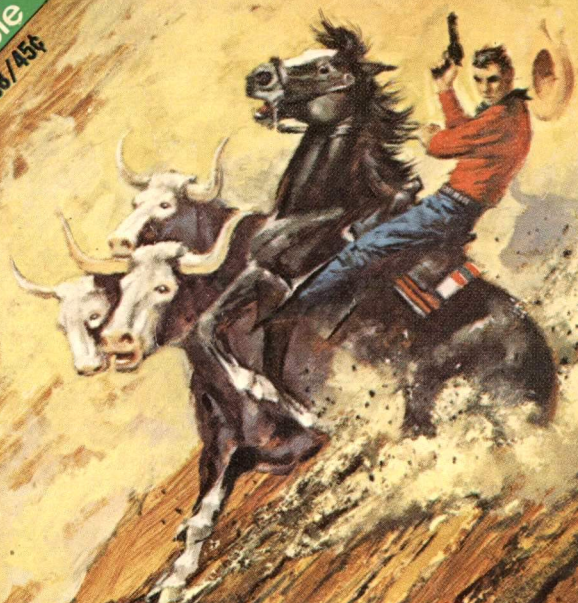


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They aimed to nail his hide to the wall  
— with him in it

# THE RINCON TRAP

DEAN OWEN

## VENGEANCE RANGE

Cleve Trevor came down into Texas with a thousand cattle on the hoof. He'd struck a deal with the owner of the giant Anchor Ranch in the bend of the San Felipe and he rode ahead now to see if the way was clear for his herd.

But Cleve was a Yankee, a former officer of the Union Army, and the old war feelings were still strong in that Texas land. And they were especially strong for him personally, as he discovered when the Rincon trap was sprung.

For Cleve then, it was war all over again—but war without help, war with everyone in the land, war against former comrades and brutal vengeance-seekers alike—and it would take every ounce of his fighting guts, powder-smoke, and riding ability to get him out of it—if that were even possible.

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# THE RINCON TRAP

by

DEAN OWEN

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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## I



HE DEEPER CLEVE TREVOR rode into Texas the more certain he became that something was very wrong. Trevor's hard blue gaze swung to his companion, Laird Meager, who sagged wearily in the saddle of a dun. All the way south they had been alert for trouble, because in this part of Texas watching for Comanche signs was a way of life. During this period Meager had not seemed concerned. But now that they were on his own vast Anchor ranch he seemed to react to every sound, his fat body sinking deeper into the stained gentleman's suit from New Orleans. Once when a coyote darted stiff-legged from a tangle of huisache Trevor thought the rancher would fall in a dead faint.

Trevor's brown face tightened. Silently he cursed his old friend the Colonel, for practically forcing Meager on him as a full partner in their venture.

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Trevor rode with his six foot frame tensed in the saddle of a roan, dusty clothing molded to a wide chest and to the long legs of a cavalryman. He was one year from thirty and if a man was ever to make up for the lost years of the war, it had to be now. Before life slid out from under and age dimmed a man's courage and made him incapable of coping with the dangers of the one big gamble.

Trevor studied the rolling, brushy land ahead. Nothing moved, only occasional bunches of Anchor cattle. But no Anchor riders. He had never intended returning to Texas. But if the Rincon Cattle Company, formed nine days ago in Paso, was to survive, he had no choice.

At last they came to San Felipe Creek where it cut down through high banks of sand under the cloudy September sky. They swung down to let their horses drink. Trevor knelt on the bank, using a hand to cup water to his lips, head turned so he could keep an eye on Meager.

When Meager had had his fill of the creek, he sank tiredly to the bank and looked up at Trevor. "You act like you're afraid I'll put a bullet in the back of your head," Meager said. His laugh was stiff.

"You seem jumpy. I'm wondering why."

"Texas is a tough country. You should know that from the war."

"But you're on your own land. You act scared half to death. There's a reason for it."

Meager climbed to his feet, a soft man of forty who had never been able to spread out enough to fill the shadow of his late father. Like most Texans today, possessed of cattle and land, but a stranger to hard cash. Meager, a fine old Texas name, Colonel McVail had said in Paso.

Meager tightened the cinch on his dun. "You took me as a partner. Why not trust me?"

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"That was the Colonel's idea. Not mine."

"At least you speak bluntly," Meager said, coloring a little.

"I've got my money and my blood invested in a herd of cattle." Trevor waved a brown hand at distant ridges. "They're to fatten up for spring on grass I've leased from you. There's a fortune at stake in the five year contract we have with the Colonel's packing house. I'm not going to let one damn thing wreck it for me. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. This is my chance too, you know."

Trevor stared at San Felipe Creek, a yard wide here where it meandered through tangles of mesquite. At least he had used his own judgment on one facet of the cattle operation. He had insisted on leasing land from Meager for his own herd that should be pushing out of Mexico any day now. He wanted his own cows on grass he controlled, instead of being scattered to hellangone over the uncounted acres of Anchor. San Felipe Creek was the southern boundary of Trevor's lease. Even the Colonel thought it foolish for Trevor to pay for grass. But on this point, at least, Trevor was adamant.

Since midday yesterday he and Meager had been riding across that lease, the northern part of Anchor. A land of deep canyons and brushy slopes. His cowman's eye told him there was sufficient grass for his thousand head of cattle. He never thought he would come back here after four years when he had been the enemy. After deciding to make his cattle fortune in Mexico, recent political unrest had resulted in some of his *politico* friends facing a firing squad. With the Colonel's new Illinois packing house dependent on a regular spring flow of cattle, they had to turn to Texas—and a new partner, Laird Meager.

"If we're going to make Anchor headquarters by dark,"



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Meager said, trying to shed his nervousness, "we best be riding."

Trevor mounted his roan, reined it away from the creek bank so Meager was always in front of him. Was he being foolish? he asked himself. Hell, the Colonel vouched for Meager. And McVail was no fool. Or was he? Trevor thought back to the war years when he had blindly followed Colonel Taylor McVail.

Trevor leaned over the saddlehorn, his nerves prickling from incipient danger. His hard blue eyes settled on Meager's sweating face. "Something isn't right, Meager. It's a feeling I have."

"No need to feel that way—"

"Remember this. If you've crossed me, I'll nail your hide with the first bullet . . ."

Muscles tightened in Meager's soft throat. "The Colonel trusts me. The least you could do—" Meager broke off, licking his lips.

Trevor let Meager lead the way across San Felipe Creek. Turning, Trevor took a final look at his lease. It was the Colonel's plan for him to spend the first night at Anchor, under a roof, in a good bed for a change. For months, before his summons to Paso by the Colonel, Trevor had practically camped out down at San Sebastiano, deep in Mexico. After the first night's rest Meager was supposed to bring out some of the businessmen from Rincon, to explain their position. A Yankee cattle company in Texas, two-thirds of it owned by blue-bellies. One third by a *Tejano* named Meager. The colonel counted on this to lessen any prospects of trouble.

Later in the day Trevor saw a cluster of distant buildings: Anchor headquarters. Still he saw no riders. But for the past hour or so he had the feeling that their approach was being observed from any number of vantage points.

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Once he caught a reflection of sunlight on what might have been field glasses. As a precaution Trevor checked the loads of his .44, eased his Henry rifle in the saddleboot. He recalled the Colonel's parting words before making ready to take the stage back to Illinois: "A lot of Texans will remember your part in the war. You'll need guts. But there's a fortune at stake for the three of us—"

Trevor rode up beside Meager. "We'll ride in at a walk," he said.

Meager licked his lips. "It's my place ahead. Why be so suspicious?" He tried to laugh. The man was a damn poor actor, Trevor reflected.

Now they were close enough to see flat-roofed 'dobe buildings, circular stone horse pens. Tall cottonwoods dripped their fall leaves in the late afternoon breeze.

Suddenly Trevor's long arm whipped out. He caught Meager's dun by a headstall. "The Colonel claimed you've got a mighty big crew. But they seem to be deliberately keeping out of sight."

Meager's mouth that Trevor had considered almost petulant during those business talks in Paso now was white from pressure.

"Likely my crew quit on me," he said in a weak voice, and turned in the saddle to stare at buildings that seemed deserted.

But some fifty head of horses in the nearest pen seemed well-fed. Trevor pointed this out. *Somebody* had to be around to feed those horses.

"Men don't just walk off a job, pay or not, these days," Trevor said thinly, releasing Meager's dun. The two horses stood, tails switching at flies. Standing in the stirrups Trevor stared at the long bunkhouse, the main casa some hundred yards distant. Still there was no sign of life.

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Trevor settled back, making up his mind. "Meager, how far is it to Rincon?"

