make no difference. You can shoot a gun, can't you?"

"Sure, but—"

He slapped me on the back. "All right, then. You come along. You're the kind of man we need."

I followed Janet outside. The crowd was breaking up, but one young man who was standing apart from everyone else was staring at Janet. He was small of stature, with the blackest, most piercing eyes I had ever seen. Suddenly he called, "Jan, come here!"

I don't think he had been inside the church house. Or, if he had, I'm certain Janet hadn't seen him. She stared at him a moment, her face turning pale, then started toward him. People stopped to watch, and I had a feeling they were paralyzed for a few seconds, unable to breathe. I didn't know what to do, but I could tell that Janet wanted no part of him, and that everyone else standing there was afraid of him.

He said something in a low tone to Janet, and she flared back at him. Then he said something else, and she lifted her hand and struck him on the cheek, a hard slap that rocked his head. I started toward them on the run, but I hadn't gone ten feet before someone tripped me and I fell flat on my face.

I said something that wasn't fit for a churchyard and got up ready to fight. "Take it easy, son," a man said. "I just saved your life."

It was the lanky elder Jake Kelsey. I dropped my fists and wheeled around to see what had happened. Janet was walking toward me, her head held high, and the man she had slapped was on his horse and cracking him with his spurs at every jump. He was headed for the gap.

"What'd he say?" I demanded. "I'll hunt him up an—"

"No, you won't," Janet said. "I lost my temper. That's all. His name is Artie Shafter and he says I'm his girl, but I'm not. He wanted to know who you were, and then he said I wasn't to talk to you any more. I'm tired of him trying to bully me, so I hit him."

Kelsey laughed softly. "That's our Janet for you," he said. "You'd better walk easy, Mr. Keenan, or she'll hammer your head in one of these days."

Janet started across the yard, calling back, "Come on, Matt, before I lose my temper again."

She did not speak until we had passed the hotel and turned up the lane to her house. Then she said: "I don't mean to get as mad as I do, but I just can't stand Artie Shafter. I went to a dance with him a year ago, and he's been trying to run every man away from me since then. He's mean. He's killed two men that we know of." She looked squarely at me. "I didn't see what happened, but when I turned around you were flat on your stomach."

"I started toward you, but Kelsey tripped me."

"I should have told you to stay where you were." She shivered, and laid a hand on my arm. "Matt, don't get into trouble on my account. I'm not worth it."

"I think you are," I said.

She dropped her hand and looked away. "Thank you, Matt," she said.

I had seen men like Artie Shafter. I did not doubt he was fully as dangerous as Janet said, or as Jake Kelsey thought. But why was he allowed to stay in the valley?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DAVID CALVERT was sitting in his rocking chair smoking his meerschaum pipe when Janet and I reached the house. He asked cheerfully, "How was the service?" Then he must have seen the worried expression on Janet's face, for he stood up and stepped down from the porch. "What happened?"

She told him, and I added, "Jake Kelsey claimed he saved my life."

Calvert nodded. "I'm sure he did. Artie always carries a gun, either a peacemaker in a holster or a derringer."

Fury had been growing in Janet. Now she cried: "Aren't you going to do anything about Artie, Daddy? I've been cooped up in the house because of him—" She stopped and looked at me. "I'm sorry, Matt."

She ran past her father and across the porch and disappeared into the house. Troubled, Calvert said: "Wait till I get my hat, Matthew. I want you to take a walk with me. Dinner won't be ready for an hour or two."

He returned a moment later with a broad-brimmed black hat. He was smoking a bent briar pipe, and when he saw that I had noticed the change, he explained: "The meerschaum is my 'sitting' pipe. I've got three or four briars I smoke when I'm not sitting. It would break my heart if anything happened to the meerschaum." We walked through the barnyard toward the river, Calvert giving me a questioning glance. "Ruth tells me you were raised on the grant when Santone owned it."

I nodded. "I was there until I was fourteen. My father worked for Santone."

We crossed a pasture, while Calvert's milk cows watched us with gentle curiosity, opened a gate, and walked along a fence beside a potato field. Calvert motioned to it. "It's early yet, but I think we'll get a crop." He nodded ahead to another field, the tall grass almost ready to cut. "I'll start haying in a few days. I talked to Ruth about it last night. She says you and Manuel will help me."

He opened another gate and we turned toward the river. "Jan doesn't lose her temper very often, but she does a good job of it when she does. It's all on account of that damned Artie. He's got a stump ranch on the other side of the Wall. I suppose he has a right to live here, but he doesn't have a right to threaten every man who looks twice at Janet."

We sat down in the shade of a cottonwood, Calvert pulling steadily on his pipe. Presently he asked, "When you were a boy, did you ever hear Santone say how big the grant was?"

"Yes, I remember because it was the day we left. He said it was twenty-two square leagues, or about one hundred thousand acres."

Calvert laid a hand on my shoulder. "Would you swear in court you heard Santone say that?"

For an instant I had a crazy impulse to get up and run. I had walked into this with my eyes open and my mind closed. I was a guest of the Calverts under false pretenses; I was dishonest; I was a liar by act if not by word. I could not give testimony in court against the company that employed me. But now, my eyes locked with Calvert's gray ones, I knew I wanted his respect.

I took the only way out I could think of. "My testimony wouldn't do any good, Mr. Calvert. I was only a kid when I heard Santone say that."

"I suppose it wouldn't," he said. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"How did the grant get stretched out?" I asked.

"Chicanery," he said bitterly. "Fraud. If the original

grant was given for the purpose of colonization, or what was called an *empresario* grant, then it could have been any size. But I'm confident it wasn't. If I'm right, then by Mexican law it was restricted to what you just said, twenty-two square leagues."

He knocked his pipe out against his heel. "I've spent most of my money fighting this thing through the courts. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't believed I was fighting for my home." He threw out a hand in an all-inclusive gesture. "I own half a section, minus the twenty acres I sold Ruth. I cleared it and plowed it and fenced it by my own sweat and strength when I was younger than I am now. My wife and I came here in a covered wagon with everything we owned. Jan was just a toddler then. We were told by the United States Land Office that this was public domain."

For a moment he was so choked up he couldn't go on. He took the pipe out of his mouth and slipped it into his pocket. He stared at the Wall, the craggy tip of it still shrouded by clouds, then I saw tears in his eyes and he turned his head.

"You don't know how this country looked when I came here," he said a moment later. "I was the first settler. The Utes were here. More than once they scared my wife half to death by staring at her through the windows. Sometimes they'd come in and sit down in the middle of our front room and stay there until she fed them. We had lots of wild animals. Even outlaws rode through here at night to escape the law officers in San Marino."

He licked his lips, still staring at the Wall. "Others came. We helped one another. Some starved out, but most of them stayed, the Kelseys and the Rigdons and a dozen or more families. We own our land, Matthew. That's the important point about this whole fight. The United States said this is our land. We have our final receipts and several of us have patents." He added in a low voice: "This land has been made valuable by my

labor and sweat. My wife is buried here. I don't care what the Supreme Court says, or what Congress says. I don't care how many officers they send out here to serve eviction papers. I'll never leave here alive."

I looked at him: David Calvert, a middle-aged man of average size, a man I would not have noticed if I had passed him on the street in San Marino. But as I studied him, I sensed a tough, unyielding strength about him I had never felt in another person. At that moment he was ten feet tall; he cast a shadow that fell from the Wall to the other side of the valley. After all his legal recourses were gone, I did not doubt that his determination woud be exactly the same. *He would not leave the valley alive.*

"Can't you make some arrangement with the company?" I asked.

"Sure," he said bitterly. "I can buy land from them I already own, but even if the price were fair I couldn't accept a deal like that simply as a matter of principle. The other alternative is to take their price for my improvements and move out. Move out and lose years of labor and sweat and the best dreams a man ever had. No, I can't do that, either."

For a long time we sat there, the sun moving westward while the clouds gradually broke away from the top of the Wall. The afternoon grew warmer; the earth steamed under the hot, sucking power of the sun.

"You asked how the grant was stretched out," he said finally. "It was partly their survey and partly political power in Congress, and that, it seems, is what handcuffed the court."

We heard Janet's call to dinner and walked back across the fields to the house. After we washed on the back porch, I followed Calvert through the kitchen, which smelled of fried chicken and gravy and biscuits, and we sat down at a table covered by a damask cloth. The silverware had been shined until it glistened, and

the dishes were blue Wedgwood. I was unused to such luxury.

I ate until I could eat no more, even letting Janet force a second piece of chocolate cake upon me. We sat there for a time, Calvert filling and lighting his pipe. I smoked with him, and for the moment all problems of the future were out of our minds. It was incredible that I had known Janet and her father only a few hours. It seemed half a lifetime. To me the most astonishing thing about it was the atmosphere of complete comfort and understanding.

Calvert rose finally, saying: "I'm taking a ride. I'll leave you two to do the dishes."

"Matt doesn't need—" Janet began.

"I will, though," I said.

I dried the dishes, standing beside her in the kitchen, the work table on one side, the cupboard with its perforated tin door on the other. Then we carried the dishes into the dining room and she put them away in the tall cherrywood china closet.

"I don't have to help with haying to know you're a better cook than Ruth," I said.

She laughed as she took off her ruffled pink apron with its lace border. "She'd kill you if she heard you say that."

She led the way into the parlor with its dark green Brussels carpet, the great stone fireplace at one end of the room, the massive oak center table at the other. On it was a porcelain lamp with a seashore landscape painted on the globe. There were a haircloth-covered sofa and rocker to match, and a few cane-bottomed chairs scattered around the room.

"I never expected to find a house like this in the valley," I said.

As we stood facing each other in the middle of the room, she was gripped by a sudden rush of emotion. She turned away, asking, "But how long will we have it, Matt?"

How could I answer a question like that? I said: "The Rigdon girl asked me to go to her party Saturday night. If you're going, could I take you?"

She walked to the fireplace, then turned and looked at me, and I saw again the sweet expression which had first attracted me. She said, "I'd be glad to go with you, now that you know about Artie Shafter."

"He wouldn't make any difference," I said.

"Matt." She walked to me in her quick, graceful way. "I'm sorry about last night. You know how I feel about Ruth. I thought that you—well, a man who'd work for her would be different than you are."

She didn't know, I thought, and in that moment I looked at myself, and I did not like what I saw. I was a company man. Ruth was a company spy. We were both hypocrites, both dishonest, and suddenly I could not stay there in David Calvert's house. I said, "I'll see you Saturday night," and left.

I walked to the hotel, my shadow long beside me on the ground that had been hardened by the hot afternoon sun. The more I thought about it, the more I disliked my situation. I could quit working for the company. I could return the money Linscott had given me. But that was stupid, looking at it from a practical standpoint. David Calvert and his neighbors were whipped. Right or wrong, the company was going to be around for a long time. What I did would not change that. So, as I was to do many times during the following weeks, I pushed away from me the moment of decision.

A few days later, when Ruth sent me to the store, young Will Rigdon told me that David Calvert had ridden through the gap on Sunday afternoon, and that on Monday morning Artie Shafter left the valley.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I HAD NEVER BEEN to a party in my life. After going to Sarah Rigdon's party on Saturday night, I was convinced that I never wanted to go to another one. We played games because, as Janet told me on the way over there, old Will Rigdon didn't believe in dancing. They were childish games, or so it seemed to me, but the part that puzzled me most was the evident fact that I was the only one who didn't find pleasure in them. The one game I would have enjoyed was post office, if I'd been paired off with Janet, but I wasn't.

That night I met Alex Kelsey. He was the son of Jake Kelsey, the lanky elder who was a neighbor of Calvert's. He was as square and blocky as his father was tall and thin. He was about my age. I didn't remember meeting him on Sunday, but from the talk I gathered that he worked at a sawmill somewhere behind the Wall and was seldom home on Sunday.

Alex spent most of the evening staring at me, apparently disliking me on general principles. He must have weighed two hundred pounds. If I held my arm parallel to the floor, he could have walked under it without touching a hair. He would be a tough one in a fight, I thought, and I had a hunch I was going to have to fight him sometime. He didn't say anything that was out of line, but there was an overbearing insolence about him that rubbed me the wrong way. It was characteristic of him, I thought, that he was the only one at the party who mentioned the grant company. He said that if he ever found a grant man in the valley he'd gut shoot him.

When I returned to the hotel after taking Janet home, I asked Ruth, "What's Alex Kelsey like?"

"He's a bastard," she said. "Killed a man at the sawmill last spring. He'd be the first to bring a rope if he knew we were working for the company. But he's yellow inside. He used to go with Janet till Artie Shafter scared him off. Isn't it funny that a big man like Alex would run from a little one like Artie?"

"No, it happens all the time," I said. "A lot of big men will run from Chip Donahue, for instance."

"Oh, that gunslinger," she said contemptuously. "Yes, I suppose it's the same thing with Artie. Well, I'm glad he's gone." She yawned and started toward her bedroom, then stopped and looked back. "I had a letter from Linscott today. He's coming up with Donahue in a few weeks. Or sooner, maybe. He didn't say. He still hopes to make an amicable settlement with David."

"He won't," I said.

"Well, he thinks he's got to try," she said.

I lay awake a long time after I went to bed, thinking about what David Calvert had told me that Sunday afternoon. I hoped Linscott changed his mind and did not come, because I knew no good would come of it.

I did not go to the meeting of the Settlers' Protective Society in spite of what old Will Rigdon had said. It seemed to me I would be a bigger hypocrite if I went than if I stayed home.

But Ruth went. She came back in a temper. "David is the only level-headed man in the valley," she said. "The rest of them rant and rave around and want to fight. They even talk about burning out the grant men."

"Why do you say Dave's smarter than the rest?"

"I didn't say smarter. I said more level-headed. Wait it out, he says. The company's worried. Let them make the first move." She jerked off her little turban hat and threw it across the room. "No, David isn't smart at all. He's the kind of man who puts principle above everything else. Is that being smart, Matt?"

I got my pipe out and filled it, struck a match and, holding the flame to my pipe, began to puff, looking at Ruth through the smoke. "I don't know," I said finally. "I've seen plenty of men who didn't have any principles —or had the wrong ones if they had any at all. Strikes me they always wind up a hell of a lot lower down the line than they think they're going to."

"You don't figure David is going to wind up lower down the line than he aims to?"

"I don't know where he's going to wind up," I said, "but I never met a happier man than Dave Calvert."

She was sitting so that she could look out of the front window of the hotel parlor at the Calvert place. There was something about the big white house and the cottonwoods and the barn and outbuildings that reminded me of Calvert himself: neat, orderly, and strong.

I was looking at Ruth, not at the Calvert buildings. She was very tense, her hands clenched into tight fists in her lap, the pulse beat at her temples a regular, powerful throb. Her body was shivering. It was a hot afternoon with very little wind stirring. I wondered if she were sick.

"Where will principle take a man?" she asked. "It'll kill Dave, that's what it'll do." She got up and started toward the hall door, calling back: "David's starting haying in the morning. You're helping him."

I went outside and sat down on the porch. I looked at the Wall and thought that it had been there for a million years and that it would be there for another million years. Calvert was like the Wall. His influence would be around a long time after he died. Then the notion struck me that Ruth had shivered because she'd had a sudden flash of intuition and had seen Calvert dying, or already dead.

The next morning I started working for Calvert, and I went right on working for him week after week, through the hottest part of the summer. Manuel was supposed to help, but for some reason Ruth had a rush

of business, and her upstairs rooms were continually filled. Usually every place at the dining table was occupied, and on Sundays she often had to set a second table.

"It's the hot weather at the other end of the valley," she said. "This has happened every summer I've been here."

Most of the people who came for Sunday dinner were camped along the river. Because Ruth had established a reputation for setting a good table, the campers flocked in both for dinner and for supper, glad to put their feet under the table again after eating their own camp cooking.

I never worked harder in my life. I put in every daylight hour of six days for Calvert, and on Sunday I worked for Ruth in the hotel. I never enjoyed working as much as I did through those hectic weeks, partly because Calvert was a good man to work for, and partly because I was with Janet every day. She ran the mower or rake as long as she could, then she'd make a dash for the house in time to get a fire going and a meal prepared by the time Calvert and I came in and washed up.

As for Sundays, I had to do almost everything from cutting wood to washing dishes and even waiting on the table. People seemed to be underfoot everywhere, mostly San Marino businessmen who had brought their families upriver for a vacation, but now and then a party of Easterners would show up, or even, as Ruth had told me when I first came, an occasional English lord.

The summer was hot and dry, with a few afternoon thunderstorms that roared down from the Sangre de Cristo Range, sent crackling flashes of lightning at the Wall, sometimes so close we said we could smell the sulphur, dumped half an inch of rainfall in a few minutes, and then moved downriver toward San Marino. After that the air was damp and cool and scented by the smell of pines that grew beyond the Wall.

Calvert and I would make a run for the barn when a

storm struck. We'd put the horses away and stand in the doorway and listen to the pound of rain on the shake roof. When it was over, and the sun broke through the clouds, Calvert would slip his hands under his waistband and teeter back on his heels and sniff audibly.

"Matthew, you can see why the company wants this valley." He'd sniff again; then his great strong face would crease in a grin. "And you can also see why it isn't going to get the valley."

In a way I was sorry to haul the last load of hay. We had filled the mow of Ruth's barn, built a stack behind the corrals, and then had done the same thing at Calvert's place. We finished in the middle of the afternoon on a Friday in late summer, and Calvert insisted that I come into the house with him. Janet had baked a chocolate cake and made lemonade.

"We have to drink a toast to the best hay crop I ever raised," Calvert said, "and the best hay hand I ever had."

"I wasn't when I started," I said, and thought of the first ungainly-looking shock I had put together, and how Janet had stopped the next time she'd come around and pointed to the shock and laughed in my face, and then wanted to know how much water I thought the shock would shed the next time we had a rain.

I stood there in Calvert's front room, a glass of lemonade in my hand, the thick Brussels carpet under my feet, and I felt a little sad now that the summer's work was done and I'd have to return to the hotel. Calvert was beside me. I was a good six inches taller than he was; but, as I often felt when I stood close to him, I had the impression that he was the bigger man.

"I'm going to have another piece of cake," he said, and went into the dining room.

I looked at Janet, thinking that I had been working in the field with her, and that I'd eaten two meals at her table for six days a week for more weeks than I

could remember. Though time had been running on, like cord being pulled from a ball and piled up at my feet, I hadn't had much chance to tell her how I felt about her since I'd brought her home from Sarah Rigdon's party. Or maybe I just hadn't made the chance.

"I'd like to take you somewhere," I said. "I don't know where. Just somewhere."

"We'll go fishing," she said in a matter-of-fact voice, as if what I had said was no surprise to her at all. "I'll fix a lunch. Let's make it a week from Sunday." She stabbed at my chest with a forefinger. "I'll make a bet that I'll catch more fish than you will, and you can name the stakes."

I said, "Sure I'll bet." I thought, I'll say the stakes are a kiss. Then I swallowed and didn't say it. Any other man would have. Maybe that was what she wanted me to say. Maybe that was her reason for putting it that way. But I couldn't get it out. Instead I muttered, "The stakes are four bits."

"Agreed," she said, without changing expression.

I got my hat, mumbled something about the cake being good, and walked out. I'd be a bachelor all my life, I thought miserably. I'd never have nerve enough to ask a woman to marry me. I doubted that any woman would take me anyway, especially Janet, who very likely had her choice of a dozen men in the valley.

There was something else, too, something I didn't want to think about; but it kept crowding into my mind whether I invited it or not. How could I ever tell Janet I loved her when I had not been honest with her? If she knew why I was in the valley. . . . Suddenly a shame was in me that was close to sickness.

I almost reached the hotel before I was aware of a new red-wheeled buggy that I had never seen before. I wondered about it, for Ruth's business had dropped off almost to nothing. I went in, thinking she had a couple of fishermen out from San Marino, then I stopped flat-footed. The visitors were George Linscott

and Chip Donahue.

Ruth was sitting beside Linscott talking to him. I had never seen her dressed as she was now, in a dark green dress decorated by dangling pompons, her hair done up in a chignon that was encircled by diadem combs which glittered in the slanting rays of sunlight falling through the west window.

Linscott said coolly, as if he didn't give a damn, "How are you, Keenan?"

Matching his tone as nearly as I could, I said, "I'm fine, Linscott," and nodded at Donahue, who was chewing on a match, his face expressionless. He nodded back, saying nothing.

I looked at Ruth again. She asked, "The haying done?"

I said, "Yes," and kept on looking at her. Suddenly I realized I was breathing hard. I didn't know why except that I hated George Linscott.

Ruth rose. "I didn't realize it was so late, George. I'll have to start supper. Get me some wood, Matthew."

I said, "All right."

Linscott got up, too. "I'll help you, Ruth. Maybe I can peel the potatoes."

Ruth laughed. "You'd waste too much of the potatoes, but you can watch me."

Ruth parted the drapes that hung from the archway which opened into the dining room and disappeared, her hips swaying provocatively. Linscott followed.

Donahue rose, grinning in that odd way he had. "Let's go cut wood, Matthew."

"Yeah, sure," I said, and went down the hall toward the back door.

Donahue, a pace behind, asked, "Like your job?"