"Not far—" Meager stared. "Why'd you ask?"

"We'll spend our first night there. You lead the way, pronto."

"But there's no need—" Meager swallowed. "We'll hire on a new crew if mine quit on me."

"I don't like this worth a damn, Meager."

"We'll ride in and have ourselves a drink. I've got some good brandy—"

"In the war I set a few traps myself. And this has got the smell of one." Trevor's right hand moved swiftly. Before Meager could blink a cocked .44 was lined at his belly. "We're riding to Rincon. Now!"

Meager gave a frightened glance toward the buildings. Then he looked at Trevor. "For God's sake, you don't know what you're doing—"

"Move that dun, or I'll do it for you! We're getting the hell out of here!"

"But you don't realize—" Meager's voice was a croak. "They'll ride us down!"

Flame leaped into Trevor's eyes. "Who'll ride us down?" "Holtganer."

The name jarred Trevor, for it had been a long time since it had been uttered in his presence. "What's a Holtganer doing on Anchor?"

Meager averted his dust-reddened eyes. "Ez Holtganer owns it."

Trevor had a mighty urge to backhand the fat man out of the saddle. He glanced toward the buildings. Nothing moved. Turning back to the cowed Meager, he demanded, "Tell the rest of it."

Meager stared fearfully at the revolver. "Holtganer took over six months ago. I—I owed him money—"

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"Go on," Trevor said harshly.

"When the Colonel wrote me from Paso, mentioning his friendship for my father and all, Holtganer got hold of the letter. He told me to keep the appointment. Your name in the Colonel's letter seemed to upset Ez. He ordered me to get you back here, one way or another."

"Even if you had to put a bullet in my skull, I suppose."

"Ez wants you alive. He'd have killed me if I failed in this." Meager was pleading now. "We best ride on in. You try and reason with Ez and maybe he'll listen."

Trevor gave him a hard smile. "Ez Holtganer isn't getting his hands on me. Meager, you start for Rincon. I'll be right behind you—"

"The minute we ride out they'll be on us."

"You heard me!"

"Ez has got a powerful hate for Yankees. You shouldn't ever have come back here—"

"That was the Colonel's idea, not mine. Thanks to your treachery—"

Movement at the nearest corral, some distance from the main buildings, caught Trevor's eye. Sunlight glinted on metal; the barrel of a steadied rifle pointed his way. Touching his roan with the spurs, Trevor reined the sensitive animal aside just as a rifle shot screamed a yard from the horse's left flank. Trevor made a snap shot, but accurate enough, because a stubby man staggered from the protection of the stone wall. He dropped his rifle, his left leg folding under him.

On the heels of the two shots came shouting from the buildings. Over his shoulder Trevor saw men on foot stream into the yard.

A distant voice cried harshly, "I want that blue-belly captain *alive!*"

Meager, his face dead white, sat his saddle as if frozen.

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Trevor sank in the spurs wheeling his roan. Before he could get it into a dead run toward open country, it broke stride, the head dropping sharply. As the horse stumbled, Trevor saw Texas hardpan leap toward his face. The distant pop of a gunshot reached his ears. Desperately he kicked free of the stirrups. He landed hard. Splintery darkness enveloped him..

## II

DAZEDLY, TREVOR came to his knees. His pistol lay several feet away near the snout of the dead horse that had been shot out from under him. Already a bullet hole in its skull was attracting the vanguard of a horde of green flies. Farther away, the man he had shot was dragging himself along the ground, toward a long, 'dobe bunkhouse. He cried out for somebody to help him. But the crew, some fifteen men, were oblivious to everything but Trevor. In the center of the group a tall angry-looking man suddenly threw back his head and laughed. The others joined in, their fiendish glee sweeping the ranchyard.

Trevor climbed to his feet. He picked up his hat, shaped it, jammed it over his sun-bleached hair. He looked around for Laird Meager, saw him standing away from the others, visibly shaking in his black suit. Trevor wanted to kill him.

"Laird, you done a good job on this blue-belly captain," the man who evidently was Ez Holtganer said. There was a Holtganer look around the eyes, Trevor noted.

"It wasn't easy," Meager said. "I hope you're satisfied, Ez."

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Holtganer's face had lost its humor. "Done me good to see one of them Yankee captains from Sheridan's Texas W wallowin' in the dust like a gutted steer."

Trever braced his knees. The fall had jarred him badly. "The war's over and done," Trevor snapped. "Time you Texans learned it."

The men stirred, their unfriendly faces showing dislike for this intruder. Each man armed with belt gun and rifle, looking as if anxious to use the weapons.

"You got guts, I'll say that," Ez Holtganer said in his harsh voice. "To even come back to Texas." He was probably in his early thirties, as tall as Trevor.

"What's this reception supposed to mean?" Trevor demanded, making himself sound tougher than he felt at the moment.

"I figured for you and Meager to come right into the house and set there drinkin'. And then me an' the boys would bust in, laughing. You'd sit there lookin' foolish. I've had you watched for hours. I knew when to expect you—"

"Meager couldn't hide his fear. I smelled it on him. It made me suspicious. All right, Holtganer, you've had your laugh—"

Holtganer tipped back a dirty hat from a V of Indian black hair that grew low on his forehead. His yellow eyes hooked insolently at Trevor's dusty boots, lifted to the long legs, the stained wool shirt, to Trevor's angular brown face.

"You don't look like man enough to murder my brother," he said thinly.

"So that's it." At least Trevor now knew the reason for the trap. That was some progress, however slight. "Bob's death is a matter of army record."

"Is it now?"

"He was my friend—"

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"Yeah, I remember the letter you wrote me. Sayin' what a pity it was that my fine brother Bob had to go get himself dead." Holtganer leaned forward. "Dead with a Yankee bullet in the back."

"Bob was a prisoner of war. Many times I cautioned him against trying to escape. Sentries called on him to halt. He didn't. They shot him."

\* "You shot him."

"You and Bob never had any love for each other. What are you after?"

Holtganer bared large yellow teeth. "I figure my brother's life is worth a herd of Mex cows."

Trevor rubbed at the scraped place on his cheekbone where he had struck the ground. "You'll never get your hands on those cows."

"You'll sign them cows over to me. Or I'll just wait till they cross the river from May-heeco and take 'em myself."

"You touch those cows and hell won't hold you."

Holtganer smiled. "I'm glad you got fight left in you. I'd hate to have got you all the way down here only to have you belly crawl and beg."

"This is a pretty high-handed way to steal a herd of cattle."

"Ain't it, though. You know something, Captain. I could have done you in up at Paso. Or on your way down here. But I wanted you to ride in. Figurin' you had the cow business in your hind pocket. And then I'd put a ring in your nose. Like the ring I got in Meager's."

"You'll never put a ring in my nose."

Trevor stalled for time, shifting his gaze to the frightened Meager. "Looks like you did a good job on the Colonel and me."

"I had no choice," Meager's voice was dead.

"You leased land you don't even own."

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"Those sections north of San Felipe Creek," Meager went on. "Yes, the Meagers still control them. Your lease is valid—"

"The lease won't do you much good, Trevor," Holtganer cut in, "if you got no cows to put on it." He laughed. "Anchor added to my Walkin' R to the south makes me a right big cowman. When the time comes I'll find me a way to sell them cows. Them and that thousand head you figure to spread on that grass."

"I suppose Meager must have sat down in Paso and written you all the details."

"Better than that." Holtganer seemed pleased with himself. "I had a couple of men there. Meager passed the word and they rode hard to tell me."

"At least you put enough fear in Meager to make him do your bidding. He fooled the Colonel."

"But he didn't fool you none, I suppose. Yet you're here in Texas." Holtganer laughed again, and his men joined in. When the yard quieted, Holtganer said, "Know why you Yankees take risks? I'll tell you. All you blue-bellies got a money disease. Anything for a dollar. You're all alike. That Colonel of yours would let you sink in quicksand if it came to savin' you or scoopin' up a sack of gold somebody had spilled."

Trevor frowned, reflecting on this. From a corner of his eye he gauged the distance to Meager, to Meager's dun horse. If he could get behind the man, grab his gun. But would Meager afford any sort of a shield? Or would Holtganer gun him down in order to get at Trevor?

Holtganer said, "Laird, you clear out. Go to Rincon and get yourself a bottle. I told John Prendle to give you credit."

Meager, looking shamed, climbed into the saddle and



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'stared down at Trevor. "I didn't want any part of it, Trevor, but—"

"Fine old Texas name, the Colonel claimed," Trevor said through his teeth. "He'll be surprised at your treachery."