"Yeah," I said. "Sure."

I was outside before I realized that I was jealous. Ruth had dressed for Linscott, who, in a black suit and a purple brocade vest, preened himself like a runty

peacock. But why was I jealous? That was another question I couldn't answer.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I HADN'T SPLIT six sticks of wood when Linscott came out through the back door. "Keenan, I want you to go with me to see Calvert," he said. "Chip, you fetch Ruth the wood she needs."

"I didn't hire out to chop wood, George," Donahue said.

Linscott shrugged. "All right, you'll go hungry then," he said, and, jerking his head at me, led the way around the house to the buggy. The team was a pair of matched bays, a source of great pride to Linscott, I judged. The buggy was new, with a mirror on the dashboard. Money, I thought, money and power; and he's going to slam both of them into David Calvert's face.

For a moment I was tempted to tell Linscott that I hadn't hired out to go with him to see Calvert. But then he'd have gone back and got Donahue, and I didn't know what would happen with Donahue and Linscott calling on Calvert. On the other hand I knew that if I was with Linscott nothing would happen.

I thought we'd find Calvert puttering around in the barn, but when we drew up under the cottonwoods I saw that he was sitting in his rocking chair on the front porch smoking his pipe. I called, "Looks like you're still relaxing, Dave."

I got down and wrapped the lines around the whipstock. "That's right," Calvert said. "I'm screwing up nerve to tackle the potato field in the morning." Linscott had swung down on the other side of the buggy, and we almost reached the porch before Calvert recog-

nized Linscott. When he did, he stepped off the porch, his pipe in his mouth.

"You aren't welcome here, Linscott," he said, and looked at me. "And you're in bad company, Matthew."

"He's staying at the hotel," I said. "He asked me to come with him. I don't know why."

"Because Miss Hadley said that you had been working for Calvert and that he liked you," Linscott said. "I thought your presence would help us to—to talk together."

"I like Matthew," Calvert said, "but I sure as hell don't like the company he keeps. As for talking together, we have nothing to say."

Calvert stood a few feet in front of Linscott, his pipe in his hand, a square-bodied man who looked as immovable as the Wall. It struck me how often I had mentally compared Calvert to the Wall, and I had never seen a time when the comparison was as apt as it was now.

"I hold nothing against you," Linscott said, and for the first time since I had met the man, I felt some sympathy for him. He was courteous, handling a difficult situation as well as any man could.

"I hold nothing against you personally," Calvert said, "except one thing. This is a free country. A man chooses his employer. You chose the wrong one. It would be different if you were working for an individual, but a corporation is heartless. You know that as well as I do."

"That may be," Linscott said, "but the men who make up a corporation and who work for it are not heartless. My presence here proves that. To avoid what might turn into bloodshed, I came in the hope of making an amicable settlement."

Calvert did not move. He said, "Have your say and get out."

"Under the circumstances," Linscott said, his voice still courteous, "there are only two possibilities. Either

you buy us out, or we buy your improvements."

"We've been over this before," Calvert said. "I will not buy land I already own, and I will not sell improvements to someone who has no right to the land."

"We have not been over this ground. Yesterday I received a letter empowering me to make an offer different from the previous one." Linscott reached into the pocket of his coat for a cigar. "You said a corporation is heartless. Perhaps, but the difficulty we're having is no different from those other grant companies have when they set out to develop their holdings. The Maxwell Grant is a similar case. So are some of the grants in the San Luis Valley. Now—"

"If you are going to stand here all night and beat the devil around the bush . . ."

"Just a minute," Linscott said. "Let me make our offer for your improvements. Five thousand dollars, plus thirty dollars a head for your cattle. We are not interested in your horses."

"The answer is No."

"Then we'll approach it from the other direction," Linscott said. "Please understand that the law is on our side, and that we can evict—"

"By God, if you don't get this over with—"

"Will you pay the company one dollar per acre?"

Calvert's mouth fell open. He had told me once that the company was asking twenty-five dollars an acre, land which was worth that figure because he had made it worth it. Now I sensed that this offer shocked him; then the shock passed and he saw the trap which had been laid for him. He asked, "Will the company make the same offer to everyone else in the valley?"

Linscott's face turned red. "I can't say about that."

"That's what I thought," Calvert said curtly. "My answer is still No."

"We're only trying to be fair," Linscott shouted, as if he could not understand such stupid stubbornness. "If we have to evict you, you'll get nothing. It's worth

something to us—"

"Janet, fetch my shotgun!" Calvert bellowed. "I'm going to shoot the feathers off a buzzard that's been hanging around here too long."

Linscott wheeled and strode to the buggy and got in. I followed, backing and turning sharply and touching the horses with the whip. I didn't think Janet would bring the shotgun, and I didn't think Calvert would shoot if she did, but at the same time I knew him well enough by now to be sure he wasn't one to bluff.

Linscott sat beside me, swearing bitterly, then he burst out: "He wouldn't have taken our offer of a dollar an acre if I had said we would give the same price to everyone. He wouldn't, would he, Keenan?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"The fool," he muttered. "The stupid, blundering, shortsighted fool. He leaves us no choice." We had reached the hotel, and he motioned for me to stop. "Put the horses away," he said, and got down.

Supper that night was a masterpiece. When Ruth made up her mind to cook fancy, she succeeded. She had bought a veal from Jake Kelsey a few days before, and we had roast veal with mint sauce, Yankee muffins, salmon salad, young potatoes and carrots out of the garden, and a cream cake with thick icing that was the final sweetener for Linscott's ruffled temper.

When we finished eating, Ruth rose. "Let's go into the other room, George. Manuel and Matthew can do the dishes."

She walked out, the pompons swinging, the lamplight glittering on the diadem combs in her hair. Linscott jumped up and followed like an eager puppy wanting to be petted. But my eyes were on Ruth's straight back, the regal set of her head, the insinuating sway of her hips.

After Ruth and Linscott disappeared through the drapes, Donahue rose, set his chair carefully back against the table, and gave me a formal salute with his

right hand. "I love dishwashers," he said maliciously. "A man couldn't eat if we didn't have dishwashers. Nobody would eat off dirty dishes."

Manuel was already carrying dishes into the kitchen. I got up and kicked my chair against the wall. If I'd had my hands on Linscott at that moment, I'd have choked him to death. Ruth, too. I said between my teeth: "I wasn't hired to do dishes. I'll be damned if I'm going to—"

"Ease up, boy." Donahue laid a hand on my shoulder and looked me straight in the eyes, and there was no malice or sarcasm in his voice. "I told you how it was with them when you took the job. I know her kind. She'll play with a man till she's got him crazy. She's too old for you. Get out before you have to kill someone you don't want to." His peculiar grin touched his mouth and eyes. "I reckon I might just as well save my wind. Nobody ever takes my advice."

He walked toward the parlor, and when he went through the drapes, Ruth asked, "Did one of the boys knock a chair over?"

"Yeah," Donahue said. "Matthew's foot slipped."

I grabbed a handful of dishes and carried them into the kitchen. Everything Donahue had said to me was true, right down to people not taking his advice. I wasn't going to, either.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I WAS CONCERNED ABOUT what Calvert would think of me, taking Linscott to see him as I had. After supper I was strongly tempted to walk over to Calvert's place to try to explain. My own feelings were not clear about a

good many things, but on this matter they were. Above all other things I wanted David Calvert's respect.

I decided against seeing him tonight. It was late and he was probably in bed. I went to my room and sat by the window and smoked a pipe. It was very dark, for there was no moon and the stars were completely covered by clouds. Beyond the Wall I could see lightning playing among the high peaks.

For the first time I had some respect for George Linscott. He was honest, I thought, at least by his standards. If that was true, then he was a few notches above Matthew Keenan, and that graveled the hell out of me. In my mind I would not be honest as long as I worked for the company.

Looking back, I asked myself why I was here. I had been raised with my father's advice, "Stay on the side of the big man," dinned in my ears. When I came, I was willing to go along on that notion. If Linscott had given me some other job, or sent me to another place, or if I had never talked to Calvert, everything would have been different. The one basic difference now was the startling knowledge that the really big man was David Calvert. Stubborn, foolish, idealistic: call him what you want to, but you could not deny his size. The fact that Linscott had made a trip up here to offer him a special deal proved that. By his very life and example, Calvert had stopped the grant company dead in its tracks.

I got up, knocked my pipe out against the windowsill, and took off my clothes. I went to bed, knowing I could not go on as I was going. I had to make a decision soon, probably the most important decision in my life. A man cannot continue to despise himself for pretending to be something he isn't, not if he is a man.

Something else that bothered me was the discovery that I was jealous of Linscott, of Ruth dressing up for him, cooking that fancy supper, smiling at him, and dangling on every word he said as if she adored him, when I knew she didn't.

I had thought I was in love with Janet. I still thought I was. But how did a man define love? Or identify it? There was no one to tell me. I, who had had so little experience with women, knew only that I liked being with Janet. She was sweet and good-natured and kind. She was pretty, even beautiful at times. She was a hard worker. When I sat down and analyzed her qualities, she was everything I wanted in a wife. I would ask her to marry me, I told myself, when we went fishing.

But there was the damnable feeling Ruth had aroused in me tonight. By taking me in as she had, she defied the valley gossip. Being the kind of woman she was, I knew she didn't give a damn one way or the other. Still, it had taken courage.

I was unable, though, to list her virtues as I could Janet's. I couldn't imagine marrying Ruth. She was cynical. She made no secret of what her past had been. But there was a quality about her that attracted me and put me on edge.

I don't know how long I lay there, filled with a turmoil that was new to me, hating myself and not being able to do a thing about it. I had barely dropped off to sleep, or so it seemed, when the door opened and Ruth slipped in.

She asked, "Asleep, Matthew?"

The faint squeak of the door had aroused me. I leaned on one elbow. "No," I said. "Are you going to marry that bastard or not?"

She laughed softly and lay down beside me. "I don't know. I really had him going tonight, didn't I?"

Donahue was right about her. I said, "You're no good, Ruth."

"I know it," she said, "but George doesn't. He asked me to marry him tonight. It's real tempting, Matthew. I'd live in the best house in San Marino. Move in the best society. I'd have a dozen dresses like this instead of one. No more hard work. He even promised me a maid." She paused. "But maybe I wouldn't be in so-

ciety. They know what I am. They'd blackball me." She paused a second time. "Maybe I ought to take him when I can get him. I'm getting older all the time."

"Then get it over with," I said. "I'm thinking about quitting my job in the morning."

"No, Matthew!" she cried. "I won't let you. I need you."

"I thought I could work for you, not the company. I've been hating myself too long."

"I know," she said. "It's funny Pat Keenan's son should have a conscience. *He* didn't have the slightest trace of one. He wasn't any good, either, Matthew. At least, not in the way *you* judge people."

"You're wrong," I said. "He had one principle he lived by. And he was loyal to Santone as long as he was on the grant."

"Because it was good for Patrick Keenan," she said. "I knew every thought, every desire, every impulse that was in him. I knew everything about him, Matthew. That's why I say he was no good. Not that I was any better. I pushed him. Wanted him to amount to something so he could buy me the things that George promises. But not Pat. He liked his life the way he had it, so he walked out on me."

She got up and walked to the door. I said: "He told me once about white women. He said that was what was wrong with the country."

"Sure," she said bitterly. "That was Pat for you."

I sat up and put my feet on the floor. I didn't want to talk about my father. I didn't even know how it had started. I wanted to talk about her and me. I said, "Wait a minute."

"I know what you're going to say. I did treat you badly tonight, Matthew, but I thought I did real well with George. I guess I should have been an actress."

"I'm getting tired of—of your motherly feelings toward me," I said. "Or sisterly feeling, if that's what it is."

"You're very young, Matthew," she said softly, "but there is one thing you should know. My feelings for you are neither motherly nor sisterly."

She went out, closing the door. I sat there on the edge of the bed, feeling as callow as she thought I was.

I slept later than usual the next morning, probably because I had difficulty going to sleep. When I did get to the kitchen, Ruth was already up and had the fire built, which was my chore. She was wearing a house dress, one that was a little more faded and shapeless than most of her house dresses, and when she saw that I had noticed it she said sharply: "Don't open your mouth, Matthew Keenan. Not for one little word."

"The king is dead," I said. "Long live the king."

She tapped her foot, glaring at me. "I don't know what you mean by that, but if it's what I think—"

The back door banged open. Manuel shouted: "Come quick, Señor Matt! The buggy, she has no wheels."

I didn't have the slightest idea what he was talking about, but I had never seen him so excited before. I ran out of the house, Ruth behind me. Manuel was ahead of us, pointing at the remains of Linscott's beautiful red-wheeled buggy, but there were no red wheels. Someone had sneaked into the yard during the night and stolen them.

"Whew!" Ruth whispered. "George will have a heart attack when he sees that."

"Have you hunted for them, Manuel?" I asked.

"*Si.*" He bobbed his head. "No wheels."

"I'll look around," I said. "Let's wait till after breakfast to tell Linscott."

"I guess that would be better," Ruth said. "No use spoiling his appetite."

I searched for an hour, but I found no trace of the wheels or of any tracks in the dust that meant anything. When I went into the house, Linscott and Donahue were eating. I said, "Good morning," and sat down across from them. Donahue nodded and kept on eating.

Linscott gave me a close look, wondering perhaps, where I had been, then he said, "Good morning," and went on with his breakfast.

I waited until they finished eating. Ruth came in and sat down at the end of the table with a cup of coffee. I asked, "Did you tell him?" When she shook her head, I said: "I've got bad news, Linscott. Someone stole your buggy wheels last night. You'll have to take the stage back to San Marino."

He stared at me for a good ten seconds. I guess it took that long for what I said to soak in, then he yelled, "Wheels!" and jumped up, his chair falling over with a great clatter. He went out of the dining room on the run, crossed the kitchen, and slammed the back door open. When he returned, his face was as red as the wattles of a turkey cock.

"They're gone." He swallowed. "Some damned sneak-thief stole them last night! Chip, you get out and find them. Turn every place in the valley inside out till you find them. I'll send that—"

"George," Donahue said, "you didn't hire me to hunt buggy wheels. Go see the sheriff."

Linscott's face lost its color. No one, I thought, and that included George Linscott, argued with Chip Donahue. Linscott turned to me. "You find them, Keenan. Don't come back until you do."

That did it. "I'm not even starting," I said. "I'm resigning my job. From now on I'm working for Ruth, not the company."

For a moment I thought Linscott was going to have apoplexy. Then, I suppose to prove that someone would obey him, he shouted at Manuel, who was standing on the back porch: "Go saddle a couple of horses. Donahue and I will ride to town."

"*Si,* Señor Linscott," Manuel said, and took off across the barnyard.

"Send my valise to town on the stage," he said to Ruth.

"This is just the beginning, Linscott," I said. "You don't understand the temper of the settlers. If I were you, I wouldn't come out here again."

"So you're expecting trouble," Linscott sneered. "Well, I guess I had you pegged right. Like father, like son. If you had any guts, you wouldn't resign."

I started toward him, wanting to kill him. He was backing away from me when Ruth got hold of an arm. Through the roaring that suddenly erupted in my head, I heard Donahue say, "Matthew."

I stopped. I didn't have a gun on me and he knew it, but he would have shot me if I'd jumped Linscott. I had no doubt of it. That was what he was hired for.

I said, "All right, Chip."

Donahue said, "Let's go look at the horses, George."

Linscott glanced at me as if that was all the attention I merited. Then he nodded at Ruth. "Thanks for looking after us so well. I hope I'll see you in San Marino before long."

He went out through the kitchen, Donahue following. Ruth said, "I'd better wave goodbye." She said it uncertainly, as if not sure I'd let her.

"I'll come with you," I said.

By the time we reached the back of the house, Donahue and Linscott had mounted, a lively brown gelding for Donahue, a black mare for Linscott that Manuel always gave to the poorest rider when he took a party of fishermen up the river. They started out, Ruth waving, Linscott waving back, and Donahue ignoring both of us. By the time they reached the road, the mare was trotting and daylight was showing between Linscott's seat and the saddle at every jump.

"He'll be eating off a shelf for a month." Ruth put an arm around me and hugged me. "You're a devil," she said. "A sly devil. I didn't think you'd do a trick like that."

"I didn't," I said.

She looked at me gravely. "You're not lying?" I shook

my head. "Then it *is* trouble," she said. "It could be the shooting trouble I've been expecting."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RUTH SAID that she always had the best garden in the valley, particularly the early things, and that surprisingly few farmers in the valley even bothered with a garden. This resulted in her having a market for anything she could spare during the summer and early fall. A few people came to the hotel to buy, but she preferred to sell to the store.

A week after Linscott and Donahue were in the valley, we dug fifteen sacks of early potatoes and I hauled them to the store. I unloaded at the rear platform, and because Ruth had given me a list of supplies to bring back I walked into the store and waited for young Will Rigdon to come in. He was a careful man, and insisted on examining each sack, afraid, I suppose, that we had dropped a few rocks among the potatoes.

I laid Ruth's supply list on the counter. It was really a swap deal, she told me. She had an understanding with the Rigdons that she'd buy her supplies from them if they'd take her garden truck, but swap or not, she said she always wound up owing the Rigdons some cash money.

I walked to the big heating stove in the rear of the store. There was a cracker barrel beside it which was a sort of community enterprise. I don't know how a stingy man like young Rigdon figured the loss unless he just put it down to good will. At any rate I noticed that he kept the gingersnaps, candy, and pickle barrel behind the counter.

A dozen chairs and upended boxes were scattered around the stove with a spittoon between each pair of seats. Nailed up on the wall was a sign in tall black letters: GENTLEMEN WILL USE THE SPITTOONS. EVERYBODY ELSE STAY OUTSIDE.

I was looking at it and grinning when young Will came in. It tickled me every time I saw it, but Will didn't think it was funny. He said: "Ain't nothing to laugh about. I'll bet there's more tobacco chewers per acre in the valley than any other place in the country."

"What about your women customers?" I asked. "Looks to me like you're keeping them out."

"Naw. They know it don't mean them." He picked up Ruth's list and began mumbling, "Beans, flour, molasses, rice."

Old Will Rigdon heard us and sauntered in from the bench in front, his rifle held in the crook of his arm. He said, "Howdy, Keenan."

"Morning, Will," I said.

The old man had been pleasant enough after I'd gone to church with Janet. At first I thought he was a little touched, and for that reason dangerous, but he seemed to be all right on everything except the grant company. Actually, he was like the rest of the settlers, except Calvert. I think that they all knew they were up against a stacked deck, that this was a problem which had no solution, and that David Calvert was the only one who had any faith they would win. If men have no hope, and if they are frustrated long enough, they'll turn to violence, and I suspected that was exactly what the company wanted.

I was thinking about this as I watched old Will put the rifle down, holding the barrel in his right hand as he squinted at me. He said, "You ain't never been to one of our settlers' meetings."

"I'd come if I owned land. I just work here."

"Sure, sure." He bobbed his head. "I guess the big man kind o' wished he'd stayed home the other day."

He laughed, a high-pitched cackle. "What'd he say when he discovered them wheels was gone?"

"Plenty. I never saw a madder man in my life."

"Well, sir, he'd better stay out of the valley." He scratched an ear. "It's coming, Keenan. By grab, it's coming. We'll chase every grant man out of—"

"Pa," young Will called, "go see if Sarah's got enough water for her washing."

"Why, she don't wash on Friday—"

"You go see."

Old Will grunted something under his breath and went out through the back. Young Will said: "I've got Ruth's stuff together. Want to give me a hand?"

"Sure."

"I've got some fresh pork coming in the first of the week. Jake Kelsey's butchering. Reckon Ruth could use some?"

"I'll ask her."

He shoved the slip he'd made out for Ruth across the counter, and I picked it up, folded it, and dropped it into my pocket. He said, "Don't pay no heed to Pa."

"You don't put a fire out by not paying any heed to it," I said.

He placed his hands palm down on the counter and looked at me. "What do you mean by that?"

"What I said. I told Linscott not to come back here. I haven't heard anybody talk except your dad, but I can feel it. Just like a storm that's brewing up."

He kept on staring at me, an odd expression on his face that bothered me. Finally he said, "Keep your nose clean, Keenan." He picked up a sack of sugar and started along the counter toward the back. It was the first hint I'd had that I was under suspicion.

When I got back to the hotel, I told Ruth about it. She shrugged. "It's natural enough. They don't like me; you work for me, so they don't like you. What difference does it make?"

"It makes one difference," I said. "What'll happen to

you when the blow-up comes?"

She shrugged. "If it comes, I'll get out of the valley. But it won't come until spring. It'll be time to worry then." We were standing by the wagon near the back door of the hotel. Ruth turned to look at the Wall. She said: "Matthew, sometimes I wish I had a conscience. Like David. Or you. I wish I could live here forever just like I am now, with you and Manuel. But I can't. We both know it." She put her hands on the tail gate, and I had never seen her face as troubled as it was then. "Maybe there is something in this talk of the eternal. Maybe that's it."

I carried her supplies into the house, thinking that the Wall dominated everything in the valley. It was a symbol of eternity. That was why Ruth had said what she had. To Calvert it was more than a symbol. I was convinced that he drew his strength from the Wall in some way that no one else really understood. I'm not sure *he* did, either.

I talked to Janet about it when we went fishing on Sunday. She nodded, smiling a little. "I know what you mean," she said, "but it isn't anything you can explain. I'm sure Daddy couldn't, either." She frowned thoughtfully, then added, "Didn't God appear to Moses in a burning bush?"

"I don't know," I said, and dropped the matter, but I knew what she meant. If God could appear in a burning bush, He might also appear in the Wall to a man like David Calvert. I knew nothing about things like that, and perhaps the thought was ridiculous. I'm sure it would be to anyone who didn't know Calvert, but it wasn't ridiculous to Janet.

We didn't fish much that day. We quit after Janet had caught five. I had only four, so I handed a four-bit piece to her. She looked at it a moment, puzzled, then remembered the bet and took it, laughing.

"I'll never spend it, Matt," she said. "I'll put it among my treasures."

We ate our lunch and then lay down under the aspens, their leaves already touched by the first golden dye of fall; and neither one of us, I guess, wanted to move. It's hard to describe that day; it's hard to describe anything that's perfect. Warm, almost brittle, so dry was the air, and the river, running low, made hardly a whisper, but the wind that raced down from the high peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Range turned the leaves of the aspens above us with gentle restlessness.

Mostly, I think, it was the feeling between us, with sunlight often touching Janet's bright, yellow hair, and sometimes her outflung hand lingered for a moment in mine. When it did, I had none of the feeling I had when I touched Ruth. I had every intention of asking Janet to marry me, but the words never came. We did talk freely and willingly of many other things, for the first time since I had known her.

I told her about my boyhood on the Santone Grant, about the time I sneaked into the big house to look at the money. I told her about Chico and Onero. She knew Onero, she said. The Utes had often come through the valley when she was a girl and had stopped at her house and her mother had fed them. She knew Buckskin Charley and Ouray and Shavano and a few of the other chiefs.

She told me some of the stories they used to tell her. One was about the small pond I saw the first day I came to the valley. "There used to be three little pools," she said, "according to the Utes, who often camped beside them. The pools were called the Little Love Lakes. It seems that the Great Spirit liked to come at sundown and walk on the water. He would bless the valley and the Spanish Peaks. You can see them from there, you know. Then the Utes and the Comanches got into a fight, and the Great Spirit was angry. He made the water dry up, and alkali came and the fish all died. Then the Great Spirit, after punishing them, disappeared into the middle pool."

"I suppose that's where the big rock is," I said.

"That's right. It lifted right up out of the water at the exact place where the Great Spirit disappeared."

"It's a good story," I said. "I'm not so sure the Indians don't have more of the real truth than we do."

She considered the idea a moment, and then nodded. "But they don't live the way we do, so we don't understand them. They used to scare my mother to death, but they never harmed us or any of our neighbors." She sat up and glanced at the sun, well over to the west now. "We'd better go, Matt. We'll be gossiped about enough now."

"Why?"

"For not going to church and being out all day together. Not that it would bother you. It wouldn't bother Ruth, either. But it does me. You'll say it shouldn't, but it does just the same. I came in for a lot of it when Artie Shafter was making an old maid out of me." She hugged her knees, her head tipped forward. "Then you came along and I see a lot of you. You can't help it, but you're the kind people just naturally talk about."

I got up and, reaching down, pulled her to her feet, and for a moment held her hands, my eyes searching hers. I said: "I don't know why I'm the kind that people talk about. I haven't done anything since I got here."

"You crossed old Will Rigdon the first time you met him," she said. "You were going after Artie Shafter if Jake Kelsey hadn't tripped you. And you live at the hotel with Ruth. You see?"

I turned toward my horse, not wanting to see. But I did. Janet didn't have to make it any plainer. I would be talked about if I had done nothing but live in the hotel with Ruth Hadley, and so, indirectly, I was making Janet the object of gossip simply by being with her. The more I thought about it, the more I resented it.

It was dusk by the time we rode through the gap, the irritation I had felt an hour before completely gone. Old Will Rigdon was sitting on his bench in front of

the store exactly as he had the day I came. Sarah Rigdon was with him, and she waved and Janet waved back. When we passed the hotel, I saw that Ruth was on the porch, her back against a post; but she didn't wave, and neither did Janet.

When I rode back from the Calvert place, I still had something of the feeling that had been with me all afternoon, as if, like the Great Spirit, I had been walking on the water. Ruth was still on the front porch. She called, "Come here when you put your horse away."

After I took care of my horse, I found Ruth, in exactly the same place I had left her, standing with her back arched, her round breasts crowding against her blouse.

"You're in love with Janet, aren't you?" she asked.

I didn't answer her question. I looked at her, utterly confused, not knowing what there was about her that attracted me, unless it was the animal-like virility she possessed. She was smiling. I'm sure she knew what she did to me, and it pleased her. She was playing with me just as she had with Linscott. Knowing that, I was still unable to walk off and leave her.

She laughed, and the sound grated like a file on metal. "Maybe you don't know how you feel about Janet, but I do, and I'm jealous." She reached out and caressed my cheek. "You've lived with the Spanish. So have I. They're a happy people because they never get all mixed up with 'don'ts' the way we do. They have a saying, you know, that a sin of the flesh is no sin at all."

I stood quite close to her. I wanted her and I hated her, and for the first time I understood why Janet felt toward her as she did. I said, "I'd better go see if Manuel needs any help with the horses."

As I walked around the house, I could feel the brittle tension that was in the air. A storm was close. Then I wished I had asked Janet to marry me. But I hadn't. I was still a free man. I knew what was coming. I had no power to prevent it and I knew the reason. I didn't want to.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MANUEL WASN'T IN THE BARN. His horse wasn't there, either. He must have gone to see his girl, who lived about three miles down the road. He often did on Sunday nights. If so, he wouldn't be back until midnight or later. Ruth had known, of course, and she was waiting on the front porch for me. Well, I thought irritably, she could go right on waiting. She was probably laughing at me.

So I lingered and smoked a pipe, and the western sky above the Wall grew dark and the stars appeared. But I was in no mood to appreciate beauty. I asked myself how a woman like Ruth could fasten herself so thoroughly in a man's mind. How was it possible to hate her and want her at the same time? I thought of my father. He, too, must have hated her. And in the end she had lost him.

Maybe she would always lose the men who wanted her. Perhaps she didn't care. Certainly that was true with George Linscott. But I had a feeling, from hints she had dropped occasionally, that my father was one man whose loss she regretted.

When I finished my pipe and walked back to the front porch, Ruth was gone. I was disappointed. I was like soft clay that she was fashioning into a mold of her making. Hesitating only a moment, I stepped into the parlor and called, "Ruth."

"In the kitchen," she answered.

I parted the drapes and went through them and across the dining room and opened the door into the kitchen. I stopped abruptly. She was taking a bath,

standing in a tub of hot water in the middle of the kitchen. Usually this was a Saturday night procedure, and, knowing it, I stayed out of the kitchen on Saturday nights. But today was Sunday.

She stood with her back to me, and now she half turned and looked over her shoulder, laughing as she pushed back a lock of hair that fell across her forehead. "Did you find Manuel?" she asked. She was mocking me, I think, and she certainly was not embarrassed in the slightest.

"No," I said, and backed through the door. I closed it, mentally cursing her, and went to my room.

I sat down and began to smoke. I tried to think of Janet, but I couldn't. I knew now that I had finally reached the point of decision. I had only been fooling myself when I had told Linscott I had quit the company. As long as I stayed here, I was, to all practical intent, working for the company. The only answer was to leave the valley. But I didn't want to do that. There might be some middle ground. Maybe I could find a job.

So I smoked and waited, knowing Ruth would come. She did, her hair brushed back and tied with a ribbon at the base of her neck. She was wearing a maroon robe, the cord knotted loosely around her waist. I was going to tell her I was quitting, but I had no chance. She lay down on the bed and stretched, relaxed.

"It's been good having you here, Matthew," she said. "I don't know how I'd have got along without you."

She knows I'm leaving, I thought. I wouldn't have to tell her. Then she raised herself up on an elbow and looked at me, half smiling. She said: "You're wonderful, Matthew. I wasn't so sure that first night I came to your room. I thought you'd kick me out. If you had, I'd have said to hell with you and sent you packing. But you didn't, and after a while it got to be a habit. Of course, what you didn't know was that I was so lonesome I was about crazy. I couldn't have stood it if you hadn't been

here this summer. I wouldn't even have tried. I wouldn't stay this winter, either."

So she didn't know! She crooked a finger at me, saying, "Come here, Matthew." Her voice broke, and I saw that she was crying. I got up and walked to the bed.

She reached up and took my hand and pulled me down beside her. She put her head on my shoulder. "I want to talk," she said. "Will you listen to me? What I'm trying to say is that you're like David. In another twenty years you'll be just like him. Wherever you are, people will look to you for advice. You'll be a leader, Matthew. It's written in the book."

For some reason I was speechless. Patrick Keenan's son could have no capacity for leadership, and I knew it. But she wasn't play acting with me.

"Talking seems to lighten my trouble," she said. "It's been heavy for a long time, Matthew. Maybe it goes back to the day my father was killed. I was little, then. We were in a caravan headed for Santa Fe. He was a trader and he'd decided to bring his family out here. I remember every minute of the trip, mostly because I hadn't seen him very often. Just between trips. He was tall and strong and he wore buckskins. I loved him, Matthew; I loved him so very much. My mother was just a woman, a common, ordinary woman. But there wasn't anything common or ordinary about my father."

She was silent, and I could feel her breathing. She was on her side, one leg pressing against me. Finally she went on: "Nothing much happened until we started across the desert. Everything would have been all right, I think, if we'd taken the long way, up the Arkansas and over Raton Pass, but my father was in a hurry, so we headed across the Jornada del Muerto. The Kiowas attacked us. We barely had time to corral. My mother held me down on the ground with her. She was scared to death, but my father wasn't. He crawled around behind the boxes and saddles and things they'd made into a barricade and gave orders. I remember the shooting

and the sound the arrows made when they hit something, a kind of *thwack,* and then they'd quiver for a moment.

"My father came to us once and told us not to worry, that we'd drive them off. He patted me and started off, then an arrow got him in the chest. My mother jumped up and ran toward him. Somebody pulled her down. She was screaming. I could hear her above all the shooting and the yelling of the Indians. I don't think my father lived a minute. She finally got to him and sat there holding his head in her lap. After the fight was over, they buried him. They drove every wagon and all the stock over his grave."

Ruth raised up and looked at me. "My mother was a religious woman, Matthew. We always went to church before we left Missouri. I've heard her tell over and over how beautiful Heaven was. After my father was killed, I asked her if he'd go to Heaven and she said yes, but she cried all the way to Santa Fe. Why, Matthew? I asked her, but she couldn't tell me. Nobody's ever answered that question."

"Nobody ever will," I said.

"No, of course not." She settled back again. "Well, my mother didn't want to stay in New Mexico, but she was afraid to go back, so we stayed. She had a little money, enough to last her until she died. After that I had to make my own living. That was about the time I met your father. You look like him, but if they could assay a man you'd turn out high grade, and he was never anything but country rock."

We lay that way for a time, and I wondered whether she was thinking of her father or of mine. But it was neither. She was thinking of me. She drew her head back, pressed her body against mine and, turning my face to hers, kissed me, and the storm that I felt coming when I left her to look for Manuel was upon us.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DAWN WAS NOT MORE THAN AN HOUR AWAY when I carried Ruth into her room and laid her on the bed. She still clung to me as she said sleepily: "Like father, like son. I knew you would be." I pulled back, thinking resentfully that she had thought so all the time, but that she had not been satisfied until she found out for sure. I left the room and shut the door behind me.

I knew now beyond all doubt what I must do. I had known earlier in the evening that I had reached the point of decision. Now it was more than a decision. *I was leaving.* If I stayed, it would happen again.

At that moment I felt as if I had been completely purged of my feeling for Ruth. I did not try to explain it to myself, but it was gone, burned out.

I gathered up a few things that were most important to me, including my father's knife and gun, and the little metal box, and all the time I was thinking of Calvert. The day would come when he would find out from someone the real reason I had gone to work for Ruth. I had to tell him myself. I had dodged the issues too long; I had been dishonest with Janet and her father and myself for too long.

I slipped out through the front of the house and walked around it to the barn. I lighted a lantern and saddled my horse. Suddenly I was aware that Manuel had come in and was holding a rifle on me. I called out, and I heard his quick words of apology.

"I did not know who it was, Señor Matt," he said.

"I am not taking anything that doesn't belong to me."

I held out my hand. "So long, Manuel. Take care of her."

"*Si.*" He gripped my hand, staring at me in the lantern light. "The talk, she is bad. They call me names because I work for her."

He had heard something tonight, I thought, something from his girl's parents, and I remembered old Will Rigdon saying, "We'll clear this valley of every grant man—" and young Will stopping him. And Ruth had always been under suspicion because she was the kind of woman she was.

"If you need help," I said, "come to me."

He nodded, and looked away, and I wondered if he would stay. But whether he did or not, I couldn't. It would be up to Linscott to send help to Ruth. I mounted, rode around the house, and saw the topmost part of the Wall touched by the first sunlight. I took the road to the Calvert lane and followed it to the house, fully aware that what happened in the next half-hour would shape the rest of my life.

I knew I would find Calvert in the barn milking. I saw that there was a light in the kitchen. Janet would be getting breakfast. I dismounted in front of the house, not wanting her to know I was here if her father said the wrong thing. I hurried toward the barn, and even before I reached the door I heard the musical *plink, plink* of milk striking the bottom of a bucket.

I called "Dave."

He apparently recognized my voice, for he called back: "Come in. You need a written invitation?"

I went on into the barn, aware of cow smells, of hay, of one of Calvert's briar pipes. They always smelled stronger than his meerschaum, or so it seemed to me. He was sitting on a one-legged stool, the bucket between his legs, the cow's tail caught between one knee and the bucket. I stopped under a lantern hanging from a wire that ran the full length of the barn behind the cows. He tipped his head, looking up at me.

"Whatever fetched you over this time of morning?" he asked.

I hunkered down in the litter behind the cow he was milking. I said: "I finally got to the place where I can't stand being a liar to the people who mean the most to me. I came here to ask for a job. For board and room, if that's all I'm worth. If you say no, I'm leaving the valley."

He took the pipe out of his mouth and put it into his shirt pocket. "I guess you'd better keep talking. I thought you and Ruth got along pretty well."

"We have. I've got to tell you something. You can run me out of here and call me a damned liar if you want to, but I'm not. I came here to the valley to—" I stopped, suddenly realizing I could not tell him about Ruth. He trusted her; perhaps he loved her. He had a right to know what she was, but he would have to find out from someone else. I hurried on: "This isn't easy to say, Dave. You see, Linscott hired me to look out for the company's interest if anything happened. He knew Ruth could use another man. That's why he told me to ask her for a job. Linscott was paying me company money, so I told Ruth I'd work for my board and room and whatever she wanted to pay me."

He went on milking until the foam was showing above the top of the bucket. He got up and I rose and stepped back. He set the bucket on a shelf near the door, picked up another one, and, going to the cow next to the one he had just milked, sat down again and at once I heard the sharp *plink, plink,* of the milk as his hands worked rhythmically at the teats. I could not see his face clearly in the lantern light, but I had a glimpse of it when he'd gone after the empty bucket. He looked as if I had struck him.

He was silent until he finished milking. He put the bucket down beside the other one, got out his pipe, and filled it again. He said slowly: "I can use a man to chop wood. There'll be potatoes to sack and haul to town."

He dug around in his pocket for a match, then he said: "I'll pay you thirty dollars a month and your meals. I can fix up a room for you out here in the barn. Is that agreeable?"

"Yes."

He struck the match and lighted his pipe, looking at me through the smoke, then he carefully broke the match and took the pipe out of his mouth. "Damn it, Matthew, I've liked you better than any man I ever worked with. What's past isn't as important as what's ahead. Why did you come here asking me for a job? If you can't stand the company you've been working for, why don't you just ride out and keep on riding?"

"I can't," I said. "Not unless you make me. Your fight is my fight. I don't know much about the legal side of it, but I do know the company's got you hipped. The way I see it, you were foolish not to take Linscott's offer. Then there wouldn't have been any question about your title."

"Never, Matthew," he said. "By God, never! They can shoot me, or haul me off to jail, but I'll never compromise with them."

"I knew you'd say that. That's why I'm here. Maybe the day will come when I can be of some help. All I know is that my sympathy is with you. I mean, that's the way I feel. Do you understand?"

I don't think he did. He tamped the tobacco down into the bowl of his pipe, staring at it, and I burst out: "It isn't money with me. Or a proposition of who owns the land. I've lived here in the valley for months and I tell you you're whipped. I just hope you aren't. Can't you understand that? Doesn't it make any sense at all?"

"You're talking words, Matthew."

"Oh, hell!" I said. "Listen, Dave. I lived on the grant. My father worked for Santone. He worshiped him. He always said that the world belonged to the strong and for me to stay on the side of the big fellow. That's why I asked Linscott for a job." I swallowed, for I had the

feeling that what I had been saying was still just words to Calvert. "What my father said was right, if I turn it around so it means something different. You're the big fellow."

He thought I was joking. He gave me a straight look and saw that I wasn't. "No, I'm not the big fellow. It's like the Lilliputians in *Gulliver's Travels.* They accomplished quite a bit when they worked together."

"No!" I shouted the word at him. "Dave, you're not a Lilliputian. That's what I'm trying to say. I don't want to live like my father did. Maybe I've grown up since I came to the valley. I guess Ruth's helped a little bit. And Janet." I looked away from him. I didn't want to talk about Janet. I was afraid even to think about her because I had a terrible suspicion I was a first-class bastard coming here this morning of all mornings. I hurried on, "But knowing you and working with you has done more for me than anything else. I told you I didn't want to live like my father did. I don't want to believe in the things he did, but a man's got to believe in something."

"And now you believe in something," he said gently. "Is that it?"

"Yes. I believe in what my father taught me, but not the way he meant it. All the time I've been trying to find out what a big man is. It isn't one like Pierre Santone, as my father thought. A big man is a free man, Dave. He's free from what's happened in the past. He's free from interference in the present. He's willing to fight for that freedom. And for a principle, if it's important enough for him."

I stopped because I ran out of breath. Calvert smiled, and I knew now he understood. I could not have stated my beliefs to any other man; I would not even have tried. I doubt that I could have stated them to myself, but Calvert had kept at me until I had, and I saw he was pleased.

"You know, Matthew," he said softly, "most men live

a lifetime without ever believing in anything, or at least knowing what they believed. You've been reaching for that a long time, haven't you?"

I nodded, not wanting to say anything more. Sooner or later I would have left the hotel, but I did not want Calvert, and most of all I didn't want Janet to know what had happened that had made me leave this morning. Perhaps Calvert did know, perhaps he had known from the first the kind of pressure I'd been living under.

He put a hand on my shoulder. "All right, Matthew, you've made some mistakes. We all have. God knows I have, even after I was married, and I'll never forgive myself for them."

I looked at the house, wondering if I understood what he was trying to tell me. Janet was over there, getting breakfast and probably wondering why her father hadn't come in with the milk. I said slowly: "I love Janet, Dave, but I didn't think it was time to tell her. I thought, if I worked here and waited, maybe I'd have a chance—"

"What kind of chance do you want?" he asked. "You get into the house, and tell her how you feel about her. You've waited too long, boy, far too long."

I went, knowing that he trusted me, that he believed in me regardless of the mistakes I had made. I crossed the barnyard to the back door, all arms and legs, as awkward as a kid on his first date, not knowing what I would say or how I would say it.

I knocked at the kitchen door, and Janet opened it. She stepped back, surprised. She was wearing an old house dress, and she was acutely aware of it just as she was of her frowzy hair. A hand went up to feel her hair as she said, plainly embarrassed, "I didn't expect you, Matt."

I shut the door and leaned against it. I said, "Will you marry me?" I saw that she was shocked, for of all the things I could have asked or said she didn't expect a proposal. I guess I seemed comical, red-faced, and

ganglingly awkward.

She said: "Matt, I'm supposed to say this is unexpected, and it is. Of course I'll marry you."

Her prompt, matter-of-fact answer jolted me. "This isn't very romantic, is it?" I asked, and took her into my arms, confidence coming back to me now that I had her answer. I said: "I left out one important item. I love you."

"You've been slow, Matt," she whispered. "I wondered if you would ever feel the way I do. It sounds crazy, but it was that way with me from the first, even that first evening I saw you, in front of the hotel."

I finally got around to kissing her, a longer kiss than either of us realized, for suddenly smoke seemed to be all around us. "My bacon!" she cried, and ran to the stove.

That afternoon Manuel brought the rest of my things over from the hotel, and I knew that Ruth would not expect me back.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE FIRST HOME I'd ever had was with David Calvert and Janet. I mean, a home in the best sense of the word, in the way a homeless man dreams about. This was different from the jacal hut in which I had lived with Chico and his folks, from the dobe house I had shared with my father on the grant, from the boarding school in Denver; most of all, it was different from Ruth Hadley's hotel.