"He might give it some thought," Meager said meaningfully. "But mainly he wants cows for his packing house. These days he doesn't think about much else."

Trevor decided to stretch his bluff. "Holtganer, I want a saddled horse in exchange for the one you had killed. I'm riding to town with Meager—"

"No you ain't. I could put a bullet in your head. And nobody around here would give much of a damn. Least of all our deputy in Rincon. Prendle lost some kin at First Manassas."

"Put a bullet in me," Trevor warned, "and it's murder!" Cleve Trevor stood with his body rigid, as Meager rode out, blue eyes as direct as the gaze of the Texas rancher who confronted him. "I'm not going to argue the matter of your late brother," Trevor went on, his voice strong, "but I didn't kill him."

"Got a witness says you shot him in the back."

"The so-called witness is a liar. Who is it?"

"Somebody you know, Trevor." Amusement touched Holtganer's yellow eyes.

A younger man, in his early twenties, with a horse face and buck teeth, swaggered up. "Let me tell him, Uncle Ez. I want to watch his face—"

"Willie, keep out of it," Ez Holtganer said, without looking around.

But Willie Holtganer didn't keep out of it. He seemed mightily interested in pressing his point. "The Captain will turn white when he hears who he just called a liar. Red Jollet is wider than a barn door an' tougher than slab rock—"

The name caused Trevor to stiffen. "Red Jollet?"

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Ez Holtganer gave him a thin smile. "I figured to string it out a little, to make you sweat. But reckon you'll sweat enough just thinkin' about that grizzly bear."

Trevor's startled gaze swept the circle of men, not seeing the towering brawler who had been his first sergeant at the camp near Laredo.

"Red's my foreman," Holtganer was saying. "He's at a line camp with the rest of my crew. He'll be in tomorrow. Then we'll see how loud you talk."

Of all the happenings on this incredible day, Trevor had not expected to hear the name of his ex-sergeant uttered without rancor by a secesh rancher. "I'm surprised you'd have what your side calls a blue-belly as ramrod."

"Jollet was on our side all the time. Guess you didn't know that, huh?"

"This I'll never believe."

Willie Holtganer's pale eyes were studying Trevor. "Would be somethin' to see, Uncle Ez. The Captain tryin' to use fists against Jollet."

"The Captain and me are partners," Holtganer said with a smile. "I don't want to see him beat to death."

"No partner of yours," Trevor snapped.

"You're signin' them cows over to me," Ez Holtganer stated in his flat Texas voice.

"Never!"

"Now we can do this an easy way, Trevor. Put your name on a piece of paper."

By intent Trevor started waving his arms, letting his voice run wild, which seemed to amuse the Texans. He took a step toward Willie, but his speech was directed to Ez. "I've promised shares to my crew. I can't just sign away—"

"What the hell's a promise?"

"Listen, my foreman's an older man. A damned good man. He saved my life in the war. If my father had lived

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I couldn't feel any closer than I do to Pete." Trevor flung out a hand, looking nervous. His feet slid another few inches toward Willie Holtganer, who stood with mouth open, glaring there at his uncle's right. Willie wore a fancy, ivory-buffed revolver at his belt. "You've got to show a little decency," Trevor rambled on, his voice agitated.

"When your cows hit San Felipe grass," Ez Holtganer said coldly, "I'll have a talk with your crew. If they don't figure to listen, well—there's a lot of buryin' room out there!"

Trevor's mouth twitched. "How can you be so heartless?"

"By God, you *are* beginning to belly crawl," Ez Holtganer muttered in disgust.

Trevor lifted his hands in an attitude of utter dejection. "I think the world of Pete Doud. I couldn't let anything happen to him—"

He sprang forward, his hands dropping. His right clamped to the startled Willie's revolver. The other caught the nephew by the belt. Breath gushed from Willie's lips as Trevor rammed him in the side with the revolver. Some of the men started to close in, guns swinging up. It was a bad moment. Trevor began to sweat. Everything hinged on how much value Ez Holtganer placed on his nephew's hide.

"Hold it, boys!" Ez cried to his men. He eyed Trevor. "Anything happen to Willie and you'll wish I'd killed you right off."

"Follow orders," Trevor spat, "and nothing will happen. Bring up two saddlers!"

"You was a fool not to take my advice," Holtganer snarled, "and done this the easy way, Trevor."

"Hurry it up!" Trevor rammed the frightened Willie again with the gun. Willie gave a yelp of pain and fear.

Holtganer issued an order, obviously not liking it. But with his nephew hauled up short under that cocked re-

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volver, there wasn't much else he could do. Two saddlers were led up, the reins trailed. The man who had brought them stepped back with the others. Trevor wondered if he should try and get his rifle from the dead horse. But it would entail further risk. He decided against it.

He ordered Ez Holtganer and his men to turn their backs. To start walking slowly toward the bunkhouse and casa. "I won't tell you more than once," Trevor finished in a hard voice.

Holtganer said, "I might've knowed you wouldn't belly crawl." Then to his nephew he added scornfully, "Why'd you let him get the jump on you, Willie?"

But Willie made no reply. Even though it was a coolish late afternoon, his face dripped sweat. His pale eyes rolled down to the gun muzzle dug into his side, just under his heart.

Trevor augmented his warning as Ez Holtganer and the men began walking away. "Don't make a wrong move," he called after them. "You may kill me, but not before Willie is dropped."

"If our side had more of your kind," Ez Holtganer muttered over his shoulder, "we might've won the damn war after all."

"This is the only war you've got to worry about," Trevor said, and marched Willie to the nearest horse.

He overheard one of the men whisper, "Don't worry none, Ez. We'll pick him off—"

"Tex, you shut your loose mouth!" Ez snarled to a darkly handsome man. "The Captain ain't foolin' none. There are times when Willie ain't worth a barrel of sand. But he's all the kin I got. Since Bob never come back from the war. Thanks to that same blue-belly Captain."

"Don't use your dead brother as an excuse to try and push me off that San Felipe grass," Trevor warned to Ez

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Holtganer's broad back. The rancher made no reply, but continued walking stiffly toward the house some distance away.

Keeping Willie covered, Trevor mounted first. Then he ordered Willie into the saddle. A little color had returned to Willie's long narrow face. Trevor really didn't know whether he'd get away with the bluff or not, despite what Holtganer had said about his nephew.

Only when he was a mile from the ranch buildings did Trevor let down the hammer of the revolver. He ordered Willie to kick his horse into a run. Trevor trailed him, looking back from time to time. After descending a long rocky slant the buildings were no longer in view. From here on out he could expect to be trailed. A drop of sweat rolled down the back of his neck.

Finally he ordered Willie to pull up, to save their horses. It wasn't long now until full dark.

Willie seemed to have regained some of his Holtganer toughness. "You hadn't oughta crossed Uncle Ez. He'll run you an' your crew clean into the river."

"If your uncle is as short of brains as his nephew," Trevor said sharply, "I won't have to worry too much."

Willie's horse face turned a violent shade of red. "Wait till Red Jollet takes his boots to your face."

"Willie, you won't be around long enough to see much of anything," Trevor said, balancing the revolver on his saddle horn. "Unless you answer a few questions. How did Meager lose control of Anchor?"

"The hell with you—"

Trevor's lips whitened. "Willie, I've gambled too much on this. No Holtganer is going to ruin it."

"You already ruined it for my Uncle Bob, that's for sure."

"I didn't kill him. He was my friend."

"Jollet seen you shoot him in the back."

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"I don't know what kind of a story Red's told your Uncle Ez. But it must have been a whopper to earn him a ramrod's pay."

That seemed to cause Willie a moment's reflection. "By rights I oughta be foreman, not him." Then his hot gaze lifted from a contemplation of the revolver aimed at his stomach. "But all the same—"

"Willie, I asked about Laird Meager." Trevor repeated his question.

"Meager an' Uncle Ez bought some land down near Galveston. Somethin' went wrong. Uncle Ez had Meager's notes. He took over Anchor."

"Meager seems scared to death. There's more to it than you're telling."

"There was a man killed. Uncle Ez says if Meager don't hold still, he'll ride him back to Galveston and a hangrope."

They were climbing out of a draw flanked by sotol and Spanish bayonet. "What about the San Felipe lease? Meager claims he still owns it."

"Belongs to his niece, Kerry. She's been teachin' school over to Laredo. But she's due back. They're goin' to open the school at Rincon again—"

Trevor knew that his reflexes were slow, due to the long push up from San Sebastiano to Paso, and the following hard ride down to this forbidding part of Texas. Grabbing only a few hours of sleep because he spent most of the time with an eye on Meager.

Otherwise he would not have grown careless, there on the hump of ground in the Texas afternoon, with the western sky shot brilliantly with red and gold.