As the weeks passed, I looked back upon the time I had spent in the hotel with increasing distaste. There had been a constant strain which I had not fully real-

ized, a strain that had gradually mounted until it broke in the only way it could. Now it was behind me and I had no regret, for I was finally free from the hold Ruth had had upon me. I loved Janet all the more because she did not question me about Ruth.

Calvert did not fix a room in the barn for me as he had said he would. Instead, Janet insisted that I have the guest bedroom upstairs which was directly across the hall from her smaller room. Calvert slept downstairs. He accepted Janet's decision with the remark: "The best is none too good for my future son-in-law. That it?"

Janet answered, "That's exactly it."

Calvert, winking at me, said: "You're a lucky man, Matthew. You'll be still luckier if you can keep her feeling that way."

Janet said, "Well, I expect him to work at it."

Actually I could have slept in the barn, for there was a harness room which originally had been built for a hired hand. As far as the room I had was concerned, it didn't make much difference either way, because I spent very little time in it. I slept there, not many hours a night, either, for we were crowded by fall work from the day I moved in: threshing; a big potato crop to dig and sack and haul to San Marino; beef cattle to bring down from the high country beyond the Wall; pasture fences to fix; wood to cut. The last, I soon learned, was one of the big jobs that faced Calvert every year, because he cut and hauled Ruth's wood as well as his own.

Nothing more was said about wages. Calvert put it very simply one evening as we sat in front of the fireplace. "You said you believed in our side of this trouble with the company. You think we're whipped, but you still believe in it. So, if there is going to be a fight, you're in it up to your neck along with me and everybody else in the valley."

"I expect to be," I said, a little irritated because he seemed to be assuming that I didn't intend to be in it

up to my neck.

But he was too preoccupied to sense the irritation on my part. He was pulling on his pipe and staring at the fire, and I doubt that he even heard what I said. He went on, "If you're going to do your share of the work and take your share of the risks, you'll get half of the profits." He paused and looked at me. "If there are any profits."

"That isn't fair," I said. "The farm is yours. I just can't move in and—"

"Fair or not, it's going to be that way." He tamped the tobacco down into the bowl of his meerschaum, adding, "Unless you're planning to take Janet away and start out on your own. I wouldn't blame you if you did. She'd go with you, all right, but I hope you won't, Matthew. She's all I've got."

"No, I wouldn't do that," I said.

But that was exactly what I would have preferred to do. I had enough money to make a start somewhere else where trouble and violence and heartbreak were not staring us in the face. Even if the trouble with the company was resolved, I didn't favor the idea of falling into a comfortable living because I was marrying Janet. But I couldn't have taken Janet away from the valley.

The room Janet gave me was by far the best living quarters I'd ever had. One window looked out upon the river and up the valley as far as I could see; the other faced the Wall, the gap directly west of the house. There were three rag rugs on the floor, and the wallpaper was the color of dark wine lightened by a series of silver chains that ran from ceiling to the floor.

The room was better furnished than either Janet's or Calvert's, with a heavy walnut bedstead, a counterpane of delicate white lace that Janet's mother, Calvert said, had prized highly when she was first married, a marble-topped dresser, a white bowl and pitcher, a rocking chair with a cushion on the seat, and a small walnut table at the head of the bed, the base of its legs

metal claws that clutched clear glass balls.

To me it all was sheer luxury, luxury that represented fifteen years of David Calvert's life, of his hard work. The counterpane may not have been fitting for a man's room, but it was the nicest thing Janet could think of. To me that was important.

So we lived those weeks out until Indian summer slipped into the past; the golden, shivering aspen leaves dropped away and left the tree limbs bare for winter, and the nights laid white frost on the ground while the fringe of snow on the peaks behind the Wall gradually slipped closer to the valley.

Those weeks pressed upon me the knowledge that I had not solved all my problems by leaving the hotel, that there were several facets to this situation, and that they were tied closely together. This fact was fully demonstrated the day I hauled the last wagonload of potatoes to town. I suppose Donahue saw me from the office of the grant company. At least he was waiting for me when I drove off the ramp behind the warehouse.

"Staying in town tonight, Matthew?" he asked.

"Sure. Too far to go back tonight."

"Have supper with me?"

"Glad to," I answered.

"Seven," he said, and spun on his heel and walked away.

After I put the team away, I had time to buy a diamond ring for Janet, something I should have done before but had postponed because of the ceaseless pressure of fall work. I also bought some things for myself: a black broadcloth suit, the first one I had ever owned; a gold watch and chain, a black hat, and a white shirt and string tie. I took the packages to my room, and by the time I washed up and returned to the lobby Donahue was waiting for me.

After we finished eating and I was filling my pipe, I asked, "You know I'm marrying Janet Calvert?"

"Yeah, I heard. Remember the time you asked Lin-

scott for a job and later I told you Calvert was the most persuasive man I had ever met?" I nodded, and he went on, "The reason is, he believes in his side of the ruckus. Hell, I don't believe in nothing. I just work for wages. Linscott lets on he's a believer, but when it comes down to cases he's working for wages the same as the rest of us."

"Dave's belief is contagious," I said. "You'd find that out if you were around him every day."

"Not me. It's different with you, being in love with Janet." Donahue took a match out of his pocket and put it into his mouth. "What happened between you and Ruth?"

"Ask her."

"I'm asking you."

I started to light my pipe, then shoved it back into my pocket. "How long are we going to be friends, Chip?"

"Till spring. Won't be no trouble till then."

"You start pushing me," I said, "and it won't wait till spring."

He chewed his match awhile, his eyes on me. They might have been pieces of slate for all the expression that was in them. I wondered, as I had so many times, if the thoughts that went on back of those eyes were different from the thoughts that the rest of us had who worked for a living.

"How much of old Pat is in you?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Ever kill a man?"

"No."

"You will," he said. "In less than six months, too. Want to bet?"

"No."

"But it won't be me. Don't let them send a boy to do a man's job."

"Then don't fix it so I've got to try."

He grinned with one side of his mouth as he always did. "You've got some of Pat in you, all right." He

canted his chair back against the wall. "I'm not trying to push you, Matthew, but I'll tell you something. I'm worried about Ruth. I don't know why I should lose any sleep over a bitch like her, but I do. I felt better when you were staying at the hotel. Manuel won't do no good. He'll run like a rabbit."

"Have Linscott bring her into town."

"He won't do it. He needs somebody up there." Donahue rose and came around the table. "Matthew, old Pat would never have got his tail in a crack like you have. He'd have played it solid with the company right from the word go. He'd have got everything out of Ruth he could, and by God he'd have made her like it! If anybody was fool enough to lay a hand on her, he'd have cut their guts out."

"I guess he would," I said, and got up.

We walked into the lobby. "You're on the other side now," Donahue said, "but keep an eye on her anyhow. Give her my regards when you see her, if you like to hear her cuss."

I would not see her, I told myself as I went up the stairs. I didn't want to, and yet I was afraid I would. She had pride, too much pride to take my leaving with good grace. She would retaliate some way, somehow, and at a time when I would not be expecting it.

I did not get home the next night until long after dark. Because Janet had gone to bed, I had no chance to give the ring to her that night. The following day was Sunday. I put on my new clothes and waited in the parlor with Calvert. Presently Janet came down the stairs wearing a white organdie dress, a Panama hat with a white ostrich plume, and carrying a large foulard fan.

She looked at me in surprise. "Why, Matt, I didn't know I was marrying such a handsome man."

"Just a dude," I said, and, crossing the room to her, slipped the ring on the third finger of her left hand.

She knew I was going to get her a ring, but she didn't

expect it at that particular moment. She stared at it, blinking as she struggled with her emotions, and all she could say was, "It's beautiful, Matt; just beautiful."

Calvert bowed his head. He said solemnly, "I salaam three times to the east in honor of the Duke of Wales and the Duchess of the Hottentots."

"You don't even know who the Hottentots are," Janet said, holding her hand up so that the morning sun was glorified in the diamond.

"No," he admitted, "but the women wear brass rings in their ears. Where are yours?"

"Oh, I could beat you," Janet said.

David put his hands in front of his eyes. "Such grandeur I never thought I would see in this house. What is that quotation about Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these?"

"I'm going to take my clothes off," Janet said. "Every stitch except my hat, and I'll go to church that way and you'll be—"

"No, you'd better go like this." Calvert looked at her gravely and shook his head. "Honey, do you know how beautiful you are, and how much you resemble your mother?"

Suddenly we were all close to tears.

"If you two will wait a moment," Calvert said, "I'll clean up and go to church with you."

He went into his bedroom. Janet said, "Matt, that's the first time since Mamma died that he's said anything about going to church."

We left the house a few minutes later, and walked down the lane in the bright morning sunlight. Janet was between me and her father, her arms through ours, and never in all my life had I been so happy as I was at that moment.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

GETTING MARRIED, I discovered, was much more complicated than I had supposed. For one thing, Janet must have clothes, so for days the house seemed filled with women and patterns and cloth. Calvert and I had to come in through the kitchen and shout because we didn't know what state of undress we would find in the parlor.

Young Will Rigdon grumbled about how Janet was mighty uppity all of a sudden, not liking any of the cloth he had in the store. If she was going to be so dad-gummed hard to satisfy, she could go to San Marino. That was exactly what she and Sarah Rigdon did. They stayed three days and came back with the buggy loaded with packages.

"No sense making it so complicated," I grumbled to Calvert.

"There is to women," he said. "Don't try to understand it, Matthew. Just put up with it."

I had no choice. First we must have an engagement party. Everybody in the valley would be there—everybody but Ruth, of course. "Lots of presents," Calvert said. "Just like an army coming in and looting the valley."

A few days after the party we'd get married. We had to wait a decent interval, Janet said. Calvert told us: "You're going to Denver right after you're married. That's my wedding present. You'll stay at the Windsor Hotel and you'll see all the big mucky-mucks, including Horace Tabor, and you'll have a honeymoon to tell your kids about."

Janet was often forthright to a degree that astonished me. She was now. She said, "This is my wedding, and it seems to me I have the right to decide a few things."

"Why, sure," Calvert said, surprised.

"All right, then. We're not going traipsing off to Denver the night we're married. We're staying right here in this house. And I won't have a lot of people here for the wedding. I don't care what they think. I'm not going to have them."

"Any way you want it, honey," Calvert said. "You can have your trip to Denver whenever you're ready for it."

Whatever Janet wanted was all right with me, although the engagement party was something I could have done without. She planned it for a Saturday night. I dreaded the day, and when it came it was a nightmare, and I think it was little better for Calvert.

We had no pressing work, now that the potatoes were hauled to town, so we were content to do odd jobs around the barn, or just sit and smoke, although it was too cold to sit still for more than a few minutes at a time. Calvert always liked to talk, but on this day he seemed to enjoy it more than ever. Perhaps it wasn't a question of enjoyment, but rather a means of taking his mind off the occasion that the day represented. Sometimes he would stop what he was doing and just look at me, but not critically, or with hostility. I suppose he was questioning the future, as any father would whose daughter was getting married. He might very well wonder if I was man enough to take care of Janet, or if I would make her happy. I am sure, too, that the burden of uncertainty was a heavier load upon him than either Janet or I realized.

Neither of us knew what was going on in the house. Mrs. Kelsey came at dawn and said testily there was nothing worse than having a couple of men underfoot at the wrong time. She reminded me of a blade of grass that was not quite strong enough to support itself, and now had turned yellow with the first frosts of middle

age upon her. If she were trying to instruct Janet in the duties of wife to husband, I could only hope that Janet was temporarily deaf.

Sarah Rigdon came over soon after Mrs. Kelsey arrived, and stayed all day. Because she was younger than Janet, and had never been married, she could not speak with the voice of experience. But I'm sure she spoke anyway, and she had a way of looking out of the corners of her eyes at me as if there were something both attractive and evil about me.

Calvert and I did manage to get into the kitchen long enough to eat our meals before we were shoved outside and the door was slammed on our backs. Other women came and went. Presents were piled up on the dining-room table. There was always a cake in the oven. Several times Mrs. Kelsey came to the back and screamed for more wood. Calvert always said: "I'll take care of it. Best thing for you is to stay away from that passel of womenfolks."

When we returned to the sanctity of the barn after a meal, we'd look at each other and sigh. "Do girls always have these engagement parties?" I asked.

"It's a custom in the valley," he answered. "And maybe it's a good thing. Janet's got a lot of common sense in that pretty head of hers. She'll be dog-tired tonight, but she'll be over it by the time you get married next week. Most girls think they've got to have a big party *and* a big wedding."

We worked in the harness room for a time, patching up odds and ends that Calvert had neglected all summer. For some reason he got off on the grant, perhaps for want of something else to talk about, but mostly, I think, because it was always in his mind. He had lived close to it for so long that he seldom thought about anything else.

"Over there in the shed back of the barn is the covered wagon I came here in with Janet, when she was little, and her mother," Calvert said. "It's still a good

wagon. If they throw me off this land, I'll load up what I can haul and start off. I don't know where I'll go, but it'll be somewhere that has had nothing to do with any of these Mexican grants." He threw his hammer down. "But, damn it, I hadn't heard of them when I came here. Neither had the Rigdons. Or the Kelseys. Who can you believe if the men who work for the United States Land Office are wrong? And what is a government's word worth if it gives you a patent to the land you live on, and then some other department of that same government comes along and says no, the land belongs to a big corporation that's largely owned by European capitalists and you can either get off or buy it a second time?"

He began walking around, overcome by the storm of emotion that had taken hold of him. "Some of the settlers depended on squatter's rights. I didn't. Neither did old Will Rigdon or Jake Kelsey. We homesteaded or pre-empted our places and we were given patents. I wonder if it ever occurred to Linscott that if the patent I hold is not valid, no one can be sure that the patent the company has is any better?"

"It probably has," I said, "but what I can't figure out is why Linscott offered to sell to you for a dollar an acre."

"To get me to shut up," he said somberly. "But I couldn't take it. I've got to see justice done for the Rigdons and Kelseys and the rest as well as me." He shook his head as if he were utterly bewildered. "We vote in this country. We're citizens with a trial by jury and all the other rights that go with it, and still this is happening to us. It's confiscation. You can't make anything else out of it. You say we're whipped, Matthew, but how can we be, if there is any justice in a country that promises justice to everyone?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess I know the questions better than the answers."

"We all do. Well, if it comes to a fight, we'll give them

one. We have a system of communication worked out that can call two hundred men here within twenty-four hours."

"Dave, there's other land outside the valley," I said, "but when a man loses his life he doesn't have another one."

"I've thought about that a great deal," he said. "I don't believe I'm half cracked like old Will who sits in front of the store and draws a bead on everybody who rides by. I don't believe in kid antics like stealing the wheels off Linscott's buggy either. I guess it boils down to how much you believe in certain principles, maybe enough to die for them. We'll have to make that decision one of these days."

"Not till spring, according to Donahue," I said. "I saw him in town the other day."

"Till spring," he said thoughtfully, as if mentally measuring the time he had yet to live. "Well, I guess I'd better milk. You go in and slick up. Chances are they'll have supper early so they can clean up the dishes." He put his big capable hands on my shoulders and looked up at me. "I didn't aim to talk like this today. It just popped out, but there is one thing I want to say. You're the right man for Janet, Matthew. I'm sure of it."

He whirled and walked away. I turned the collar of my sheepskin up around my neck and crossed the yard to the back door of the house. The ground had been frozen all day, and now the snow was coming down again in fat flakes and was sticking. I shivered, not because I was cold, but because I was afraid. I was not sure I could live up to what David Calvert expected of a son-in-law.

The instant I stepped through the door, Mrs. Kelsey said: "Sit down and eat your supper. I wish Dave would come in and eat so we could get the kitchen cleaned up."

"Has Janet had supper?"

"Of course not. She couldn't eat tonight. None of us could. You're just like a man." She sniffed, her thin jutting chin reaching upward toward the tip of her nose. "Women aren't that way. There's more important things in this world than filling our bellies."

I ate because I had to. It was that, or stand up to Mrs. Kelsey, and I couldn't do that. Not tonight. Cold meat, cold beans, cold biscuits, and lukewarm coffee. I escaped as soon as I could. Girls were everywhere, fluttering around the house as senselessly as a flock of moths against the chimney of a lighted lamp. All were in party dresses, their hair done up in curls, some of which were scorched because the curlers had been too hot. That, to my way of thinking, was the height of stupidity.

I got to the top of the stairs, and when I reached the landing I saw that the door to Janet's room was closed. Giggles were coming from the other side, some of them Janet's. I preferred her alone. I went into my room and shut the door, wondering why a man must go through this to gain a wife, and for the first time questioning whether Janet was worth it.

I shaved in cold water, put on my store suit, slicked down my hair, and then sat on the edge of the bed, discovering I was as thoroughly uncomfortable as I had ever been in my life. I didn't move until someone knocked on my door, and Sarah Rigdon called, "Aren't you ready yet, Matt?"

"Sure," I said, and opened the door.

She backed away, giving me an unsettling look. She said, "Janet's downstairs and people are coming."

I went downstairs. The presents had been cleared off the dining table and a number of cakes with white icing, pink icing, and chocolate icing had been placed there. A big cut-glass punch bowl was in the middle of the table surrounded by glasses: tall glasses, short glasses, and round fat glasses with handles. They must have been gathered from one end of the valley to the other.

Calvert was in the front room, as dressed up and uncomfortable as I was. He saw me and grinned, making an inclusive gesture at the room. Because at this time of year there were no flowers, Janet and whoever had helped her had used pine boughs instead. I felt as if I had been transported into a forest that was filled with the deep dark shadows of winter.

"Hope nobody drops a lighted match," Calvert grumbled.

"Yeah." I put a finger inside my collar and tugged.

I heard Janet laugh behind me. "Uncomfortable?" she asked.

I turned and saw her. After that there was never a doubt in my mind about whether she was worth it. She had always been pretty to me. Now she was beautiful. She was wearing a pink dress with a wide blue ribbon around her waist, and she had a string of pearls around her neck; but it was her hair that held my eyes, brighter than I had ever seen it, every curl perfect. Whoever had fixed her hair had been careful that the curler had not been too hot. Both cheeks were bright with color. I thought it was the excitement of the occasion, and it was not until later that I learned that girls actually sat in front of their mirrors and pinched their cheeks to achieve the color they considered becoming.

"You're beautiful, Miss Calvert," I said.

She curtsied, smiling, and the eagerness and sweetness of expression which I loved were in her face again. "You are not only handsome, Mr. Keenan," she said, "but you will be the tallest man here. In fact, I believe you're the tallest man in the world."

We stood side by side in front of the fireplace, very straight and as dignified as we could be, and shook hands with people as they moved past. They wished us good luck and hoped that all our troubles would be little ones. Some of the women cried over Janet, and the men gave me the wink. Only Alex Kelsey stood back, his eyes on Janet as if hypnotized, but when he did look

at me I knew that he hated me.

The nightmare went on and on, without end. We ate cake and drank punch; we tried to talk, but if Janet had not stayed beside me I don't believe I could have stood it. She had, like her father, the rare capacity to give strength to those around her.

Once Calvert drew Jake Kelsey aside, and I heard him say in a low tone: "You'd better take Alex home. He's been drinking."

"He wouldn't go without trouble," Jake muttered. "You know how he's always felt about Janet."

Then the climax of the nightmare came, in the melodramatic fashion that only Ruth Hadley could have arranged with such perfection. She didn't knock. She just opened the door, came in, stamped snow from her boots, and shut the door behind her.

Calvert swore and started pushing through the crowd toward Ruth. She was wearing a long coat, and had a cap pulled down over her ears. She was white with snow when she first came in. Her eyes were on me for a moment, then on Janet, who had stiffened and taken hold of my arm, and finally she looked at Calvert. Before she came in, there had been a great clatter of talk and laughter. Now there was absolute silence until Ruth laughed.

"Stand where you are, Dave," Ruth said. "You wouldn't throw out even the uninvited guest. Janet knew what she was doing when she overlooked me. I could take Matt Keenan away from her just by walking through the room. But that's not important. I think it is much more important for all of you to know that Matt Keenan was a company man when he began working for me."

Calvert started toward her again, but Alex Kelsey got in his way. "How would a floozy like you know anything about that?" he demanded.

She looked at him, all the deviltry that was in her dancing in her eyes. "A floozy like me," she repeated.

"Why, you don't know what the word means. You walk like a man, but you aren't one. Shall I tell them how I know?"

She laughed again, and I had the feeling that she was completely at ease, and enjoying herself. She was play acting, and she derived a strange pleasure from it just as she derived pleasure from playing with Linscott. "I guess Alex doesn't want me to tell how I know about him, but I'll tell you good neighbors how I know about Matt Keenan. I work for the company, too. That's why Linscott sent Matt up here to work for me. Linscott thought I would need help telling him what you folks were doing." She lifted a hand to me and Janet, making a motion that was man-like in its directness. "Good luck, sweethearts," she said, and whirled and went out.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ALEX KELSEY hadn't moved after Ruth had spoken to him, but now he started toward me, his big face ugly. "You son of a bitch! You ain't fit for Janet. I'm going to beat hell out of you."

Several men blocked him off, one of them shouting, "Outside, Alex!"

I yanked off my coat, calling, "All right, Kelsey, outside!"