He was glancing at their backtrail, carelessly, when Willie rammed in the spurs. Willie's frightened horse lunged straight at Trevor's mount. As the two horses crashed together, Willie made a wild grab for Trevor's gun. Almost un-

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seated by the impact, Trevor fought to keep his saddle. His right arm swung wide, then slammed the gunbarrel at the side of Willie's head. Willie pitched out of the saddle. His horse ran away, stirrups flapping, as it cut for a brushy rise of higher ground.

Shaken, Trevor got his own horse under control, then rode back where Willie lay unmoving in the sand. Above Willie's right ear a square of skin laid open to the skull was bleeding.

As Trevor started to swing down, he heard a rumble of distant hoofs. Turning in the direction of the sound he saw horsemen burst over the brushy crown of a ridge a half mile away. Ez Holtganer had trailed him with his men, hoping for a break. Well, Willie had redeemed himself somewhat, Trevor supposed, by providing his uncle with that break.

There wasn't time to dismount and try again to use Willie as a hostage. The riders were too close. Without a rifle Trevor was helpless. The only thing to do was ride for it. He did.

Spurring his horse, he tried to cut toward the river where his crew would be coming with the herd. Of course he had no idea just where they would cross. But with any luck he would spot their dust before Holtganer did. However, he didn't have that much luck. The Holtganer men, strung out now in a long hard-riding line, headed him off from the western trail he wanted to take. In order to keep from getting picked off in open brushy country, he was forced to swing east, toward a line of low hills.

At full dark he was still riding. Finally he halted. Hearing no sounds of pursuit, he tied his horse in a grassy pocket and loosened the cinch. Then he sank to the ground, his back to a mesquite stump, revolver in his lap.

Desperately he fought to stay awake. In the quiet moon-

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less night they could sneak up and overwhelm him. He tried to hold off the paralyzing sleep by making plans for the future. What future? he thought glumly. Over west somewhere in this vast land of rock and mesquite, Pete Doud and the crew were approaching with a thousand head of cattle. Heading for the San Felipe grass where they would fatten up until spring. Heading this way instead of north to Paso as had been originally intended. The Colonel told Trevor he would get a message to Doud, notifying the foreman of the change in plans. And there was no reason to suppose the message had not been sent. Colonel McVail was a stickler for details of this sort, even though he sometimes showed a lack of judgment when it came to picking business associates, Meager being a case in point. Trevor's mouth twisted as he considered the predicament.

From the first, even when he and the Colonel were in it alone, Trevor had been aware of the risk. But in these post war years what wasn't a risk? It was a time when a man with nerve, cows and grass could make his pile. Trevor intended to make his. And no yellow-eyed Texan was going to ruin his chances.

As he hunched there in the chill evening he tried to judge his position by the stars he could barely see through an overcast. San Felipe Creek lay to the north. A big stretch of grass, but then Trevor had expected to raise a lot of cattle. The thousand head of Mexican beef would be the nucleus of a herd. Before he could rely on an annual calf crop, Trevor would need Anchor cows for the first few years of the contract with the Colonel's packing house. In time, Trevor had intended to be on his own. Even in Paso he had not liked the idea of having to rely on a man like Meager. He had taken steps to make himself



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independent by leasing land from Meager. But Meager's treachery had changed a lot of things.

He reflected on his hasty trip to Paso at the Colonel's bidding and learning the Colonel intended taking in Meager as a full partner. When Trevor objected the Colonel pointed out that no longer could Mexican sources be counted on for cattle. And until the political situation cleared up there, any business venture was foolhardy. No, the Colonel explained, Mexican cows were no longer available in the numbers he would need to supply his new packing house. They needed a third partner, a Texan, with cows and land.

At their first meeting in Paso, Meager was drunk. The Colonel excused it, saying, "He needs a strong man to run Anchor. You could be that man, Cleve. A mighty rich man in Texas—"

"I have a feeling about him, Colonel—"

"Cleve, you were a resourceful officer. I expect you to be equally resourceful as a cattleman. Establishing a cattle company with Yankee partners won't be easy down there. But you can do it. Now quit carping about Meager's drinking. He comes from good stock. His father was my friend—"

And that ended it unless Trevor wanted to turn his back on the Colonel and try and go it alone.

Sometime during the night Trevor slept. Shortly before dawn he drew in his belt against a rumbling stomach. From here on out every mile he traveled in Texas offered a threat. Holtganer's crew was out there, with Ez Holtganer intent on grabbing Trevor's herd. Pete Doud, past forty, with a stiffened left arm sustained when he tried to shield the already-wounded Trevor from sniper fire, would fight for those cows. The rest of the crew Trevor had picked up near Monterey, Anglos disillusioned with the turbulence of Mexico, eager to get back to the States.

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By midmorning Trevor managed to club a rabbit. He made a smokeless Comanche fire and wolfed the half-cooked meat. Then he pressed on.

Late in the day, always working cautiously toward the river, he saw a finger of dust against the sky. His heart leaped when the cloud expanded. Maybe his herd and his men. Or perhaps only some vaqueros driving horses. He took some risks by quickening his pace, his blue gaze slitted against the sky. Horses wouldn't make a dust cloud that size. It was made by cattle. But that didn't necessarily mean they were his own CT branded *vacas*.

As he topped a rocky spine of ground he spotted riders bunched to his left. All standing in the stirrups, peering at the dust cloud. The rider in the center was staring through field glasses. Ez Holtganer. Beside him, his hat riding high because of a head bandage, was his nephew Willie. So far, they hadn't seen him.

There was no way for Holtganer or Trevor to know whether the dust meant the Mexican herd or not, whether Pete Doud was ten miles away or fifty, or had even crossed the river yet. Trevor felt a strong hunch and decided to play it.

From the position of the dust, whatever had stirred it up was no more than three miles dead ahead.

### III

LINING OUT the horse he had taken from Anchor, Trevor put it to a dead run. If he didn't get the jump on the Holtganers, they would cut him down with their superior rifle

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range. His only chance was to outdistance them. If the dust cloud was not stirred up by Doud and his men, then Trevor hoped to be able to reach the river. In Mexico he would find his herd.

As the horse took the bit one of the Holtganer men saw the swiftly-moving horse and rider. A shout broke the stillness, and they were after him.

For a long held breath Trevor expected a rifle shot to slam into his back. Not until he was up a slant and over into towering boulders did he draw a reasonably even breath. Bent low in the saddle to dwarf the target, he glanced back. A towering wall of brush hid the pursuers.

Over another rise of ground and then at full tilt down a long grassy slope. Ahead he suddenly saw a mass of brown hides. Riding at point was a familiar figure with a left arm angled oddly at the reins. No mistake, it was Doud, reining in now to peer at the rider racing towards him.

"Petel" Trevor shouted and Doud spurred away from the herd, waving his hat now in recognition. Other riders stood up in their stirrups, trying to see what was happening. Drivers of Trevor's two supply wagons halted their teams.

Trevor glanced over his shoulder. No sign of Holtganer now. Ez was too smart to ride hell bent into trouble. He'd likely spread his men and try to box them in.

Doud was hauling in his horse as Trevor reined in. "Cleve, this is a surprise, you meetin' up—"

"Cow thieves!" Trevor waved a hand at his back trail. "May have to make a stand!"

Doud's sharp gray eyes studied the long slant. "Trouble already?" he said grimly. He was a solid man who rarely trimmed his long graying hair or his beard. Trevor swung down tiredly and singled out Bill Aspen, a stocky, brown-

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faced Texan—one of the more dependable men Trevor had hired on in Mexico.

"Aspen, saddle me a fresh horse!" Trevor hadn't intended for it to sound like a military order. Aspen shot him a look, but hurried away with the spent Anchor horse.

Doud gave a tug at his mustache, relating how Colonel McVail had sent a messenger. "Said I was to swing toward San Felipe Creek. That we was to change our drive to this part of Texas. You an' him got a new partner, huh?"

"Some partner," Trevor said through his teeth as he glanced at his herd bunched now on the grassy floor of a wide valley. Quickly he recounted Meager's treachery, the entry of Ez Holtganer into the picture. When he mentioned Red Jollet, Doud swore. Doud had been corporal, transferred to Texas with Trevor when both were wounded.

"Sergeant Red Jollet," Doud said, studying Trevor's face. "Don't you ever try to fist fight him, Cleve."

"Some people around here seem to favor the idea."

"He made triple his army pay by winning money in them saloon brawls—"

A bullet fanned high overhead. Trevor shouted his orders, then mounted the fresh horse Bill Aspen had brought him. So far, no enemy riders had shown themselves. Trevor waited, nerves tensed. Horns flashed in the sunlight as the herd began to stir, a crazy apprehension visible in their rolling eyes.

"Keep 'em tightly bunched!" Trevor cried.

A spate of rifle fire swept the valley, the slugs cutting close. Now the Holtganer men could be seen, coming in from the rear, streaming down from a ridge screened with oaks. Trying to trick them by changing the direction of expected attack. Trevor smiled grimly and thought, I'm an old hand at this sort of thing, Holtganer.

As Trevor turned to shout something to Pete Doud, he

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saw the foreman's horse falter. Before it piled up, Trevor swung close. He hauled Doud onto his own saddle. Burdened by the double weight, Trevor's horse nearly went down. At the last moment it regained its footing.

"Try to keep the cows from running!" Trevor yelled at those of his men near enough to hear his voice above the shouting, the din of screaming lead.

Tension washed over the herd like a blast of cold wind. Powdersmoke bit at Trevor's throat as he set Doud on the ground. Trevor was firing the rifle Bill Aspen had placed in the boot of the fresh horse. He covered Doud until the foreman ran to a deadfall to take shelter. Then Trevor snapped off three quick shots at the knot of Holtganer riders rushing down the slope.

One of Trevor's men, Edmunds, with a darkly pitted face, tried to haze a dozen or so cows that had broken wildly from the main body of the herd. Trevor saw him flop suddenly across the horn, drop his rifle, then hang on with both hands.

Wheeling his horse, Trevor sent it lunging toward the wounded rider. But four Holtganer men, spurring down a steep grassy hill, tried to close in. Trevor squeezed off at the lead horseman. Impact of the bullet drove the rider out of the saddle. The other three pulled aside. Behind Trevor the cows were becoming harder to handle. Horns flashed in the feeble sunlight. At that moment Trevor saw Ez Holtganer and tried to bring him down. But the range was too great.

"Stampede!" A voice yelled hoarsely.

The Holtganer men were suddenly wheeling away, streaking back upslope to escape the frenzied cows that swept toward them like a wave from a dynamited dam.

Straight up the valley the thousand head of Mexican cattle streaked, shaking the earth. One of Trevor's men was

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crumpled on the grass. It was Edmunds. If not dead, he would be in a matter of seconds. Desperately Trevor tried to get a burst of speed out of his weary horse. He was too late. Driving forelegs of the lead steers crushed the body, and then Edmunds was completely engulfed. Trevor felt sick as he reined away in a wild effort to escape a similar fate. He made it, his horse at a dead run.

Doud swung close and gestured wildly at the Holtganer men disappearing over the oak-lined ridge. "They've turned tail!" he shouted above the roar of the stampede.

Trevor couldn't blame any man for running. It was not a time to fight. It was a time for a man to ride for his life.

Once Trevor was certain the Holtganers had quit for the day, Trevor began to hand signal orders to Doud. The herd must be turned. It was three miles before they ran themselves out. By late afternoon the stragglers had been rounded up.

A deep rage worked through Trevor as he counted his men. Two dead, Edmunds and a man named Corning. On the slope he later found the unrecognizable remains of three Holtganer men and two horses.

That evening Trevor split his crew, seven men to guard the spent herd. Six rolled up in blankets. Trevor, sitting tensely by a small fire, wearily kept one eye open for raiders. Early darkness had brought a stillness to the valley. An hour ago the dead had been buried. A bad day all around. But they'd had some luck. Holtganer had not hit them with his entire crew. The other half were off somewhere at a line shack with Red Jollet, so Holtganer had told him earlier. Otherwise the ending might have been different.

Aside from the loss of his two men, how many precious pounds had the herd run off in the senseless stampede?

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Both wagons had been wrecked. With repairs the hooligan wagon would be reasonably serviceable, Doud assured him.

Firelight touched Pete Doud's beard as he sipped coffee. Trevor saw that the foreman was favoring that left arm more than usual. One thing Trevor would never forget: Doud saving his life in the war. And Doud had nearly been killed today when his horse went down.

They talked about the Holtganers. "I remember Bob Holtganer," Doud said. "I felt bad when he got killed."

"He wasn't much like his brother, Ez."

Doud swore. "Looks like we got ourselves a rattlesnake for an enemy."

"Two rattlesnakes." Trevor reminded him about Red Jollet.

"I never gave a damn for him even when he was on our side."

"Maybe he wasn't on our side, even then. I haven't made up my mind about that. Not that it makes much of a damn now." Trevor absently rubbed at the old wound on his right thigh that had begun to throb. A sniper bullet through the thigh instead of the chest had earned him the transfer to Sheridan's command in Texas, with Colonel McVail crying, "My best field officer assigned to guard prisoners of war. What folly!"

For a time Trevor and Pete Doud were stationed near Laredo, where Red Jollet had been acquired as sergeant. Here certain prisoners taken in the Brownsville campaign were held, Bob Holtganer among them. "I've got to get home and run things," Bob used to say, "before Ez and Willie act like real Holtganers and blow up the country. I don't trust Ez worth a damn."

"The war can't last forever," Trevor would assure him when they would smoke and talk politics or philosophy.

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Bob got tired of waiting for the war to end. Guards killed him when he tried to escape.

Doud stuck a stub of cigar in his bearded mouth. "What you aim to do about that Meager?"

"What can you do to a weakling like that? A drunk. I suspected it from the first. Tried to tell the Colonel. But you know from experience you don't tell McVail anything he doesn't want to hear."

"Easier to move a balky mule."

"There's a deputy sheriff-saloonman in Rincon," Trevor said. "I think it's time we had a little law around here."

"He won't turn against his own kind," the older man warned. "You just might earn yourself a hole in this Texas ground."

"I've got a little money on deposit at the Paso bank. Pete, we better think about hiring on more men."

"Cleve, forget the Colonel's contract. Take your cows north—"

"We wouldn't get fifty miles without Holtganer riding us down. This time with his full crew."

"Looks like you stuck your bare foot in a hornets' nest."

"Enough smoke and fire will drive even hornets out of their nest."

Trevor wrapped himself up in one of the Saltillo blankets Doud had brought out of Mexico and which had not been too badly trampled by the crazed herd. Trevor took a turn at guard duty, slept another hour, then was up when the east was streaky with gray.

After a cold breakfast, Trevor told Doud he was going to Rincon. He put a hand on the foreman's bad arm. "Pete, if Holtganer jumps you while I'm gone, ride for it. Your skin is more important than a herd of Mex cows."

"Givin' up like this don't sound right."

"I'm not giving up," Trevor said fervently. "Not by one



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hell of a mile. If Holtganer jumps us again, I'll ride clear to Austin and shout my complaint at *politicos*."

"You'll be welcome there like Spanish fever in the bull herd."

"You've got shares in this venture, Pete. And if things go wrong here, we'll meet in Paso and have another try at it."

Despite Doud's insistence that he not ride to Rincon alone, Trevor was adamant. Hat tipped against the climbing sun, Trevor rode out, wondering just how a Yankee went about taking on the state of Texas.

### IV

RINCON WAS A collection of 'dobe houses and a few frame buildings such as the Southwest Store, Prendle's Great Texas Saloon and a hotel with a sagging second floor gallery. Trevor dismounted in front of the saloon. The town seemed strangely deserted. Inside he asked a barkeep where the deputy owner of the saloon could be found. The man said there was a "doin's" at the south end of town. The deputy wasn't expected back till late. They were reopening the school today.

As Trevor left he saw Laird Meager staggering along the walk. The former owner of Anchor came to a weaving halt when he saw Trevor.

"Am I to believe that you stepped fresh from the grave?" Meager said thickly, leaning against the saloon wall for support. "I thought Ez would have shot you by now."

Trevor felt a cold anger at the man who had tricked

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him. "I should wring your miserable neck," he snapped and rode out while Meager made some garbled, excited speech that Trevor failed to catch. The hell with him, he thought, as he cut toward a grove of trees where he could see a flat-roofed building decorated with bunting. Teams and saddlers were tied off under cottonwoods while half a hundred people milled around a long table. Women in starched dresses and Sunday hats were serving cake and coffee.

Before Trevor quite neared the end of the table, a girl with bright hair stepped up, holding out a tin cup of coffee. "Welcome," she said pleasantly. "I don't believe I've seen you before—"

"Name's Trevor, ma'am. I'm looking for John Prendle."

Something in his voice must have worried her. When he did not take the cup she set it back on the table. "Please," the girl said quietly, "I don't know what your business is. But can't it wait until the festivities are over?"