Janet clung to me, crying out: "Don't go, Matt! He'll kill you! No one has ever beaten him. Not ever."

I jerked away from her. Young Kelsey was already through the door. I followed, the rest of the men streaming after us like schoolboys when someone yells, "Fight!"

The snow had stopped coming down, but there were

three inches on the frozen ground, enough to make footing slippery. Overhead the clouds were breaking away so that the full moon gave a bright glow upon the snow except when a cloud momentarily shadowed it. The door of the house remained open, the women huddled there, Janet in front, while lamplight spilled past them.

The men formed a ring around us, sadistic animals hungering for blood. A moment before they had been shaking my hand and wishing me well; now the false veneer of civilization was gone and they were yelling to Kelsey: "Kick his guts out!" "Make him wish he'd never heard of the company," and "Bust him up!"

For a moment Kelsey stood motionless, facing me, his big fists cocked, a finger of light from the house falling on his face. He was a full head shorter than I was, but he was heavier and certainly stronger. More than that, he was spoiling for a fight. He had the crowd behind him; he was their champion. I was a grant man.

Then he drove at me, and I heard young Will Rigdon yell, "Fight him fair, Alex!" I was almost alone. In all this crowd, only David Calvert and maybe Rigdon were on my side.

I met him head-on, and we traded blows, the first advantage with me because my arms were longer. I kept him back on his heels, his punches a little short, or doing no great damage, and all the time I was getting my right through to his face. Though I cut his lip, started a stream of blood from his nose, and rocked his head from side to side, I had the feeling that I wasn't really hurting him. He was built like an oak post, and I might just as well have been hitting one.

I had never been much of a fighter until I was hurt, and he hurt me before the fight was three minutes old. He pressed harder, taking the best I could give him, and then he caught me with a roundhouse right that knocked me flat into the snow.

I heard Janet's scream, which seemed to pierce the

yelling of the men and the ringing in my head. I rolled through the snow and scrambled on my hands and knees until I got to my feet. If Kelsey had got to me, he would have killed me, or maimed me for life. That was what he tried to do, but he slipped and fell on his face.

From that moment on there was no decency, no restraint; there were no rules. Now I called upon everything of my father that was in me. I fought like an animal, by instinct instead of by thought.

I dropped on top of Kelsey, my knees driving into the small of his back; I got him by the hair and battered his face against the frozen ground. He was a twisting, writhing brute, kicking up the snow so that it whirled around us in a white fog. Unable to get me off his back, he reared up and fell over sideways. I got clear and tried to scramble away from him, but he reached out and caught my ankle and I fell.

I sprawled on my back. As he leaped at me, I brought my feet up and straightened my knees, getting him on the shoulders with both boots. Still he fell partly on me, frantically grabbing at me with both hands like a man who finds himself in deep water and can't swim. We floundered around in the snow, neither of us able to get a good grip on the other, and finally he slid off me and we got to our feet.

We faced each other, breathing hard, and now I was hardly conscious of the yells of the men. A warning bell was ringing in the back of my mind. Kelsey was too much for me. I had given him everything I had; I had hit him with my fists and boots and I'd driven my knees into the small of his back, and still he came on.

This time he got hold of me. I tried to backtrack, but the snow under my feet was packed and slick, and for a precious second I was straining to move, but actually floundering around off balance. He got his left arm around me and squeezed.

I hit him in the ribs, on one side and then the other, and he let me swing, making no effort to stop me. He

started hammering me in the side with his right fist, and I felt as if I were caving in. I got my right hand against his face and shoved, slowly forcing it back, but all the time he was hitting me in the left side.

I jerked my hand away from his face. His head snapped forward as my left came up flush against his chin. I heard his teeth snap together, his grip on my waist slackened, and I jumped back, free from his encircling arm. He began to wilt. I moved forward, hitting him on one side of the head and then the other.

Those last punches were like the final blows of an ax against a tree already beginning to topple. He was down in the snow then, not unconscious but with the fight beaten out of him. I was not much better off than he was, but I would have fallen on him and kept hitting him if young Will Rigdon and Calvert hadn't grabbed my arms, Calvert saying, "He's whipped, Matthew."

I swayed there for a moment and felt blood dripping from a cut over my left eye. I don't know when he had hit me in the face hard enough to open a cut, but he had. I wiped at it, smearing the blood; then I saw Jake Kelsey in the crowd. All the men were just standing there, looking at me as if they didn't believe it had actually happened.

"I'll kill him, Kelsey," I said. "I'll finish him." I was still blind with fury.

They came to life, then. Kelsey said, "No, you've done enough."

And somebody else said: "We'd better get him home, Jake. I've got my wagon."

Calvert and Rigdon led me inside. Everything was fuzzy for a while, but the women were milling around and some of them were crying and all of them were blaming Ruth. Janet seemed to have more sense than anyone else. She said: "Bring him into the kitchen. I've got hot water."

Then I saw Mrs. Kelsey, who was fluttering around and wanting to know how bad Alex was hurt. I yelled

at her: "Get out of here, you old biddy! Go take care of him."

I didn't see her any more. I was sitting in a kitchen chair trying to hold on to the table. I felt my hand slipping, and I heard Janet cry, "Catch him, Daddy!" and I had the impression I was falling head over heels into a dark well.

When I came out of it, I was in my bed upstairs stripped to the waist, and old Will Rigdon was feeling my side. He knew more of doctoring than anyone in the valley, and I had heard that no one sent to San Marino for a physician unless there was an emergency. The thought occurred to me that people spoke of the old man as if he were half cracked, and in many ways he acted like it; still, they turned to him when they needed him.

Young Will and Calvert were standing behind old Will; I looked around and saw Janet at the head of my bed and Sarah Rigdon a few feet on the other side of her.

Janet whispered, "Matt."

I said, "I'm all right."

Old Will stepped back and nodded. "I think he is. The marks on his face don't mean nothing, but he took a hell of a beating when Alex was hugging him with one arm and hitting him with the other. It's my guess he's got some busted ribs. You're going to have to take it easy for a spell, Keenan."

Calvert said: "Sure, Matthew. You stay right there in bed."

"Let's get along home," old Will said. "Sure sorry about your party, Janet."

No one said anything for a while. They were looking at each other uneasily, as if there was something that had to be said and none of them wanted to. Then young Will came up to the side of the bed. He cleared his throat. "Keenan, I'm ashamed of what happened tonight. Dave says it's true you came to the valley to work

for the company, but that ain't neither here nor there. If Dave says we can count on you from now on, why we'll sure do it. Only thing is, some of the folks won't see it that way. Maybe you'll have more trouble."

"Then it'll be with a gun," I said. "I'm not going to take another beating."

"You won't have to," young Will said, smiling a little. "It was Alex who got the beating. Nobody else is going to ask for one. What I was thinking about was how folks are gonna act. Just not be friendly."

Both the Rigdon men started toward the door. Sarah said, "Goodbye, Matt." She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. It was an impulsive action, I'm sure, and something she would never have done under any other circumstances. "It was such a nice party until that happened."

Janet said: "I'll wrap up a hot iron and bring it to you. Your bed's going to be awful cold before morning."

She went down the stairs with the Rigdons, but Calvert stood beside the bed, looking at me. I had never seen as much misery in his face as there was at that moment. He asked: "Was it true, Matthew? What Ruth said about her working for the company?"

"Yes. That's why Linscott sent me up here. I was supposed to look out for Ruth, to protect her if anything happened."

"Why didn't you tell me that morning you left the hotel?"

"I started to," I said, "but I couldn't. I knew you ought to know, but I couldn't be the one to tell you."

He turned and walked to the window and stood staring out into the darkness. Presently he said: "I've been very fond of Ruth. She knows how to talk to a man. Not many women do. I had planned to ask her to marry me after you and Janet were married. She knew that, but still she had to come here tonight. I guess it was a good thing it happened. She kept me from making a fool of myself by asking her to marry me."

Janet came in with the hot iron. He left the room, saying nothing more, his face gray and drawn. He must have been thinking that Ruth had done a perfect job of fooling him. Though I knew how she felt about him, I would never tell him. It was far better this way, I thought. Perhaps Ruth would leave the valley. I hoped she would.

Janet slipped the hot iron under the covers and then, still wearing her party dress, knelt beside the bed. She asked, "Can you forgive me, Matt, for bringing this on you?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "You didn't bring it on."

"I did, sort of. I knew Ruth Hadley would do something like that, and I knew how jealous Alex was. He quit asking me for dates because he was afraid of Artie, but you weren't, and that made Alex hate you more than ever." She swallowed. "Matt, I didn't have to have the party. That's what hurts. We could have just got married. I knew all the time that was the way you wanted it."

I hurt in more places than I ever had in my life. Kelsey must have hit me harder than I had thought. My side was the worst. Even lying on my back, I found it hard to breathe. I didn't feel like making love or saying pretty things, but I knew I had to try.

I put my hand on her yellow hair and wound a curl around my forefinger. She was watching me intently, as if all our future depended on what I said. "Did I tell you that you have pretty hair?" I asked. But she didn't smile. She just kept looking at me, and then I said: "Don't worry about it. I'm sorry the party turned out this way, but I'm more sorry we won't be able to get married as soon as we'd planned."

She did smile then, and I knew that was what she had wanted to hear. "I'm sorry, too, more sorry than I can say." She leaned forward and kissed me lightly on the lips.

Hurting as much as I did, I didn't really believe the wedding would have to be postponed for more than a few days. But I was wrong. It took me nearly a month to get over that fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I WAS IN BED for a week, although I was fretful the last four days. A waste of time, I grumbled, but Janet insisted she was going to get Doc Van Dine to come up from San Marino if I didn't stay in bed, and that, I said peevishly, would be a stupid waste of money.

"All right, then stay in bed like I want you to," she said. "Old Will says that if you've got some broken ribs, the only way to get them to heal is to remain quiet. If the ribs aren't broken, the muscles have got to heal, so you still have to stay quiet."

If I kept on arguing, she would kiss me until I quit, and then claim I was just trying to get a kiss out of the wrangle and why didn't I come right out and ask for it? I floundered when I tried to answer that, and she'd walk out of the room with a triumphant wiggle to her trim neat hips.

The weather turned warm and the snow went off the ground. My room was comfortable, especially in the afternoon with the sun upon it, and Sarah Rigdon sat with me then so that Janet could get some sleep. She stayed up all night in spite of anything I could say, and Calvert was with me through the mornings and evenings. It wasn't until after I was up and around that they told me old Will had said I would be a goner if I got pneumonia. That was why they kept hot irons in my bed and watched over me as if I were actually sick.

I had never liked Sarah Rigdon, but I changed my mind during the week I was in bed. Her mother had been dead for several years, and I suppose Sarah subscribed to Mrs. Kelsey's belief that marriage was a legalized form of sin, and that a woman was born to suffer so her husband's appetite could be satisfied.

Along with that notion, Sarah had a morbid fear of being an old maid. She was a plain-faced girl who did not have many dates, and since there were few eligible men in the valley she had some grounds for her fear. Because she was Janet's best friend, I suppose it was natural that she would look upon me with a mixture of admiration and alarm.

While Janet slept during the day, Sarah did the housework in the morning and stayed with me in the afternoon. I pitied her but I liked her, and I think she liked me. She was shy, and often found it hard to talk, but she would listen to me for a while if I'd tell her about my boyhood on the Santone Grant. She would, for a short time at least, talk about how it had been when her grandfather and father had first come to the valley, and how neither of them had even heard of the Grant Company until long after they had patented their quarter-section.

"That's what's the matter with Grandpa," she said sadly. "He's kind of crazy, and everybody knows it but him. He thinks if he sits in front of the store with his rifle and takes a bead on strangers like he did with you, he'll run all the grant men out of the valley. Sometimes he's worse than others, especially when he hears people talk about it and gets excited, but when there's a burying he handles it, and when somebody gets hurt, like you did, he's the one who helps out."

I thought about it a lot that week because I didn't have anything to do but lie on my back and think. I don't know that I proved a single thing to myself about old Will unless it was that we'd all be better off if we had some of his craziness. Then I wondered about Cal-

vert. His neighbors would have said he was the sanest man in the valley, but Linscott would claim any man was crazy who turned down the deal Calvert had been offered.

After a week in bed, I told Janet I'd had enough. I'd ride to town and see Doc Van Dine, but she said she'd let me up if I'd just lie around. Then she added tartly: "It's time I was getting Sarah out of here anyhow. She's in love with you."

I laughed at that. "You're dreaming," I said. Then I wondered if Janet was right, and I wound up deciding that made me crazier than old Will.

I did ride into town early in December and let the doctor look me over. "Nothing to keep you from going ahead and getting married," he said. "You've still got some bruises on your side, but that's all."

I bought a wedding ring and made arrangements with a preacher to come to Calvert's place on December 8th, which was the date Janet had given me if I found out I was all right. I stayed in town overnight, and ran into Donahue in the lobby just before I went to my room.

"Heard you had quite a tussle with young Kelsey," Donahue said.

"Something like that," I agreed.

"That damned Ruth," he said bitterly. "Linscott blew up when he heard about it. Now she's no good to him with everybody knowing what she is."

"A lot of them had guessed it," I said.

"Guessing and knowing are two different things. Now they know." He gave me a straight look. "Matthew, I'm warning you: Don't let anything happen to her."

"Don't warn me," I said, "and don't expect anything from me. She tried to bust Janet and me up. I don't care what they do to her."

I swung around and went upstairs. I went to bed and lay there for a long time, only half listening to the variety of noises you always hear in a hotel, for I was thinking of Janet and the chance that she might be a

widow within six months. But I couldn't tell her, and I had gone too far to back out and leave the valley. I would have lost Janet if I had. When I considered the future without her, I had a feeling there was no future at all.

We were married on December 8th, one of those warm winter days that are not unusual in Colorado and that make you think the calendar is mixed up and it isn't December at all. Just the two of us, Calvert, the preacher, and the Rigdons. Janet wore a white dress and a veil, and Sarah said it was terrible we weren't having a big wedding in the church.

For a moment Janet was furious. "After what happened at the party, I wouldn't have a big wedding for anything. You hear? Not anything." Then Sarah began to cry, and Janet apologized. It was the only time I ever heard Janet speak harshly to Sarah.

I suppose it wasn't much of a wedding, the way women judge weddings, but it was the way Janet wanted it. After it was over and the ring was on her finger, I kissed her and she clung to me and I whispered in her ear: "I love you, Janet. I'll always love you."

"Oh, Matt, Matt," she whispered, "I know. I know."

When I looked around, Sarah was crying again, and for a moment I thought Calvert was going to, too. He kissed Janet and he put out his hand to me, and when I gripped it he placed his other hand over mine. "She's all there is, Matthew," he said. "Take care of her." Then he turned away.

We ate dinner, the damask cloth on the table. There was some joking and laughter, and the usual advice to both of us. Young Will needled me about not buying a box of cigars from the store, and old Will came to my defense with: "You got no room to talk, son. You're tighter'n the bark on a tree yourself or you'd have fetched a box over and given it to Keenan."

Afterward the Rigdon men left to go back to the store. Calvert said I'd have to do the milking because

he was riding to town with the preacher. So I changed my clothes and milked, thinking with some impatience that milking was one thing we had to do, regardless either of the pleasures or of the emergencies of life. When I got back to the house it was dusk, and Sarah and Janet were just finishing the dishes.

Janet hung up her apron, but Sarah started twisting the corner of hers. "I think I'd better stay here tonight. They can get along without me. . . ."

"No, Sarah, no," Janet said. "We're married now. It's all right."

Sarah backed to the kitchen door, looking at Janet and then at me and again at Janet. "Goodbye," she said, and ran out of the house and across the fields to the store.

We both laughed a little sadly. "Poor Sarah," I said.

We sat in front of the fireplace for a time, Janet curled on my lap, one arm around my neck, and I was conscious of the pressure of her breast against my chest. When the fire died down, I said, "I'll get some wood if you'll get up."

"We might go to bed. Then we wouldn't need any wood."

She tried to yawn and failed, and we went up the stairs together. When we reached the landing, I picked her up. "I'll carry you over the threshold, if you'll tell me which room you want to sleep in."

"Your room," she said.

So I opened the door and went in and put her down on the bed. I lighted the lamp, and when I turned to her she was just sitting there looking at me, and I sensed she was embarrassed for the first time.

She said, "If you'll turn your back, I'll undress."

I went to a window, the one facing the Wall, and stood looking at it in the moonlight for a moment, then I undressed and went to bed. I took Janet in my arms, and it seemed to me that I was filled with loving her, and that this was all a man could ever ask from life.

We stayed two weeks in Denver, as Calvert wanted us to, good rich weeks spent shopping, going to a show in the Tabor Grand, eating in the best restaurants, or dawdling in bed in our room in the Windsor. Sheer luxury, those weeks, with no chores, no housework, just each other.

When we got back to the valley, it was Christmas Eve and it had started to snow, the air crisp and challenging. Calvert had finished the milking, and it was dark by the time we put the horses away. When I went into the house with Calvert, each of us carrying suitcases, we found Janet standing motionless in front of a perfect cedar tree that Calvert had decorated and placed against the wall.

Christmas Eve! I had wondered if he would remember. He said: "They're Janet's decorations. She's had most of them since she was a little girl."

I took one of the suitcases into the dining room and put it on the table. Opening it, I took out the presents I had bought: a pair of boots for Calvert, a bottle of perfume for Janet, a lace handkerchief, and a few other things. I took them into the parlor and slipped them under the tree, and when I stood up I saw that Calvert was staring at Janet. She had dropped into a chair and was crying.

"Why, Janet," Calvert said, "I thought you'd like the tree."

"I do." She got up and came to us and put an arm around each of us. "My men! You're such fools, such lovely, lovely fools. Don't you know I'm just happy?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JANUARY. FEBRUARY. March. April. Winter, with a foot of snow on the ground and a wind howling down through the gap that made the temperature seem twenty degrees colder than it actually was. A good spell in February: false spring, Calvert called it. Too early to plant the garden, although we were tempted, for the warm, steaming earth was inviting and we thought we could see the cottonwood buds beginning to swell.

Calvert was right about the weather. March was cold and blustery as, by proverb, it was supposed to be. Wet snow clung to the tree branches, breaking some of them off. Both our woodpile and haystacks melted down; as Calvert said, it was an annual race to see whether they gave out before spring finally got here. But Janet and he had never frozen to death. He laughed then, and said that a late spring came nearer scaring him to death than anything else.

April was a paradoxical month of disappointment and satisfaction as far as the weather was concerned. We never knew from one day to the next what it would be. A cold rain or a wet snow, and then the following day would be warm with a tingling promise that this was a fecund earth, that the death of last fall was only temporary, and that life was now bursting out around us.

The valley was green again, and farther down the river, toward San Marino, the wild plums were in bloom. The birds were back with us: the mountain bluebirds, robins, red-winged blackbirds, and meadow larks that, to my ears at least, gave out the sweetest of all songs. And quite often fluffy white clouds came floating

down through the gap and sometimes paused around the topmost point of the Wall. Janet, watching them, called them "God's birds" because they never quite came down to the earth where we were.

The love that Janet and I shared became richer and fuller than ever, although I had not thought it was possible. We could never get enough of each other, of our lips, our bodies, the things we shared, like our walks along the river after supper at dusk when the valley was washed by purple light.

But I cannot say April was the best month of the four. They were all good, all perfect, each in its individual way. Not much work to do, just the chores that couldn't be done during the growing season when the pressure of work was so great. Mending harness. Fixing fence. Breaking a young gelding to ride. Feeding stock.

Our evenings were long. We spent them reading, or playing cards in front of the fireplace, sometimes with Sarah, who would stay the night with us. I don't think she and Janet were as close as they had been, but she still liked to come over. She had started going with a boy who lived a couple of miles to the south, young Johnny McKay, and he often came with her. She was hopeful, but he wasn't as old as she was, and far less mature.

To me it was more than having a young wife I loved. For the first time life was complete. I possessed something my father had never known. Neither had Ruth Hadley. I was lucky and I knew it. I had a home, a family; I was with people whom I loved and who loved me. Perhaps more than anything else I treasured that wonderful sense of belonging which so few people ever fully attain.

Every day and every night Janet was a little more wonderful, a little different. In January we took a hot iron to bed with us and we both tried to get our feet on it at the same time. Once we got a small part of the bed warm, we never moved. We clung to each other, our

legs and arms wound around each other, and Janet would say: "I don't see how I ever kept warm sleeping by myself in that other room. Every night I thank the good Lord he gave me a man."

"Just to keep you warm?" I'd ask.

She'd never answer the question in words, and afterward she'd ask: "Was it right, Matt? Was it just right?" She never asked me if I loved her. That was something she felt, I think, just as I felt it in her.

In February, when it was warm, we would often stand by the window, with all the stars and a rich full moon shining in a clear sky, and look at the Wall, which seemed to lift itself out of the earth and reach for the sky. "So much strength," Janet would say. "Is there anything in us that has that kind of strength?"

"Your father has," I'd say. "I wish I had a little of it."

"But you have, Matt," she would say. "I felt it right from the first."