Trevor smiled despite his black mood. She was quite pretty, slender in a yellow dress, her pale hair tightly braided. Probably one of the older students. "I'm sorry, but my business can't wait. I won't disrupt your day."

He had caught sight of a lank man gone to paunch, wearing a badge and talking to some men in range hats. Now they turned to stare. Sight of a grim stranger in their midst seemed to put a chill over the gathering. Women ceased their chatter to stare at the big man in the dusty clothes. A stubble of beard on his jaws.

As Trevor came up, Prendle's face changed from that of a genial saloon keeper participating in a civic function, to the grimness associated with his badge. Trevor introduced himself and asked to speak to him alone. Prendle frowned, followed him a few steps, but some men trailed along, their eyes curious.

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"You're the man who leased the Meager San Felipe grass," Prendle said, sizing him up.

"I'm surprised the validity of the lease would even be recognized. In view of everything that's happened."

"I best put it to you straight, Trevor." Prendle eyed the big gun on Trevor's hip. "I ain't the sheriff. He's clean over to Valleyheart Junction—"

"I don't intend riding all that way. Unless you refuse to take action."

Prendle's long face showed color. "I take action, if I see fit."

"I want assurance that my cows will be safe on the San Felipe lease. I don't want any more stampedes."

"Ain't no Texas law against stampedes that I know of." Prendle smiled. Men crowding around burst into laughter.

Trevor's blue eyes went cold. He'd been laughed at quite enough. He was remembering the laughter in the Anchor ranchyard. "I only want to explain that Holtganer stampeded my cows. Two of my men were killed. As the sheriff's representative I want you to point out the law—"

The pale-haired girl who had offered Trevor the coffee said angrily, "Oh, I just knew we couldn't have a civilized gathering without some ruffian spoiling it."

A hush fell over the crowd and a man said, "Here comes Ez now."

Trevor spun. Ez Holtganer was just dismounting at the rail by the cottonwoods. With him was his nephew, his hat canted at an angle from the bandage he still wore on his head. Last but not least was Holtganer's foreman, the towering Red Jollet. Holtganer said something to his foreman. Jollet scowled, but stayed behind. Holtganer came on alone.

Holtganer, thumbs hooked in his shell belt, nodded pleasantly at the deputy. "John, this here is the fella that shot Bob in the back."

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A gasp went up from the crowd. Prendle said firmly, "Ez, Bob was kilt in the war. I don't hold with Yankees comin' down here to make cow money, but damn it, the war—"

"Trevor an' his Yankee Colonel," said Holtganer, the tight mouth grinning. "Last year in *Chee-cago* I tried to get a contract from this here Colonel. I figured it would help all of us down here. Even things up a little for the war them blue-bellies cheated us out of winning."

A murmur of anger rose from the crowd.

Holtganer, his smile deepening, continued, "But the Colonel said he had this old friend, this Captain named Cleve Trevor. Said this Captain was one *mucho hombre* when it come to the cow business."

"I'm staying on that San Felipe lease," Trevor cut in coldly. "That's all that concerns me now."

"That lease ain't worth a Jeff Davis dollar." Holtganer chuckled. "Not unless his niece honors it."

"Meager or Meager's niece," Trevor snapped, "so far as I'm concerned, the lease is good. Her uncle is a blackleg—"

Prendle stiffened. "Laird may have—er—weaknesses, meb-be. But the Meagers are an old family hereabouts."

The pale-haired girl pushed her way through the crowd, her eyes snapping. She peered up into Trevor's face. "This has gone far enough. We're dedicating our school and you're not welcome—"

"Ma'am, I'm trying to prevent further trouble. It's my only reason for stating my position—"

"I'm hardly interested in your position. After you called my uncle a blackleg—"

Trevor caught a movement from the corner of his eye. As he tried to turn something crashed against the side of his face, so much power behind the blow that his feet shot out from under. He struck the gravelly yard, skinning his

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forehead. Through his ringing head came Red Jollet's powerful, sneering voice.

"Captain suh—"

Trevor turned his head, and his wavering gaze centered on the figure that towered above him. Jollet still carried his solid shoulders at an arrogant angle.

Ez Holtganer said, "Tell the folks how my brother Bob died."

"The Captain here told Bob he could escape. Then when Bob was a swimmin' the river, the Captain shot him in the back."

"You are a liar!" Trevor shouted, and somehow got his legs under him. Jollet started forward, dust plunging from his wide boot soles. Ez Holtganer blocked him.

Willie Holtganer looked disappointed. "Let 'em have at it, Uncle Ez."

"Willie, shut your mouth before you catch flies."

Jollet was grinning at Trevor. "How are you, Captain suh?" He made a grand bow, sweeping off his hat, greasy hair tumbling about his face. The mock servility brought laughter from some of the crowd. For them, Trevor knew, there hadn't been a hell of a lot to laugh about in recent years.

Trevor shook his head, trying to restore the senses addled when Jollet's sneak blow knocked him down. "I see you've lost none of your venom," he said. "A shame that good men on both sides had to die while you survived."

Willie voice rose shrilly, "Fight him, Red. You hate him enough—"

"Hate ain't a strong enough word." Jollet's eyes, small as blue pebbles, bored into Trevor's face. "You broke me to ranks, remember?" Jollet advanced, smiling, shirt sleeves pushed up on thick forearms. Trevor backed to give his

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head time to clear. He heard the Meager girl shouting a protest at this savagery. Nobody paid any attention.

It was John Prendle who thrust himself in front of Jollet. "We ain't goin' to have these proceedings busted up by a brawl." A spattering of applause and sighs of relief came from the ladies.

Trevor, still trying to recover from Jollet's blow, had to admire the deputy's nerve. Younger males in the crowd, urged on by Willie Holtganer, whooped for a fight. Prendle shouted them down and turned to Ez Holtganer. Ez stared at Trevor out of his yellow eyes. And Trevor knew he was debating whether to swallow Prendle's order or to let Jollet go ahead with it.

"You're right, John," Holtganer said finally. "Red, you leave Trevor alone. For now."

Trevor rubbed the side of his bruised head. "You ever come for me again, Jollet," he warned. "I'll meet you with a bullet. Not a fist."

Kerry Meager, who was serving coffee and cake to Willie Holtganer, cried, "Can't you understand, Mr. Trevor? We don't want you here."

"Yankee gunhands we don't need." Ez Holtganer smiled, enjoying Trevor's unpopularity.

"Don't ruin the day for everybody here," John Prendle warned when Trevor hesitated.

"Me ruin the day?" Trevor saw the Meager girl standing stiffly in starched and ruffled apron, giving him the kind of look a woman shows when an insect crawls on her kitchen floor. Beside her stood Willie, the beaver teeth munching cake. Jollet, towering above the rest, stared coldly at Trevor.

"Prendle, I've stated my case," Trevor said in a reasonable tone. "I hope things can be worked out legally from here on out."

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"The legal way includes arresting a man for making a public nuisance out of himself," Prendle stated, a thread of impatience in his voice. "If you're not out of this yard in one minute—"

Trevor rode off, his back stiff. You couldn't argue against all those men and a deputy sheriff. It was up to Prendle now whether or not the range erupted in warfare. Damned if he would let them run him out. There was too much at stake for that. Once a man started running there was no end to it. . . .

For two days Trevor spread his cattle out on the lease, picking the best grass, making sure there would be a minimum of overgrazing. He saw no sign of the enemy, but somehow word got around concerning the threats Holt-ganer had been making in town. Trevor was not too surprised when informed by Pete Doud that two of the men had quit.

"Cleve, this ain't like the war," Doud pointed out. "You got no army behind you now."

Trevor sprawled on his bedroll drinking coffee. In these past days Doud had salvaged enough parts from the two smashed wagons to make one. It would carry what was left of their gear. The men circling the herd looked disgruntled. Others were rolled up in their blankets.

"Pete, I'm not going to quit, if that's what you're hinting," Trevor said. "We've got this contract with Colonel McVail. It's a plum that comes once in a lifetime." Trevor cleared his throat, thinking of the lost years of the war. "Next year I'll be thirty. I may never have another chance."

He was tired and depressed. For some reason he kept remembering the Meager girl and how she had denounced him at the gathering. So damned stiff in the spine, so proper it screamed from every fiber. She had a lot of room to talk. Kin to a thief like Laird Meager.

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Next day Trevor sent a man to the river to try and hire on vaqueros. Two days passed, and still no visit from Holtganer.

"Maybe Prendle's badge has got him scared," Trevor muttered.

"You don't believe it and neither do I," said Doud.

Toward the end of the week the man who had ridden to the river returned empty-handed. He was a dark skinned man with Mexican blood named Joe Graves. "They hear that a war is shapin' up between you and Holtganer."