So we lived out those months, day by day, and if time was like a river, this was the deep and quiet pool; but the roar of the falls was in our ears. We all felt it, I think, although Calvert never mentioned it, but we clung to each day, each hour, as if trying to hold the present so that it could not become part of the past and only a memory.

In April Calvert sold all of his cattle except one milk cow. He gave no explanation, but he went to town late in the month with the money. When he returned, he told me he had transferred all of his cash to Janet's account.

"She's always had an account of her own," he said, "so it was easy enough to change mine. Wasn't much. About three thousand with what I got for the cattle. There would have been a lot more if it hadn't been for all this litigation."

"What's bothering you, Dave?" I asked.

"Just a hunch. And don't mention it to Janet. She's worrying enough." He scratched the back of his head,

his eyes on the Wall. "One of these days a U. S. marshal is going to walk in here with an eviction notice. I don't know what I'll do then, Matthew. I honestly don't know."

But it didn't happen quite that way. Calvert and I were plowing the field where he'd had potatoes last year. He was going to plant wheat, and that struck me as being odd. He didn't expect to be here, or he wouldn't have sold his cattle, so why, then, was he planting wheat? I was his son-in-law, but in reality I was still a hired hand. I never questioned his plans or his orders. It was not a situation I would have agreed to permanently, but for the moment it was the only thing I could do.

We saw the stage go by late in the afternoon. A few minutes after that Janet rode down the lane toward the road. She was on the gelding we had broken a few months before. When we stopped to rest our horses, Calvert said, "I wish she wouldn't ride that colt. He's pretty boogery yet."

I didn't say anything. If he wanted to tell his married daughter what she could or couldn't do, that was up to him, but as her husband I hadn't given her an order since we were married, and I didn't intend to. It was one reason we got along so well. Besides, I wasn't worried about her. She was the best woman rider I'd ever seen, and I had a notion she could ride that colt as well as I could. Or her father, for that matter.

Sarah took care of the mail. Janet helped her sometimes, but I didn't think they'd had time to get the mail sack open when Janet came back, putting the gelding into a dead run. Calvert stopped his team as soon as he saw her. He shouted: "What's the matter with her? She's got no business riding the colt that way!"

We waited. The news was bad, I thought, or she wouldn't be riding so fast. She slowed up when she hit the plowed ground, and even before she reached us she was holding an envelope out to her father.

He tore it open. Janet didn't say a word. She sat her saddle, her eyes on Calvert. He took a sheet of paper out of the envelope, read it, folded it, and slipped it back. He looked at me. "Might as well unhook."

"What was it?" Janet demanded.

"A summons to appear at the United States Court in Denver to defend our claims." He licked his lips. "We have one day to get there, one day to cover the thirty miles from here to the railroad and 260 by rail. It's a physical impossibility even if we had one of those flying machines Jules Verne wrote about."

I had known from the first that the settlers were up against a stacked deck; I had told Calvert months ago that the settlers were whipped. He knew it. He must have known it. But knowing that something was going to happen and actually having it happen were two different things.

He said very little while we did the chores and ate supper. I had never seen him as preoccupied as he was for those two or three hours.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE SUN WAS DOWN, but it wasn't quite dark that evening when young Will Rigdon walked across the fields from the store. He said: "Dave, I guess all of us got that summons. Of course, a lot of 'em ain't got the mail, but there's twenty or so that have and they're at the church. You'd better come over and we'll talk about it."

Calvert nodded at me. "Want to come, Matthew?"

"No," I said. "I'd better not go."

He understood. Actually, I'd had very little to do with any of our neighbors except the Rigdons. If I met

someone like Jake Kelsey at the store, we were coldly polite. No one had told me, but knowing how strong feeling was in the valley, and knowing it would become stronger, I was certain that I wasn't trusted and that my presence would only be a source of friction. The time was close when I'd have to take part in what was happening, but not yet.

I built a fire in the fireplace, for the evenings still had a bite to them. Janet and I sat in front of the fireplace holding hands. I don't think either of us said much until Calvert came in about two hours later and sat down wearily beside us. He filled his meerschaum and lighted it.

"We'll fight," he said, as if there had been some doubt about it. "We're going to set up a system of signals by fire. We'll pile some brush on top of the Wall and another pile farther south, and so on. Young Will says he'll light the one here at the gap, somebody else will light the next pile when he sees this one, and that's the way it'll go."

"Why?" Janet demanded.

"To call everyone together," he answered. "We can have a hundred men here at the settlement in less than six hours."

"With rifles and ammunition," Janet cried. "And I suppose young Will has stocked up so he's got enough shells to supply all of them at a profit to him."

"Yes," Calvert said, "except that there will be no profit for him. He'll sell them at cost."

"You know what will happen?" she demanded. "You'll kill a U. S. marshal. Then we'll have the militia here from San Marino. And the United States Army. And you think you can hold this valley. You men! You stupid men!"

She jumped up and ran across the room and up the stairs. Calvert took his pipe out of his mouth and stared at it. "The women never understand, but I was hoping Janet would."

"You're on a mean horse and you can't get off," I said, more roughly than I intended. "People expect something of you, so you've got to do it."

"Yes, that's true."

I didn't expect him to admit it. I asked, "You think you can do any good?"

"Yes, I'm sure we can. If we don't do anything else, we will call the attention of the entire country to a great injustice. Sometimes you go as far as you can, and after that the shedding of blood is the only answer. I think we've reached that point."

I got up. I knew Janet needed me, and I knew there was no use arguing with Calvert. Pierre Santone must have felt as I did now when he talked to my father the day we left the grant. I said: "At least there's one thing you can do. Go see the sheriff in San Marino and tell him to keep his deputies out of the valley until this cools off."

He shook his head. "No use. Jim Huntley's a good man, but he wouldn't listen to me."

"Then I'll go," I said. "In the morning."

"I can't stop you," he said. "Matthew, Artie Shafter's back in the valley. He's staying up there on his old place. I talked to him tonight. He said since Janet was married, he wasn't going to make any trouble, but you'd better watch him."

"All right," I said.

"Another thing I don't like." Calvert got up and knocked his pipe out into the fireplace, then laid it on the mantel. "A fellow named Bascom just moved onto the old Laird place. He bought it from the company."

I knew where the Laird place was, a mile or two down the river. No one had lived on it for a year. Apparently old man Laird hadn't had the money to buy his land from the company, so he'd sold his improvements and left. The company hadn't sold it to anyone else because people who knew what the situation was were afraid to move up here and be labeled "grant

men." So Bascom was either a complete stranger, or the grant company had hired him to come here. If he was a company agent, he was taking a calculated gamble.

"Have you met him?" I asked.

"No, but young Will has. A proddy bastard, Will says. We've got to shove him out, or he'll make trouble. I'm riding over there with Jake and young Will."

I told him good night and went upstairs to Janet.

The next day I took Janet with me into town. I let her out at the Commercial House, went to the bank, and transferred my money to Janet's account. If both Dave and I were killed, there would be no land for her, but at least she'd have more than eight thousand dollars, which would take care of her for a long time.

My next stop was the courthouse. I had never met Huntley, but I'd heard he was a man of high integrity, and a tough lawman. He was exactly the picture of what you expect a sheriff to be, tall and as weathered as any of the false fronts on Main Street, and wearing a white mustache that flowed out on both sides of his face to an unbelievable length.

"Keenan," he said when I introduced myself. "You're Dave Calvert's son-in-law, ain't you?" I nodded, and he said, "And you're the boy who knocked the whey out of young Kelsey."

"I'm not sure who knocked the whey out of who," I said.

"I heard it was quite a tussle. Somebody told me you were Pat Keenan's son. Donahue, I think it was, told me. I knew Pat pretty well when he worked for Santone. Everybody knew him who lived in that part of New Mexico." He cocked his head and looked at me. "You favor him, son; you favor him considerable." He motioned to a chair. "Sit down."

"I can't stay long," I said. "My wife's at the hotel. I wanted to ask you something."

"Sure. Anything."

"I guess you know how it is in the valley," I said. "It's coming to a boil. No way anybody can stop it that I can see, but I thought that if you kept your deputies out of there it might prevent trouble. Looks to me like a case for Federal officers."

All the good humor went out of his eyes and mouth. He walked to the window and looked at the hills across the river. He asked, "Ever get a bull by the horns and wish to hell you knew how to let go and couldn't?"

"Yes," I said, "only you haven't grabbed this bull by the horns."

"No," he agreed, "but sooner or later I'll have to. I know those people up there. Your father-in-law, now. They don't come no better. And the Rigdons, before old Will got a little touched like he is." He wheeled away from the window. "Tell me one thing. Why do they have to be so damned stubborn? They could settle with the company."

"What would you do if you had a patent on your farm and the grant company was about to evict you?" I asked.

"I'd probably do the same thing Dave's gonna do. By God, I would! No probably about it. They'd carry me off in a pine box." He rubbed his face. "I appreciate your coming in, Keenan, but I can't make no promises. I'll just have to do what I have to do."

I went out. There was nothing more I could say.

I intended to tell Janet about the money as soon as I got back to the hotel, but when I reached the room she was trying on a new hat. She wanted me to admire it, and I did. For the moment, at least, she was diverted from our trouble, and I couldn't bring myself to tell her about the money.

When we returned to the valley the next day, I asked Calvert what sort of man Bascom was. "Proddy, just like young Will told me he was," he said, and let it go at that. I found out myself three days later.

We had finished plowing, and Janet sent me to the

store. Several men were standing around the stove in the back. Both old Will and young Will were there, and Sarah was in the little cubbyhole in the corner that served as the post office.

I knew most of the men by sight, but one was a stranger, lanky, red-bearded, with a grating voice that turned my hair wrong end to on the back of my neck. He was talking when I went in, and it didn't take more than ten seconds to know he was Bascom. He was insulting and profane, and his listeners, from old Will on down to young Johnny McKay, were red in the face and uneasy, all wanting to stop him but not knowing how.

Finally, after a string of profanity, Johnny said: "Sarah's yonder working the mail. You've got no call to talk so loud she can hear you."

"She don't have to stay there," Bascom said. "You're a mighty funny bunch in this valley. Don't want no strangers coming in, you say. Can't buy from the company, neither. If I'm a grant man, I can get to hell out. Threatened me, they did. You was with 'em, Rigdon. And now when a man just talks along natural-like, it ain't fit for a woman. . . ."

I'd had enough of him if the rest hadn't. I said, "Get out of here, Bascom."

He took a good look at me. "Who the hell are you?"

"Keenan," I said. "Matt Keenan. I'm David Calvert's son-in-law. I guess you met him the other day."

"Keenan? Say, you're the grant man who worked for that chippy who runs the hotel, ain't you? I hear you and her. . . ."

I hit him with all I had, my left into his belly, and I swear I skinned my knuckles on his backbone. He bent forward, his mouth open, trying his best to take a breath, his bearded chin shoved invitingly at me. I swung my right; I heard a satisfying crack as his lower teeth struck his upper ones. He went back and down, knocked a spittoon over, and wound up with his head propped against the cracker barrel.

No one stirred for a moment. The front door had opened, and I heard Alex Kelsey shout something. Sarah peeked out of her cubbyhole, then jerked her head back. I think Bascom was dazed for a few seconds. Presently he sat up and reached inside his coat.

Old Will yelled, "Bascom, you pull that hideout gun and I'll blow your head off."

Young Will said: "Better git, Bascom. While you're going, go clean to San Marino and don't come back to the valley."

Bascom felt his chin, stared at old Will, who was holding his rifle on him, then got up and went out. Kelsey, still standing by the door, said, "Well, he's got a start toward San Marino, anyhow."

I said to old Will, "For the first time since you drew a bead on me the day I came to the valley, I'm glad you've got that Winchester."

Old Will patted the stock. "It'll come in handy before we're done. You'll see."

Alex Kelsey walked along the counter to the back of the store. I hadn't seen him since we'd had our fight, and now I wished I was wearing a gun. I had no way of knowing how he felt toward me, but I was positive I didn't want to tackle him again.

But Kelsey wasn't any more of a mind to fight than I was. He held out a hand. "Keenan, I want to shake hands with the man who had guts enough to take a swing on Bascom. Around San Marino they say he's a bad one."

I shook hands, relieved when I saw that Kelsey carried no grudge. "Good thing I didn't know that, Alex."

He stepped back and looked me over. "Keenan, I don't see how a long drink of water like you can hit a man so hard."

"Well, I couldn't get you down," I said. "I remember thinking I might just as well be hitting an oak post."

He slapped his knee and guffawed. "Reckon I gave you a fight at that."

I drove home as soon as I got the mail and the flour and sugar Janet wanted. As far as the men in the store were concerned, I had established myself when I'd hit Bascom. Maybe I was not as much of an outcast as I had thought. Maybe they had forgotten; or perhaps they were willing to accept Calvert's son-in-law for what he was and not what he had been.

There was a settlers' meeting on Sunday afternoon, and the church was full when Calvert and I got there. I looked around for Artie Shafter. He was sitting in the front pew. I had seen him only once before, but, like Chip Donahue, he was the kind you never forgot once you saw him. Small, black-eyed, tense, he was like a watch spring so tightly wound it won't stand another turn.

I took a seat in the back, deciding against saying anything to Artie Shafter just then, but I had a feeling that the day would come when I'd have plenty to say to him. I didn't believe he had returned to help fight the company. More than that, he didn't seem to be the sort who would forget a grudge.

Calvert presided over the meeting. Most of it was routine, covering ground that must have been covered previously many times. Some of the men felt called upon to make speeches, about how we would not surrender a foot of land that we owned to a foreign corporation, that it was better to die than give up our homes. As I listened, I had a feeling that the first to surrender would be the ones who were talking the loudest.

In time Calvert worked the discussion around to practical ways and means. Had the brush been piled on the Wall so it would take only a moment to light the signal fires? Had everyone bought ammunition? Had the men who were selected for the task ridden to the surrounding grants to ask for help once the fight started?

Everything seemed to be in order. One man who had been in the San Luis Valley asking for help said: "We'll

have a thousand men here in twelve hours. Whether they live on the Santone Grant or not, they know that what's done here will be the same thing that's done to them. The minute the first bastard comes up here to serve an eviction notice, we'll hang him—"

"Just a minute," Calvert said sharply. "There will be no fighting if we can help it, and certainly no killing. Now, then. More than one hundred of us received a summons to the United States Court in Denver. We may be arrested for not going and they may throw us into the San Marino jail. I can't read the future any better than you boys can, but whatever happens we can't afford to take any chances on being surprised. I want someone to stay at Loma twenty-four hours a day. The instant a party of officers shows up, get word to us."

He appointed Alex Kelsey to take the first twenty-four hours, Johnny McKay the next, and went on down the list of names he had already prepared. As we walked home late that afternoon, I said, "Dave, has it occurred to you that what you're planning is insurrection?"

"Yes," he said. "But we won't be attacking anyone else. We're defending what's ours."

That had been the basic argument from the first, and it always would be as long as David Calvert was able to argue the matter. But what he had said about not attacking anyone else was wrong, or so it was made to appear to outsiders. Not long after dark that night someone set fire to Bascom's house and barn. As soon as we saw the red glare to the east of us, Calvert and I saddled up and rode downriver to Bascom's place. He was gone, but twenty or more men were milling around.

Bascom's closest neighbor, a man named Drilling, said: "He came over to visit us. He sat around talking until my wife saw the fire. Bascom was scared to death. Said he'd had a fight with Keenan and they were out to kill him. He got on his horse and headed for town. We couldn't put the fire out. It was burning like hell when I got over here."

On the way home, Calvert said: "Bascom could have started that fire himself. That would be one way to make the sheriff think we'd done it to run him out."

The thought had been in my own mind. This would start it, and if Calvert was right Bascom must be a company man sent up here to make trouble. There were other grant men in the valley, not many, but a few who had as much right to be protected by the law as any of us.

None had been as belligerent as Bascom. They had lived here anywhere from a year to six months, and they were more or less accepted. They had got along because they had leaned over backward to get along. None had been warned to leave as Bascom had. The fact that he had been warned made it look bad for us.

But what would happen now? We found out just after sundown on Monday night. Johnny McKay brought his horse up our lane on the run, yelling, "Dave! Matt!" before he pulled his horse to a stop.

Calvert beat me through the front door, calling, "What's up?"

"A bunch of deputies just rode into Loma," Johnny said. "They're camping there tonight according to what I heard 'em say. I counted eleven. Sam Burke is running the outfit."

Calvert took a long drawn-out breath. He said, "Johnny, ride over to the store and tell young Will. He'll fire the brush pile by the gap."

So it had come!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I WENT UPSTAIRS FOR MY GUN, and put on my sheepskin when I came down, for it was a cold, cloudy night. Calvert stood by the front door, waiting, his Winchester in his hands. Janet was beside him. She kissed him, and then she came to me and I put my arms around her and held her hard for a full minute.

I followed Calvert outside, and when I looked back she was standing where I had left her, her face shadowed because the lamp was behind her, but I'm sure she wasn't crying. She would not send either of us away with the sight of a crying woman to carry with us as the last memory of her.

She stood there, straight and tall and proud of us, I think. She lifted a hand to wave to me, and I waved back, although I doubt if she saw me in the darkness. Then I caught up with Calvert. Because of the absolute blackness, we took the long way down the lane and along the road rather than across the fields.

I thought of Janet, back there alone in the house, and the long wait that was ahead of her, and the uncertainty that made it so much worse. I don't think she expected to see either of us alive again. She didn't say a word to make me think that, but I felt it.

For a moment I thought about myself. I had tried not to. As long as we had been waiting, my fears had been mostly for Calvert, but now I had reason to be afraid for myself. It was my fight as well as Calvert's or the Rigdons' or anyone's. It was not the fighting I dreaded so much, or the danger that I knew I would face. Rather it was the indecision, our inability to make

a definite plan.

Ahead of us someone had built a fire at the intersection of the two roads. Half a dozen men were standing around it. Suddenly Calvert quickened his pace. I asked, "Dave, if they are coming to arrest you, will you resist?"

"I don't know," he said. "Depends on how Sam Burke performs."

"Know him?"

"I know him, all right. A show-off." He paused, and added bitterly, "Big man, big man."

When we reached the fire, I saw that old Will Rigdon was there. So were the Kelseys, Johnny McKay, Artie Shafter, and two or three others I knew only by sight. We spoke to them and they answered, and a minute or so later we saw a flame leap up from the top of the Wall.

"That'll fetch 'em," old Will said with satisfaction. He patted the stock of his rifle. "I guess Sam Burke will wish he'd never seen the valley afore we're done."

He stood across the fire from us, his beard flat against his chest, his white hair stirred by the wind that came rushing down through the gap. His eyes seemed as bright as the fire. He was thinking, and perhaps all of them were thinking, that the deputies would come, that there would be some shooting, and then the deputies would go back and that would be the end of it. The company would say, "I'm sorry, folks," and withdraw its claim to the land. People always thought that way, I suppose, before the shooting started, before they saw the dead and wounded.

I couldn't stand it any longer, and I burst out: "Dave, I think we ought to have a plan. We don't even know what we're going to do."

"We can't decide on a plan until we find out what Burke intends to do," Calvert said. "They aren't up here to go fishing, that's sure, but they may be coming to warn us."

"Like hell!" Artie Shafter jeered. "This is an inva-

sion. They're gonna run us out of the valley if they can."

He was like a fox, his black eyes glittering, all wound up ready to jump. I wished he was a thousand miles away. I didn't trust him. Everything he said and did seemed to prove that my suspicions were right.

"We can't be sure, Artie," Calvert said in an even tone. "If it is an invasion, we'll turn them back. If they have come to warn us not to resist, we'll let them say their piece and go back. It's hard for me to believe that the company would force a situation that's bound to lead to bloodshed." He cleared his throat, his eyes on Shafter. "I want to make one thing clear, Artie. We will not stand for someone firing a shot just to get a fight started. I'm not above shooting the troublemaker myself, if we have one. Understand?"

Shafter stared into the fire, his face sullen. "Yes, sir," he said.

Presently young Will Rigdon joined us. Not long after that we saw another fire from the top of the Wall to the south. Others came riding in, all of them armed, and our number grew from ten to fifteen and then to twenty. When the flames died down, Alex Kelsey and some of the younger men brought wood from the pile behind the church and threw it onto the fire.

Talk was spasmodic. Almost everyone was smoking and getting as close to the fire as he could. After a time Jake Kelsey asked, "What are we doing here?"

"Burke's bunch of deputies is at Loma," Calvert answered, "and it won't take long for them to get here from there. I want as many men as we can get for Burke to look at in the morning." He paused, glancing around the tight little circle of men. "There's another reason I wanted you here. Bascom's buildings were burned the other night. Suppose this bunch at Loma is aiming to hit back by burning some of us out?"

"They wouldn't do that," young Will Rigdon ob-

jected. "Sam Burke's one of Huntley's regular deputies."

"For all we know, Burke may have resigned yesterday," Calvert said.

"Let's go after 'em," Artie Shafter said. "Let's run 'em from here to—"

"No, we've got to let them make the first move," Calvert said. "I don't want to hear that kind of talk from you or anyone else."

Again Shafter's face turned sullen, and he lowered his gaze. "Sure, Mr. Calvert," he said.