"I never knew a vaquero who wouldn't ride through hell's front door. Go back and offer a bonus."

"They figure that a coffin is a mighty tight place for a man to spend his money."

Trevor sent him to relieve Cummin, one of the riders who had been two days on lookout. An hour later Graves returned, face pale. He had found Cummin dead, shot in the back. His saddle horse also shot dead.

White-lipped, Trevor rode out with Pete Doud and Graves to verify the grim discovery. There wasn't much sign, only the tracks of a single rider soon lost on hardpan. Trevor returned and helped dig a grave. Doud stripped saddle and bridle from the dead horse.

On the return trip to camp Doud said, "You figure it's Holtganer?"

"Tracks led toward Rincon. But it's him all right."

"Maybe he's not the one killed Cummin."

"When you go after a snake you don't cut off the tail. You take the head." Trevor swore at the needless waste of life.

Doud gave him a glance. "I'll go with you," the foreman said, guessing his intention.

Trevor set his jaw. "The same orders stand as before. If the herd is hit while I'm gone, you pull out."



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"You're not goin' alone, damn it—"

"In the war you took my orders. Take them now."

"It's too long a gamble."

Trevor's smile was bitter. "You tell me just when managing to stay alive west of the Mississippi wasn't a gamble."

With the sun warming the side of his face Trevor rode up through thickets of mesquite, to the sand ridges that bristled with sotol and huisache. This was a forbidding and bloody land. Trevor came to the fresh grave of his rider and bared his head. Trevor thought of the futility of life, the struggle and heartache. And finally it all ended up the same. A hole in the ground.

God, there must be something more to it than that. He started riding again. In Rincon he'd ask a few questions. If he had any decent luck he might even find Ez Holtganer there. It would save him a ride out to Anchor.

## V

AFTER THE USUAL fried steak and greasy beans for the morning meal, Willie Holtganer watched his chance and called Tex Hurley down to one of the stone horse pens where they wouldn't be overheard. Tex Hurley was a tall, rangy man with a rather handsome face. He prided himself on his looks. Now he was smouldering, had been for a few days ever since that blue-belly captain had put a hole in Sam Bissel's leg. The wound was a bad one, but Bissel wouldn't go to town and see the doc. He was afraid the doc would take off his leg as he'd seen done in the war.

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Tex Hurley thoroughly hated Trevor for doing that to his friend.

"That blue-belly sure put a mean slug in Bissel," said Willie.

Hurley made an animal sound deep in his throat. "I'll stuff him with gunpowder and roll him into a campfire—"

Willie gave a careful look around the yard to see that no one was within earshot. He and Tex had ridden across the river a few times to play monte. Willie considered him a fair enough friend. One thing in Hurley's favor, he despised Red Jollet.

"Red's getting' too close to my uncle," Willie said in a conspiratorial tone of voice. "I don't like it."

"That *pelado*," Hurley muttered. None of the older Holtganer hands had liked it when Ez returned from a trip to Laredo with Jollet in town. Until then, Ez Holtganer had acted as his own foreman. Others felt they should be in line for the job in case the boss ever decided to name a ramrod. "If you ask me," Tex Hurley went on, "Red is blue-belly to his toenails. He never spied for our side."

Willie agreed and took a hitch at his gunbelt. So far as he could tell, the only bond between his uncle and Red Jollet was their mutual hatred for Trevor. Jollet hating him because he had caused him to lose his stripes in the war, which made it harder for him to spy for the Confederacy. Or so Jollet claimed. Nobody could deny that Jollet was Texas. He was a native of Laredo.

"Uncle Ez would feel right kindly toward you and me if we was to bring in Trevor," Willie said.

"I'd like it for what he done to Sam. But what's this got to do with Jollet?"

"Red wouldn't look so good if we done the job. He killed one of Trevor's lookouts the other night. Claims he's goin'

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to keep on till he gets the Trevor himself. But we just might beat him to it."

"Yeah, maybe Ez won't think that big hellion is such a good foreman after all."

"The job should be mine. Everybody knows that." Willie rubbed the side of his head where Trevor had struck him with his own gun. "In all this fightin'," Willie continued, "somethin' might happen to Uncle Ez. Then I'd be runnin' things."

"Ez sure does work you purty hard at that."

"Like a cowhand. And me bein' his kin. He cheated Pa out of his share of Walkin' R. Ez grabs everything for himself. If Uncle Bob hadn't died in the war Ez would have taken his share."

"If you get to be top man, what then?" Hurley asked, eying him. "What about me?"

"Reckon you know the answer to that, Tex. But we got to move slow. One thing at a time. Get Trevor and make Jollet look bad. It just might get that son fired."

"Yeah."

"But don't let on to Ez what I've been talkin' about," Willie warned coldly.

"Don't worry," Tex Hurley assured him. "I'd sooner pull a rattler's fang with my bare hand, than rile Ez."

Willie Holtganer led the way to a pair of mustangs left near the house for any emergency. And this was sure enough an emergency, Willie figured. Until Trevor was finished, Uncle Ez would be meaner than a bull with a thorn in his mouth.

"We'll catch Trevor alone," Willie said. "That's when we'll finish him off."

"Just so we're sure of him."

Because Rincon was on the way to the San Felipe lease where Trevor had his camp, Willie suggested they stop off

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for a drink. Tex Hurley agreed. He wanted to talk to the Doc about the bullet wound in Sam Bissel's leg.

As the two riders neared John Prendle's Great Texas Saloon in Rincon, they saw Kerry Meager on the walk, yellow head touched by sunlight. She was talking to her uncle.

"Right is right and you know it, Uncle Laird," she said angrily, her voice carrying to the pair of horsemen.

"Trevor should never have come back to Texas," Laird Meager muttered, and lost a little color at sight of Willie Holtganer and Tex Hurley pulling in at the saloon rack.

"It was underhanded to lead him on," Kerry continued, ignoring her uncle's efforts to hush her up, now that they had eavesdroppers.

"Kerry, I wish you'd keep out of it," Meager said worriedly.

"What will your colonel friend think of you when he learns the truth?"

"McVail may ponder it a moment. Then he'll simply look for another cattle source. The business is too big to worry about the fate of one man."

Willie, dismounting, saw Kerry's shoulders stiffen as she said, "Then McVail isn't much of a man. And neither are you, Uncle Laird."

Meager groaned. "I didn't count on you coming back here to Rincon to teach school—"

"Well, I am here," Kerry added, "and I have to get back to my pupils. Now you ride out and take Mr. Trevor my message."

Gathering her skirts, she flung Willie and Tex a cold glance then hurried away, crossing a series of vacant lots on her way to the schoolhouse.

Willie watched the girl until she entered the school building. Because of the day's heat she left the door open. One of these days, Willie reflected as he tied his horse,

she just might give him more than a nod if he turned out to be the biggest cowman in these parts. Even if he was homely and no match for her in looks.

Tex Hurley had already entered the saloon, but Willie lingered to lay a hard eye on Laird Meager. The fat man stood on the saloon gallery, seeming lost in thought.

"Hi ya, Laird," Willie said. Meager bobbed his head and started away, but Willie caught him by a soft arm and swung him around. "Kerry mentioned you takin' a message out to Trevor. What message she talkin' about?"

Meager managed to stiffen his spine. "Willie, I'm afraid that's none of your business."

Willie's temper gave way. For some reason nobody ever took him for a tough Holtganer man. Not even Meager, this member of a once powerful family now gone to fat and ruin. Willie flung out an arm, knocking Meager against the saloon wall.

"Anything that happens around here is Holtganer business," Willie said savagely.

The raised voices brought John Prendle to the batwing doors. "Willie, you leave him alone," the saloonman ordered.

"No need for you to butt in, Prendle." Willie Holtganer tried mightily to make himself sound tough.

Prendle was unimpressed. The bar owner-deputy sheriff inclined his head at Willie's arm that still pinned Meager to the saloon front. "Willie, I said to leave him be."

Willie hesitated, studied Prendle's long face, then dropped his arm. He swaggered inside, looking around. Tex was the only customer. Tex Hurley was pouring himself a drink. Cursing under his breath, Willie helped himself to the bottle on the bar. Even whisky did not thaw the knot in his belly. It galled him that nobody ever took him seriously.

After the third drink, Tex said, "I'm goin' over and see if Doc' Norton's in. Want to talk to him about Sam."

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"The hell with Sam Bissel. Let's get out to the San Felipe lease an' finish Trevor." Willie Holtganer's voice shook with suppressed rage.

"If Sam does lose a leg over this," Tex said thinly, "shoot-in' will be too good for that blue-belly captain."