Watching Shafter, I began to doubt that he would accept Calvert's leadership. If he didn't, this crowd would turn into a mob in a matter of minutes. Then, glancing around the circle of men, I saw Manuel Trujillo standing back of the others.

For a moment I couldn't understand it at all. Manuel had worked for Ruth as long as she had been in the valley. She had been good to him and paid him better than average wages. It didn't seem possible that he would quit his job, but now I remembered he had been nervous about it the last time I had talked to him.

I stepped back from the fire, moving slowly so that I wouldn't attract attention, and a moment later walked to where Manuel stood. I took his arm and led him farther away from the fire so that we could not be seen. I asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I do not work for the hotel no more," he said, and I knew from his tone that he blamed himself and was worried about what I would think.

"Why?"

"Some men told me to quit or they would hang me." He paused, then added contritely, "I am sorry, Señor Matt, but I could not stay."

Who was I to blame him? Ruth shouldn't be in the valley. Linscott should have pulled her out weeks ago. Actually, she had been of no value to him since she had exposed herself the night of the engagement party.

Then I remembered what Alex Kelsey had said that night and what Ruth had said to him. It was an insult he would not forget.

"Who were those men?" I demanded.

"I was not to tell. . . ."

"Tell me," I said. "Was Alex Kelsey one of them?"

I could not see his face. We were too far from the fire to benefit from its light, and the sky was so overcast that the stars and the crescent moon were completely blotted out. But I felt his fear, and I thought that no one in the valley could so paralyze him with threats as Alex Kelsey, and perhaps Artie Shafter. Before morning the whole crowd would be after her.

It must have taken him a full thirty seconds to work up enough courage to tell me. Then he said, "*Si,* and Señor Shafter."

"Come on," I said. "We've got to get her out of here."

"I would not dare. . . ."

"Manuel," I said, "I've got more reason to hate Ruth Hadley than anyone else in the valley, and you've got more reason to like her than anyone else. Isn't that right?"

"*Si,* but . . ."

"Come on, then," I said impatiently. "You'd never sleep another night in your life if you let those bastards get hold of her."

Reluctantly he went with me, and suddenly I began to wonder if I was too late. One of them back at the fire, probably Shafter, would remember that there was a company agent in the valley, and he'd say a rope was too damned good for her. It would be like setting fire to pitch pine. Not even Calvert could stop them, once the fire swept through the crowd.

I started to run, Manuel keeping up with me. I could barely make out the dark shape of the house against the slightly less dark sky. We slowed down to a walk, moving past the horse trough along the side of the house to the back.

"Saddle her horse," I said. "I'll get her up. Don't light a lantern."

"*Si*," he said, and ran on across the barnyard.

I went in through the back door of the hotel and along the hall to her room. I knocked, and when there was no answer I knocked again, and then my knuckles missed completely, for the door opened and I felt the muzzle of a gun rammed into my belly.

"Who is it?" Ruth asked.

"Matt Keenan," I said.

"Well, this is a surprise," she said. "Every night I expected you to come back to me, but I'd almost given up." I heard her place the gun on the bureau. "You should have let me know, Matthew. I might have shot you."

"Get dressed. You're getting out of the valley tonight."

She laughed. "Matthew, have you been drinking? They'll never run me out—"

"Then they'll hang you. Why do you think they ran Manuel off? You think Alex Kelsey will forget what you said to him that night at Calvert's?"

"I sure dumped him on his nose, didn't I?" She laughed again, enjoying the memory of it, then she asked, "What's all the excitement about? I saw a fire down there in front of the store and a bunch of men. . . ."

"Burke and a crowd of deputies are camped at Loma."

"So there's finally going to be a fight? Well, it'll be fun to watch."

My patience rubbed thin. "Ruth," I said, "I'm risking my hide for you, although I don't know why after what you did to me. Now you can either get dressed, or I'll carry you out of here and you can ride to town in your nightgown. Manuel's saddling your horse now."

She sighed. "All right. I'll pull the shades and dress. Stay right there or I won't do it." I heard her walk

across the room to the windows and pull the shades, then come back to the bureau. "I'm flattered by your concern, Matthew. Somehow I had the idea you were happily married."

"I am," I said. "When you get to San Marino, tell Donahue that I didn't do this because he warned me I'd better look out for you. I'm doing it because the settlers will ruin every chance they've got if they hang you."

She lighted a lamp, smiling at me as if she had to be indulgent. "You're lying, Matthew," she said as she pulled off her nightgown.

She walked away from me, looking back over her shoulder and laughing as she brushed an unruly lock of hair away from her forehead exactly as she had the night I had seen her in the tub of hot water. She said: "I know you're lying because what you said about Donahue can't be true. That damned gunslick is the last man in the world who would worry about me."

I looked at her, and I didn't care what she said or thought or did. The sight of her body did not stir me as it had before. She was the same woman who had put me in torment, but now she was nothing.

"Get dressed," I said. "I don't want to fight my friends on your account."

She sat down on the side of the bed and looked at me, a voluptuous woman, but one who possessed little of the grace and beauty that were so much a part of Janet, and none of her goodness. I don't know what Ruth saw in my face, but she dressed hurriedly. She took only a minute with her hair, slipped her gun into a pocket, and then looked around the room.

"I like it here," she said. "I'll never find another place I like as well." She blew out the lamp and, catching up with me before I reached the back door, took my arm. "You know, Matthew, it's kind of funny. I knew you and Janet were right for each other. When you first came, I tried to throw you together, and then I wished I

hadn't. I'm sorry I went over there that night, but I couldn't help it. I just couldn't help it, Matthew."

She let go of my arm and walked to where Manuel waited with her horse. "I cried when you left me," she said to the boy, "but now I feel better because you thought enough of me to come back. I'll never see you again, but I'll never forget you."

I was close to them, close enough to see her bend forward and kiss him on the cheek; then she stepped into the saddle and rode past the hotel and turned left toward San Marino.

I heard a sob break out of Manuel. I put my hand on his shoulder. "Go on home. You don't belong in this."

"*Adiós,*" he said, and disappeared in the darkness.

I walked back to the fire. Calvert, the Rigdons, and Jake Kelsey were not in sight. I paused in the fringe of darkness, and when I heard the talk I knew I'd had little time to spare. Shafter was saying: "I don't care if she is a woman. We oughta string her up. I wasn't here then, but you all say you heard her admit the company sent her out here. I say string her up."

Calvert should have known better than to leave. I pushed through the crowd to the fire. Alex Kelsey was saying, "I heard her all right—"

"Wait a minute, Alex," I said. "Where's Dave?"

"In the house making some coffee. Why?"

"He ought to hear what Shafter's got to say." I looked at Shafter, whose bright black eyes were on me, his right hand hanging at his side not far from his gun. "There's a wrong smell about you getting back here just at the time you did," I said. "Now you're talking about hanging a woman. That's the surest way I know to ruin everything we're trying to do."

"I'll bet you've been over there nights," Shafter said.

I let that pass. "You won't get your hands on her," I said. "I warned her and she's gone. I didn't do it because of what you're trying to say, but because I knew what it would do to us if we laid a hand on her. Now

if you want to back up what you're saying, go ahead. I don't think you will. I peg you for a fraud, Shafter, a liar and a coward."

His dark thin face turned as pale as it could. The men behind him stumbled in their haste to get out of the way. So did the men behind me. For a moment I wasn't sure what Shafter would do. He stared at me, and there could be no doubt about how much he hated me, hatred that he had undoubtedly nursed from the day he had seen me at church with Janet.

He might have gone for his gun. But he didn't because Alex Kelsey said: "I think you made a mistake getting the Hadley woman out of here, but that ain't the point. If you and Artie keep this up, you'll be swapping lead and one of you will die. Maybe both. Come morning, we're gonna need your guns. Now, why don't you ease off, Keenan?"

I didn't say anything. I had no intention of easing off. I kept watching Shafter, then we heard the men come out of the store with the coffee. Shafter gave me a grin that was as shallow as his lips. "Alex is right, Keenan." He made a quick turnabout and walked toward Calvert and young Will, calling, "Say, I can smell that from here."

Everyone seemed to want to talk at once as the tension broke. Alex walked around the fire to me. He said, "You're getting mighty reckless the last few days. You know Artie's right handy with that iron of his?"

"I'd heard he was."

"Don't keep pushing him. I'm thinking about Janet. You don't look like no beauty to me, but I guess you do to her."

He slapped me on the back to show there were no hard feelings. For the first time I began to like him.

He started to turn away when I gripped his arm. "Alex, why did Shafter come back to the valley?"

His broad face was stirred by curiosity, then he shrugged. "I don't know."

I let him go then, watching Shafter, who was holding out a tin cup for Calvert to fill with coffee. I wondered why he had backed down just now. From his record he didn't seem like a man who would back down for anything or anyone. Then it hit me. *I wasn't the one he had come back to kill!*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

DAWN CREPT UP THE VALLEY as if reluctant to let another day begin. Clouds hung so low that even the top of the Wall on both sides of the gap was hidden, and the air was cold and penetrating. Some of the men had taken their saddle blankets and rolled up in them beside the road, but most of us sat by the fire, keeping as warm as we could, smoking and drinking coffee and not saying very much. We were all, I think, afraid of the day that was ahead. Then, after so many dragging hours, it was upon us.

Someone yelled, "By God, they're coming!"

Men ran to the fire from where they had been sleeping. The rest of us were on our feet, listening, and for a moment the silence was tight and oppressive. The morning light was still gray because of the clouds, but we could see well past the hotel and no one was in sight. Then I heard the steady beat of hoofs, and it seemed that everyone else heard them at the same time.

Calvert said: "Let's see what they're up to. I don't want any of you firing a shot until I give the word."

More men had drifted in during the small hours so that we had over thirty, but that number was a long way from the thousand someone had promised on Sunday. How many would come during the day was a ques-

tion in my mind. Calvert stood facing the men at the fire. I moved forward until I was close enough to say, without being heard by the others, "Keep your eyes on Shafter."

Calvert gave a barely perceptible nod. "Artie, I'm going to say this for the last time. You make one move to start a fight and, by God, I'll kill you myself!"

"What's the matter with you?" Shafter said furiously. "Last night Keenan tried to rile me into a fight, and you've been on my tail ever since you showed up."

"You're the only one who's anxious to fight," Calvert said, "and you're the only one who acts like he doesn't want to follow orders."

He turned around. We could see them now, eleven men, just as Johnny McKay had said. At first their faces were expressionless blobs in the distance; then they reached the hotel and we could see them clearly. The man in front apparently was Burke, average in height but almost as bulky as Alex Kelsey. The one thing that attracted my attention was his red mustache, which flared up on both sides. He must, I thought, spend hours waxing and shaping it.

I had supposed, and apparently Calvert and the rest had, too, that the deputies would keep riding on past the hotel until they came to where we were standing in the road, but instead they turned in just after they passed the horse trough and dismounted in front of the barn.

"Maybe they did come up to go fishing," young Will Rigdon said.

"No, they didn't," Calvert said bitterly. "They're playing for time and figuring on making us come to them." He nodded at me. "Matthew, take half the men and make a swing through the fields and come up on the other side of the hotel. I'm going to find out why they're here. I can't stand any more waiting."

"No," Jake Kelsey said. "None of us can."

"Let's take their guns away from 'em," Alex said.

"Their pants, too. Make the bastards walk back to San Marino without their pants."

I thought it was a pretty good idea. Ridicule might be the best answer to all of this, but Calvert ignored the suggestion. He nodded at me, and I made a motion with my hand, breaking the line of men in two and indicating that the ones on my left were to follow me.

I didn't want to go because I had intended to watch everything Shafter did. Because I was irritated by Calvert's order, I overlooked the fact that Shafter was not in the group that was to come with me. When I hesitated, Calvert said, "Get moving, Matthew," and I climbed the fence and started across the field, the men following.

We must have taken fifteen minutes to reach the road and start back toward the hotel from the east, perhaps more. By that time all the deputies were inside. Then I saw that Calvert was walking toward the hotel, alone.

"He's making a mistake," Alex Kelsey muttered. "I wish to hell he'd have let us stay together."

His father, a step behind us, said, "I don't like it."

We were on the move, a solid block, when I suddenly realized that if the shooting started, the deputies inside the hotel couldn't miss. I said: "Scatter out across the road. You men in the back slow up so you'll be a few steps behind the rest of us."

Calvert stopped when he reached the horse trough in front of the hotel. He called, "Who's in charge here?"

"I am," Burke said from the doorway. "What have you got these men here for?"

If anyone had a right to be afraid, it was the deputies. We had them outnumbered three to one, and we'd have more men before dark, but if Burke was worried he gave no hint of it. We were close now, and Calvert motioned for me to stop. I did, seeing that the other group in front of the store was moving forward.

"What are you doing here, Sam?" Calvert asked.

"Huntley's orders are to protect the life and property

of every man in the valley," Burke said. "Bascom was burned out and came damned near getting beefed. We aim to see that don't happen to nobody else."

"Get out of the valley," Calvert said. "I'll give you five minutes to saddle up and start back. If you're not gone by then—"

A shot barked from the other group of settlers. The next second I had the feeling the place was blowing up. Twenty guns must have gone off. Bullets were all around me, kicking up dust in the road and snapping past my head. One of them tugged at the crown of my hat. Everyone scrambled for cover: the fence or the ditch at the side of the road or anything that offered protection.

I dived headlong for the ditch on the right side of the road, confused by the suddenness of the battle and scared right down to the bottom of my belly. I had a wild, mixed-up impression of men scattering like chaff before a sudden gust of wind, the firing of guns from all sides, and dust and smoke, and then, just as I hit the ditch, I realized that Calvert was down.

"Stop shooting," I called at the men behind me, and got up and ran toward the horse trough, waving my hat and yelling: "Hold your fire; hold your fire! Calvert's hit!"

I don't know exactly what happened unless the first shot I heard made all of them jerk their trigger fingers. After the first flurry of firing, there was a moment of silence while our men sought cover and the deputies inside the hotel waited to see what would happen. I found myself, without any thought on my part, sprinting toward the horse trough, and it seemed that my voice shouting, "Hold your fire; hold your fire!" went on and on, and was the only sound.

Calvert was crawling toward me in plain sight of the men in the hotel. Burke, standing at a window, called, "Get him out of there, then come and get us if you want us."

The instant I saw Calvert's white strained face I knew he was hard hit. There was a spreading splotch of blood on his chest, and his right hand was pressed against it to stop the bleeding or the pain; but maybe he didn't even know he was holding his hand there.

I picked him up, staggering and straining, for he was a heavy man and I was afraid I would make the bleeding worse by moving him. I got to where Alex Kelsey was lying behind the fence. He crawled out and, taking Calvert's feet, helped me to carry him as far as our lane. There we laid him down, and suddenly the firing broke out again.

I said, "We've got to get old Will over here." Most of the men who had been with me were standing around looking at Calvert, whose eyes were closed and who was gritting his teeth, blood seeping out around the fingers of his right hand.

"I'll get him," Johnny McKay said.

"Keep low," I said, "or they'll pick you off. Alex, we've got to get Dave to the house."

"All right," he said. "We'll carry him easy-like."

We did, Jake Kelsey walking beside us, tears running down his cheeks, the corners of his mouth working. Before we reached the house, he said: "It wasn't any good. I knew it when we saw Dave out there by himself."

The door slammed open and Janet ran toward us. I said: "He's hit pretty hard. Johnny's gone after old Will."

She didn't cry or say anything. She just walked beside us, and when we laid him on his bed I looked at her. I thought, she's known all the time this would happen. She was frozen inside. For the hours that she had been by herself she had gone through the deep, shaded valley. Now that the moment was here, she was incapable of feeling anything.

I went out to the barn and saddled my horse. Old Will could not do anything for Calvert. I didn't think the doctor could, either, but I was bound to see that

he tried. By the time I led my horse out of the barn, old Will was going into the house and young Will was standing in front talking to Alex. I mounted and rode toward them, and all the while the firing around the hotel was a steady hammering.

Young Will motioned for me to stop. "Shafter fired that first shot," he said. "He was holding his gun in front of him, just kind of aiming it sideways at nothing and it went off. Shafter said: 'I didn't aim to do that. It was an accident!' That's all I remember because we were scrambling around getting out of sight. The next thing I knew he was gone."

Alex looked at me. "You were right about why he showed up at the time he did."

I asked, "What do you mean?"

"It's my guess he hired out to the company to start the shooting."

It could have been that way, I thought, or he might have come back to be on hand when the shooting started so that he could kill Calvert. Probably we would never know, any more than we would know what Calvert had said to him last fall that made him leave the country.

I said, "Tell Janet I'm going after the doctor." I rode down the lane and, turning toward town, put my horse into a run. I almost killed him that morning, riding in a way I would never have ridden a horse under any other circumstances.

When I reached San Marino, I turned my horse over to the hostler in the livery stable where we were regular customers. I said, "Rub him down and walk him. . . ."

"I'll take care of him, Mr. Keenan," the man said, staring disapprovingly at my sweat-gummed horse.

I ran along the street to the doctor's office, wondering what I would do if Doc Van Dine wasn't in. But he was. Before I finished telling him what had happened, he reached for his hat and black bag.

"I'll do all I can, Keenan," he said, and started toward the livery stable where he kept his saddle horse.

For a time I leaned against a lamppost, sleepy and tired and hungry, but I knew I had to start back at once. I looked at the big sign on the company office and I was tempted to go inside, but I couldn't do any good. Then I thought of the sheriff. I started toward the court house, but I had not gone more than half a block before I heard a man call, "Keenan." I turned and saw Huntley standing in the archway of a livery stable motioning for me to come to him.

The stable was not the same one in which I had left my horse, but it was the same one the doctor had gone to. Van Dine was already on his way out of town. When I reached Huntley, I saw that a dozen or more men were inside saddling horses, and I wondered if there was any connection between the fact that the doctor had been here a moment before and that these men were getting ready to ride. I decided not. Van Dine had left only a minute or so ago.

"I didn't get much chance to talk to Doc," Huntley said, "but he did say Calvert got shot."

I nodded and told him what had happened, watching the men inside while I talked. Then I asked, "What's this about?"

"I'm taking a posse up the river," he said. "I can't let Burke and his boys get murdered."

"They've done their murdering," I said hotly. "They deserve to get some of their own medicine."

He shook his head at me. "They didn't do anything out of line, even the way you tell it."

"You had no business sending them up there," I said.

"Now you're telling me what my business is. I suppose you figure your bunch had a right to burn Bascom out."

"No sense of us getting mad at each other," I said. "All I'm real sure about is that Dave Calvert's been shot. I think he's dying. Now maybe you can tell me what's going to happen up there with him gone?"

He was silent a moment. "A mob with no one to lead

them," he said. "That what you mean?"

I nodded. "You take a posse up there and you'll have a civil war on your hands."

"Hell, I can't just let Burke's boys—" He stopped. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll leave the posse at Loma and go on alone. Maybe I can talk your friends into letting Burke's bunch out of the hotel if they leave the valley. You going back up now?" I nodded, and he added, "Maybe you can give me some help."

"Maybe," I said, and then I couldn't keep from asking the question that had been bothering me as long as I had been standing there. "How'd you happen to get a posse together if you saw Doc only a minute—"

"Artie Shafter told me what had happened," Huntley said. "He rode in about half an hour ago."

"Shafter?" I grabbed the sheriff's arm. "Where is he?"

"I dunno. Getting drunk in some saloon, I reckon. Well, looks like the boys are ready."

I stepped to one side and stood there while Huntley mounted the horse that the hostler was holding for him. I watched the posse ride to the corner and make the turn toward the river. How had Shafter got here ahead of me? Young Will said he'd disappeared just after the shooting started. He must have had a saddle horse hidden out, maybe in the brush along the river. When he'd seen Calvert fall, his job was done. All he'd wanted was to get away. His horse could be faster than mine. Or perhaps I had taken longer getting away from Calvert's place than I had thought.

Because the fact that he was in town was important, not how he had managed to get here ahead of me, I started looking. I went along one side of the street and then the other, taking a quick look into each saloon. He might have taken a room in a hotel and gone to sleep. Or he might be in a brothel. There was the possibility that he had left town, but I didn't think so. He wouldn't be expecting any of us to come after him, and if I had him sized up right he was the kind who would hang

around to see what happened and do a little bragging.

I wasn't sure what I'd do when I found him except that I knew I was going to make him talk if I had to break every bone in his body. If this was Linscott's scheme, I wanted to know it.

As it turned out, I had no chance to make Shafter talk. I found him in the last saloon on Main Street, a disreputable little adobe building set off by itself. The bartender was talking to three cowhands who looked as if they'd just ridden in off the range. Then I saw Shafter, who was sitting at a table with a bottle beside him.

Shafter sat facing the door, but because he was reaching for the bottle and looking at the window he didn't see me until I said, "Shafter!" He came up out of his chair, his gun in his hand, and started shooting. His first bullet hit the window behind me; the second slapped into the adobe wall.

He had had two shots and both were clean misses. I don't know why he missed unless he was nervous and surprised when I called. Perhaps he was a little drunk. But whatever the cause of his bad shooting, I had my gun out before he could squeeze off a third shot. I let go, getting him in the neck. The bullet must have sliced his jugular vein, because blood spurted all over that side of the saloon.

He went back and down, clawing at his neck. I would have left then, for it was plain that Shafter could not tell me anything, but the bartender motioned for me to stay.

"The marshal will be along in a minute," he said. "He always comes when he hears shooting. Be better for you if he finds you here and we tell him what happened."

He looked across the room at Shafter's motionless, blood-spattered body. "You're lucky, mister. Artie usually shot straighter than that."

I waited. When the marshal got there, I told him my

story. The bartender and cowhands backed me up, and when I asked if he was going to hold me he said: "Mister, I wish I had a medal to give you. The job you done was long overdue. No, you're free."

I went back to the stable, rented a horse, and was out of town before the reaction hit me. Then I was sick and weak and scared, so scared I was trembling as if I had a chill. I got off my horse and bent over, gagging, then I lay down under a cedar tree for a while. After an hour or so I rode on, and when I reached the next settlement I stopped for a drink. After that I felt better.

It was dark when I reached Loma. I saw several fires along the river, too many for Huntley's posse. I wondered if Burke's bunch had got away. If so, Huntley didn't need any help from me. If I walked into his camp, I'd probably have trouble. It seemed to me I'd had all the trouble I ever wanted, so I made a wide swing around the fires and went on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WHEN I REACHED THE CALVERT HOUSE, there appeared to be lighted lamps in every room except the ones upstairs. Someone was in the barn, too, for a lantern hung over the stable door. I rode past the house and dismounted when I reached the barn. Alex Kelsey and Johnny McKay were inside. Alex came out and took the reins.

"Dave?" I asked.

"Still alive."

"Any chance?"

Alex had his back to the lantern so that his face was shadowed. I could not see it clearly, but he hesitated,

then finally said, "I don't think so," in a tone which indicated there was none at all.

"Where's Burke?"

"Pulled out late this afternoon. We was glad to see 'em go."

I had guessed right. Burke and his men were at Loma with Huntley's posse. I walked to the house, so tired that it was an effort to take a step.

Both the Rigdons and Jake Kelsey were in the front room. They nodded at me and I nodded back. I took off my hat and went on into Calvert's bedroom. Janet sat beside his bed, the doctor behind her. Calvert lay on his back, his eyes closed, not moving at all. Janet rose when she heard me come in. Putting an arm around me, she led me back toward the door.

"He's still alive," she whispered, "and as long as he's alive we can pray for a miracle. That's all we can do, just hope and pray. The doctor's done all he can."

I was not one to believe in miracles, but I could not say so. Not when I looked down into Janet's face. She would go on hoping as long as he was breathing. I said, "If the Lord would perform a miracle for any man, He would do it for Dave."

"You're tired, Matt. Go into the kitchen, and Sarah will fix you something."

I walked through the living room and the dining room and into the kitchen. I pulled a chair back and sat down at the table. "Can you fix me something to eat, Sarah?"

She was standing by the stove, her head bowed. She turned, startled, and said, "Of course, Matt," and went into the pantry and began slicing bacon. I was almost asleep, my head tipped forward, my chin against my chest, when the doctor came in and sat down across the table from me. Sarah put the bacon on the stove, filled two cups with coffee, and set them before us.

"He hasn't got a chance," Van Dine said. "Not a chance. But how can I tell Janet?"

"I know," I said. "You can't."

He shook his head, staring down at the black coffee. "I feel so damned helpless when I run into something like this. You've just got to sit and wait for a man to die. When it's a man like Dave Calvert—" He stopped abruptly, drank his coffee, and went back into the bedroom.

Sarah brought me a plate of food, filled my coffee cup, and put the pot back on the stove. She stood with her back to the door casing, for it was a warm night, and the door was open.

I thought of how I had disliked her at first and of how wrong I had been. I remembered dozens of things she had done for Janet and, indirectly, for me, little things, big things, as she was doing now, and I wondered if anyone had ever told her that she was good.

"Sarah, do you know you're a wonderful person?" I asked.

She turned toward me, and then she began to cry. I started to get up, but she motioned for me to sit still. She wiped her eyes and came to the table and sat down beside me. "I cry at the drop of a hat nowadays," she said. "Sometimes I cry before you could drop a hat. I don't know what's the matter with me."

"We all feel like crying now," I said.

I went upstairs and lay down with my clothes on, and I was asleep at once. Hours later, although it seemed as if no time had passed at all, Sarah shook me back to consciousness, saying: "Wake up, Matt. Dave wants to talk to you."

I sat up, and she handed me a cup of black coffee. I got it down, scalding my throat, and washed my face in the bowl on the marble-topped bureau. When I went downstairs, I saw that Jake Kelsey had gone home, but the Rigdons were still there. I walked into the bedroom and sat down beside Janet. Calvert was conscious and smiling.

"If I had this to do all over again, Matthew," he said,

"I wouldn't change a single thing. We've had the shedding of blood, and now the story of what has happened will be in all the newspapers. Maybe this will be enough to right an injustice."

He was no more afraid to die than I was of going from one room to another. He said, " 'Man that is born of woman is of few days, and full of trouble.' " He was looking at Janet. "I hope you won't grieve for me. I'm going to be all right, and I'm leaving you in good hands."

"Of course you'll be all right," Janet whispered. "The doctor says that as soon as you're a little stronger, he'll probe for the bullet, and after he gets it out . . ."

"Janet, we've always been honest with each other. Let's be honest now. Matthew, you were wrong about one thing. You said we were whipped, but we aren't. A man is never whipped as long as he keeps his faith. He's got to hold to what he believes in."

"Yes," I said. "I was wrong."

He had said all he wanted to say. He closed his eyes, and we sat there beside the bed, Janet's right hand in my left one. Van Dine, sitting behind us in the corner, did not move. I suppose an hour passed, one of those ebb-tide hours just before dawn when life seems to be at its lowest point.

In that quiet time, sitting beside the bed, I knew how important the long fight had been to David Calvert. I knew what he meant when he said a man was never whipped as long as he kept his faith, and I knew why he said it. Janet and I would not stay here, but wherever we went, whatever we did, we would need the kind of faith that David Calvert had lived by.

Suddenly he sat up, his hands extended, his eyes wide open but seeing nothing. "Janet! Matt!" We took his hands. I put both of mine over his that was so hard and callused with the years of clearing the land and fencing and building. He said, "I love you both," and then he dropped back, his hand slack and lifeless in mine.

I put my arm around Janet and led her outside into the living room. The Rigdons were still there. I nodded at old Will so that he would know that Calvert was gone, and Janet and I left the house and walked toward the river.

The light was growing stronger with each passing minute. The sky was clear. It would be a warm day, I thought. Janet walked beside me, her head high, her shoulders back.

We sat down, my back against a cottonwood, Janet beside me. The sun tipped up over the horizon far away to the east, beyond the long trough that had been dug through the ages by the river, and I could see the first sharp glint of sunlight on the top of the Wall beside the gap. Little tendrils of clouds which had been hovering around the craggy tip scurried away across the sky.

"Matt, what would I do without you?" Janet whispered. She put her head down on my lap, and the tears came.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WE BURIED HIM two days later. By that time word had gone out across the divide and more than one hundred men were camped along the river, some below the Wall and some above. If Huntley or Burke had come to the valley, the temper of the settlers was such that every one of the lawmen would have been killed.

Jake Kelsey and Alex and young Johnny McKay made the coffin and lined it with white silk cloth from Rigdon's store and covered the outside with black cloth. They bored holes in the sides and made rope handles, and on the morning of the funeral they brought it to

the house and Calvert's body was placed in it.

I asked young Will Rigdon to arrange for pallbearers, and I asked Sarah to sing. Janet had talked to me about having old Will handle the funeral. "I don't care if people do say he's touched," she said. "I've watched him in church, and sometimes it seems to me that God's right there with him and nobody sees Him but old Will."

I asked Will, but he shook his head. "Get a preacher out of San Marino," he said. "A regular preacher."

"No," I said. "Dave would have wanted you." Then I told him what Janet had said.

He turned and gave me his back, then he began rubbing his eyes. "By grab," he said, "I'm getting as bad as Sarah. Don't take nothing to make me cry no more."

"You'll do it, won't you?" I asked.

"I'll try," he said.

On the afternoon of the funeral we propped the front door open and placed the coffin in the living room. Everyone in the valley was there, and men from the other side of the range came, too, all of them filing through the house for one last look at David Calvert's face. I stood on the porch. Janet was upstairs with Sarah. Alex crossed the yard from the barn. He said, "Come out here, will you, Matt?"

I followed him to the barn, not knowing what had happened or what to expect. A dozen men were standing there: Jake Kelsey, the Rigdons, young McKay, and others, the closest friends that David Calvert had had.

Young Will cleared his throat. "This is a funny thing to do in the barn, but we didn't want to bother the folks in the house. You see, Matt, we figured Artie Shafter was the one who killed Dave. It wasn't his bullet, but he done it all the same. We've talked about it a lot. Artie was always a proud one, and we think he carried a grudge ever since Dave made him leave the valley. Of course, none of us know what Dave said or done to Artie, but when Dave told you something he

really meant, you done it. Chances are, Artie came back when he saw trouble was boiling up and laid low till he got his chance. So we were waiting till after the funeral and then we were going to town and get Artie. We knew he might pull his freight, but we didn't think so, him being the ornery son he was. Well, we just heard a little while ago that you got him the day you went to town after Doc, and we want to shake hands with you."

They lined up and shook hands with me, one after the other. Alex was the last. He said: "I was sure wrong about you, Matt. I just couldn't have been more wrong." We went outside, then, and crossed the yard to the house and waited there until everyone had looked at the body. Of all the things that had happened, nothing except Calvert's death itself touched me like this ceremony of shaking hands.

Later the pallbearers carried the coffin outside, and the crowd gathered around it. Janet and I stood beside the coffin while Sarah sang. There were some flowers, not many, for it was too early for flowers, but there were a few. When Sarah finished, I heard no sound except the wind in the cottonwoods and the rush of water in the river, and now and then a sob breaking from someone. But not Janet. She stood beside me without flinching, tall and straight, with all the dignity in the world, the sunlight on her bright hair. Calvert, wherever he was, would have been proud of her.

Old Will stood at the head of the coffin for a long moment before he could control his emotions, then he held up his hands and prayed. He shook his head when he finished and wiped his eyes with the back of a hand. Suddenly he seemed very old and tired.

"Folks, I'm going to be following along behind Dave before long and I'm glad, 'cause he's gone on ahead and blazed the trail. All night I talked to God about it. He said He was mighty happy that Dave was up there with Him. That was where Dave belonged, not down here

where folks do little ornery things and some big ones, too.

"But I don't agree with God. We needed Dave. No matter how tough things got or how worried most of us were, he just kept right on going. The rest of us looked at him and then we could keep on going, too. We've all done some crying the last few days; but God, He told me something I hadn't thought about before. He said: 'Will, you're grieving for yourself. You just stop it now. You're feeling sorry 'cause Dave's not around for you to lean on, but he's still going to help you.' "

Old Will got out his handkerchief and blew his nose. He said: "I thanked God for what He had to say. He gave me quite a boost 'cause what He said about Dave helping us is mighty true. Everyone of us who knew him will get a lot of help from thinking back to the way he lived and the things he done and said. Now, I don't have a lot of fine words to say about the future life. Jesus didn't tell us much, neither. But last night when I was talking to God, He said: 'Will, don't you worry none about it. Not one bit. You'll be surprised when you get up here, maybe, but it's going to be all right.' I figure it is, or Dave wouldn't be there now. And if it wasn't, he'd fix it."

He stepped back and nodded at young Will, and the pallbearers took hold of the rope handles and started up the lane. I don't suppose there ever was a funeral sermon preached as unorthodox as old Will's, or one that was much shorter, but it seemed to me he pretty well covered the ground.

Janet and I followed directly behind the coffin, the rest, bareheaded and reverent, falling into line and keeping step. We crossed the road and climbed the little slope to where Janet's mother was buried beside the open grave that waited for David Calvert.

The pallbearers set the coffin down and stood motionless until the people behind us had formed a big circle

and had become silent; then old Will prayed again and that was all. Janet and I walked back to the house, for I did not want her to watch while the grave was being filled. We sat down in the front room. Presently Sarah came in and sat down, and then the house was so silent I couldn't stand it and I went outside.

I stood on the porch and filled my pipe and smoked it, and thought of the hours I had sat there with Calvert while he puffed away on his meerschaum. I looked across the field to the bullet-pocked hotel, and I thought Ruth would have liked to have been here for the funeral. Calvert would have liked for her to be here, too. That was proof of his bigness. No one else would have stood for it, or understood.

The crowd had scattered. The men who were camped along the river were saddling up and riding away. There would be no more trouble. The company had won. Or had it?

Presently Sarah called me to supper, and I went into the house. I sat down at the table with Janet and Sarah, but I couldn't eat. I got up and returned to the porch. Now it was fully dark, and it startled me when I realized I was looking at Calvert's chair as if I expected him to conquer death and come back to sit there. We would miss him more and more, I thought, as we recovered from the shock of losing him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

AFTER THE FUNERAL we worked as rapidly as we could to pack our personal things for travel or to get rid of them. Some we loaded in the covered wagon: grub, grain for the horses, Janet's saddle, dishes, bedding, the

precious damask tablecloth, our clothes, keepsakes like the lace counterpane on my bed, and a few of the smaller pieces of furniture. But Janet realized from the first that there was very little we could take. We were literally starting over, and she parted with things that I'm sure grieved her far more to lose than she let me know.

I carried my gun everywhere I went. I didn't expect trouble, but as the days passed my resentment grew. I could not have controlled my temper if men had come to evict us, but no one did, and within a week we were ready to leave.

We sold the milk cow and all the horses to Jake Kelsey, except the heavy work team and the gelding we had broken during the winter. My saddle horse was still in town. I would get him when I returned the livery-stable animal. We sold our chickens to the Rigdons, and Janet gave them all the furniture that we could not take in the wagon.

I loaded the wood we had left and piled it back of the church to replace the wood that had been burned the night before Burke and his deputies came. I left the wood wagon with Kelsey because he had bought it when he'd dickered for the animals.

Sarah asked us over for supper the evening before we left. She had cooked a good meal, but none of us felt like eating. Old Will was sick in bed. When we were ready to go, I shook hands with him. He seemed entirely at peace, his great beard settled down over his chest.

"Take care of yourself, Matt," he said.

"You do the same," I said.

That was all. We knew we'd never see each other again. I doubted that he would be alive when the first snow fell next winter. As far as old Will was concerned, life was behind him; for me it was ahead.

Outside, in the other room, it was different. Janet and Sarah were in each other's arms. Both were crying, and I half expected Sarah to ask if she could go with us. But she didn't. Young Will laid a hand on my shoulder

when he shook hands with me. He asked, "Where are you going, Matt?"

"I don't know," I said.

Janet moved to the door and stood there, waiting for me to come, blinking back the tears. I started toward Sarah to shake hands with her, but she made no effort to take my hand. Without any hesitation she put her arms around me and looked up at me, and suddenly it struck me that young Johnny McKay was a fool if he didn't ask her to marry him.

"I love you both," she said. "Please let me see you again some day."

"Of course," I said. "You'll hear from us. Goodbye, Will."

We went out quickly, both of us, I think, conscious that we had drawn the curtain behind us, drawn it so tightly that there would never be any going back. I don't think we wanted to. We walked past the hotel, empty, its windows bullet-smashed, a ghostly thing in the moonlight, and I could not keep from thinking of Ruth and wondering what would happen to her.

Janet said she wanted to sleep in the wagon. It was going to be our home for a long time, and we might just as well get used to it. Besides, there were no beds in the house. I thought she would go to the wagon, but instead she went to the house.

She paused on the porch, and said: "You can hear his old rocker creak and smell his pipe smoke. He called the meerschaum his thinking pipe, and you know, Matt, it always smelled a little different from the briars."

"We ought to go to bed," I said.

I don't think she heard me. She said—and from her tone, I knew it hurt her to say it—"Matt, I can't let them have the buildings."

"I'll take care of it," I said.

The sun was not yet in sight in the morning when I hitched up and tied the gelding behind the wagon. The livery-stable horse was saddled and tied at the hitch

pole in front of the house. I gave Janet a hand up to the seat, and as she took the lines I said, "Don't look back."

She nodded, spoke to the team, and drove away, her face more drawn than I had ever seen it. I waited until the wagon was out of sight beyond a bend in the road, then I went into the house and smashed a lamp. I struck a match and touched the flame to the spreading puddle of coal oil.

I had no need of coal oil in the barn or chicken house or woodshed. There was straw or chips that caught at once. I mounted my horse, waited until I was sure that the neighbors could not put the fire out if they tried, and then I rode away. I looked back only once, and saw that the flames were breaking through the roofs of the barn and the house. The chicken pen and woodshed were practically gone. No one was running across the fields. They knew, I thought.

I went on, bringing my horse up to a gallop, and not slowing down until I reached the wagon. Janet looked at me and I nodded. After that nothing was ever said about it. There was no need. I was very sure of one thing. We had done the only thing we could do. Neither of us would ever doubt it.

We reached San Marino the next afternoon, and camped along the Venito under the same cottonwoods where I had camped years ago with my father. We went to the bank and drew out Janet's money. She was shocked when she found out how much there was, and I had to tell her what had happened.

She squeezed my hand. "Matt, we're rich. With what we got for the livestock, it makes about nine thousand."

"It's enough to start," I said. "What'll we do with it, buy a store?"

"No. Neither one of us would be satisfied to work inside." We started back to the wagon, Janet looking at me intently. Finally she asked, "Matt, could we make a go with cattle?"

"I'd like to try," I said.

She nodded, relieved. "I'm glad," she said. "I was afraid you'd want to do something else."

After supper that evening I was hunkered by the fire filling my pipe when Janet said, "Matt, isn't that Donahue coming?"

I glanced toward the bridge. It was Chip Donahue, all right. I rose, my right hand moving automatically toward my gun, the thought crossing my mind that Linscott had heard we had burned the buildings and that he had sent Donahue to make me pay for them. Or kill me, maybe, for shooting Artie Shafter.

Frightened, Janet moved back toward the wagon. "I'll get the rifle," she said.

"No," I said. "Let's wait and see what he wants."

I stood by the fire, waiting, Janet behind me. Donahue rode up and touched the brim of his hat to Janet, then looked at me. "Heard you were in town," he said, "and figured you'd be down here."

"Have a cup of coffee?" I asked.

"Glad to," he said, and stepped down.

Janet brought a tin cup to the fire and filled it, trembling a little so that a few drops missed the cup. She handed it to him. He said, "Thank you, ma'am," and squatted beside the fire.

I knew, then, that he had not come to make trouble. I squatted on the other side of the fire and, picking up a burning twig, lighted my pipe.

"Where you bound, Matthew?" Donahue asked.

"Don't know," I answered. "Thought we'd try running some cattle if we find a place we like."

"Try North Park," he said. "Cold, but it's got good grass. Not crowded, neither. Mighty few places you can go any more that's not crowded."

"We'll have a look at it," I said.

He finished his coffee and put the cup down. "I reckon you didn't know, or didn't care, but Artie Shafter had a reputation. You plugged him and now

you've got one. Always works that way." He rolled a cigarette, glancing at me, then back at the paper and tobacco. He sealed it and put it in his mouth. He said, "I guess you know you won."

"The company gets the land," I said.

"Hell, there never was any doubt about that."

"How do you figure we won?"

He pointed to the wagon. "That's part of it. The ones that paid the company for the land and are staying are the ones that lost." He lighted his cigarette. "The rest of it is that Linscott resigned and left the country. He didn't say why. And me 'n' Ruth are leaving in the morning."

I stared at him, so stunned I didn't believe I had heard right. "You didn't say you and Ruth, did you?"

"That's what I said. We're two of a kind. Might be I'll amount to something yet, Matthew. You never know what'll happen to a man when he gets the right woman." He rose. "Well, I've got to get along. Just rode by to say *adiós*."

We shook hands and he stepped into his saddle. "So long, Mrs. Keenan. Take good care of that man of yours."

"I aim to," she said.

He rode away. Janet came to me and gripped my arms. "Sometimes I don't understand you, Matt. I didn't know you had killed Artie Shafter."

"No need to tell you," I said. "It was just something I had to do. Like Dave felt about paying for his land."

She put her hands up to my cheeks and brought my head down and kissed me. She said, with an urgency I had not heard in weeks, "Come to bed, Matt."

"Time, I guess."

She went into the wagon, but I lingered by the fire. Across the river and downstream fifty yards or so were some Mexican houses. Something happened that set the dogs to barking, and suddenly a baby started to cry. A man galloped by on the road; then the sound of hoof-

beats died, and presently the dogs stopped barking and the baby went back to sleep.

From the wagon my wife called, "Matt, come to bed."

I said, "I'm coming, Janet."

RETURN TO HELL

When Matt Keenan rode back to the Santone Grant, he wasn't prepared for a bloody cross fire of violence. He hadn't counted on getting involved with his father's woman. And he hadn't planned on falling in love.

He had returned to pay a debt for a dying man. He'd given his word and he aimed to keep it. Now he only hoped that his aim was good enough to keep him alive. . . .

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