"Let's get at it, then. Longer we wait—" Willie broke off as Prendle stepped behind his bar.

"Don't pick on poor old Meager," Prendle said, lowering his voice so that Meager, still slumped on a bench out front, couldn't overhear. "He's twice your age, Willie. And in no condition to defend himself."

"A man who can't defend himself has got no business in Texas."

Prendle said, "You ain't much of a credit to Texas yourself. Talkin' like that—" The deputy's voice jarred to a halt with a quick oath. "I knew the day was startin' bad. All I needed now was Trevor—"

Willie spun to see what Prendle was peering at. Through the streaky front window he saw a horseman coming along the street, hoofs lifting dust against store fronts. Tex had also wheeled. Now he dug an elbow into Willie's ribs.

"Yonder comes our big chance, Willie," Tex whispered. Putting his back to the bar he eased his revolver in the tight leather confines of a sweated holster.

Willie made no reply. His vocal chords were frozen. Sight of Cleve Trevor's tall figure in the saddle drained his confidence.

Finally Willie found his voice and it was louder than he intended. "Wait till we get him in a crossfire."

Prendle, overhearing the remark, drew his own revolver and cocked it. "Willie, you 'n Tex turn around here. An' stop this foolish talk."

Both men looked back over their shoulders at the big

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Remington revolver Prendle balanced on the edge of his bar.

"This ain't your fight," Willie managed to say.

"The Captain I don't particularly like," Prendle said through his teeth. "But you ain't goin' to murder him."

Willie stared at the muzzle of the big gun leveled at his chest. Sweat broke out on his horse face. He saw Tex give an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders as if to say, "The hell with it." With his left hand Tex casually reached for the glass he had left on the bartop. It was half full.

Even then Willie sensed that Tex intended to make some fool play to keep Prendle out of it. Three quick drinks in the early morning had fired up Tex Hurley's rage. Because yonder came the man who had put a bullet in the rider's best friend, Sam Bissel. Willie tried to speak. No sound came from his lips. All he could do was stand there, half turned from the barfront, as if carved from a slab of river rock.

From the gallery came Meager's voice, containing a note of embarrassment. "Glad you rode in, Captain. Saves me a trip—"

Willie saw Cleve Trevor looming up in the doorway, blue eyes in a tight brown face slanted toward Meager. "I rode in for a word with Prendle," he said coldly. "Now keep out of my way. I've had quite enough of you."

In that awesome moment Willie Holtganer saw Trevor take a half-step through the swinging doors. The northerner halted, eyes sweeping from Willie to Tex, to John Prendle behind the bar. Evidently seeing the three of them there for the first time.

Trevor inclined his head at the deputy. "Prendle, why the pistol?"

"I don't aim to have trouble with you, Captain," Prendle

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replied in a steely voice. "Now you back outa that door nice an' easy." —

"Just a minute there—" Trevor started to shake his head, as if to say that nobody in Texas was going to give him orders. Not until he'd had his say.

Even then Willie felt a flash of grudging admiration for the Yankee. Tex hissed, "*Now, Willie, now—*"

Prendle swung his gaze to Tex. "Hold on there—"

Tex Hurley dashed the contents of his whisky glass full into Prendle's eyes. Reflex action triggered Prendle's Remington, the bullet slicing through the top of a deal table across the room. Tex Hurley half-climbed the front of the bar, swinging his gun barrel at Prendle's head. The same instant he shouted, "Get Trevor!"

Blinded by the whisky, Prendle made an instinctive grab for Tex's gun. But Tex, panicked now with his back to the door, freed his weapon. He dropped back, screaming at Willie to do something. Tex Hurley shot once through the front of the bar. Prendle, standing directly behind it, began to sag down into a rising fog of powdersmoke.

In that condensed space of seconds Willie flung himself aside. He came down hard on the plank floor, nearly knocking himself out. As he tried to scrabble away he saw Tex Hurley spin from the bar. Tex aimed a frantic shot at the big man still in the doorway. But a jet of orange-red flame whipped at Tex from that direction. Tex Hurley collapsed, a wound in his throat already pumping.

All Willie could think about then was self-preservation. Somehow he managed to get behind the bar. Nearby he could see Prendle on the floor, head turned queerly, the eyes wide open and dead. From the street came a man's shout. Willie took heart. He was not alone.

Still hunched out of sight behind the bar, Willie began



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to chant in a frenzied voice, "Get Trevor! He killed Prendle! Get him! Get him!"

A rifle shot smashed into the front of the saloon and Willie heard Smithson from the livery shouting, "Damn blue-belly!" A second rifle blasted above the sounds of confusion beginning to sweep the town.

Crawling over Prendle's body, Willie risked a glance toward the street. He saw Trevor's horse down, writhing in the dust. Trevor was on hands and knees, stunned. Then he sprang up, dodged into the space between saloon and saddle shop. A dozen men raced toward the saloon.

Willie spotted Laird Meager, face ashen, huddled on the gallery by a fire barrel. Drawing his gun at long last, Willie dragged Meager into the saloon. Meager nearly stumbled over Tex Hurley's body.

Willie hissed, "You tell it the way I say, Meager." And for emphasis Willie rammed the gun muzzle into Meager's paunch. Meager nearly collapsed.

By that time Charlie Smithson from the livery, and other merchants were streaming into the saloon.

"What the hell happened?" demanded the brawny stableman.

"The Yankee got Tex and Prendle!" Willie cried. "Damn near got Meager here. Ain't that right, Laird?"

Meager was trying to straighten up. He glanced apprehensively at Willie's tight face, then nodded. "That—that's right."

"Let's go get him!" Willie cried triumphantly.

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### VI

As TREVOR DUCKED between two buildings he felt a stunning blow along his right leg. Impact knocked him headlong into the dust. He rolled to a sitting position, still retaining his grip on the .44. He was surprised and at the same time thankful that no blood gushed from his leg. Only the heel of his boot shot off.

He got shakily to his feet. Behind him in the clouds of drifting dust raised by many boots he could hear them shouting—hear the day jarred by the sporadic firing. He was still the enemy and Appomattox had never happened. He knew they would not listen to any appeal from him.

Panting, he limped around a corner of the mercantile. In the initial burst of saloon firing a stray shot had struck his horse. He had no chance to get his rifle.

From the protection of the mercantile's mud wall he peered south where he could see the squat schoolbuilding shaded by tall cottonwoods. If he could reach the trees he might have a chance to stand them off. Any second they'd locate him.

Somewhere a man shouted, "Search every building. He can't get far afoot."

Trevor swallowed and pulled away from the protecting wall. Now he could see a saddled horse tied off at one side of the school building. Probably belonging to one of the pupils. His heart leaped. It would take luck to cross the clearing, handicapped as he was by the missing bootheel.

He had taken only a few running steps when he noticed figures in the schoolhouse doorway. A girl with yellow hair peered out. Around her were the frightened faces of children.

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Even at that moment some men appeared far down the alley that ran behind the saloon and the mercantile. Trevor knew he could never cross the fifty yards of clearing and reach the school. And even if he tried it, the fools might shoot at him blindly, not considering the safety of teacher and pupils. Only when their blood stained the schoolhouse steps would they realize the tragedy.

Turning to the knot of men who had spotted him now, Trevor made an appeal, knowing even then that he wasted his breath. "Listen to me! I didn't kill Prendle—"

Pulverized 'dobe stung the side of his face. A bullet screamed away from the gouge it made in the wall. Down the block came the pop of rifle fire. Desperately he flung himself into an opening between the mercantile and another 'dobe structure.

Deliberately drawing fire away from the schoolhouse, Trevor moved at a limping run between the buildings. Ahead the main street seemed cleared of men at this point. A glimmer of hope touched him. Maybe he could find a saddled horse—

But already men were shouting as they bore down on the slot between the buildings. Just as he neared the main street he glimpsed a figure at an open window. Trevor saw something hurtle from the window. Even though he tried to duck, an object struck the side of his head. As he pitched forward he realized a flung beer bottle had struck him. He could see the bottle rolling ahead of him in the dust. An instant later the whole world tilted and slid him down into blackness. . . .

A woman's strident plea cut through the enveloping fog. ". . . he should be given a trial. Taken to the county seat and—"

Trevor heard Willie Holtganer's thin voice cut in. "Uncle Ez will have the say of what's to be done with him!"

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"Willie, he wouldn't have a chance and you know it." Then the girl made an appeal in a new direction. "Uncle Laird, why don't you speak up? You could sway them if you'd try—"

Meager muttered something that was lost under Willie's burst of almost hysterical laughter. "Come along," Willie said, and made a clucking sound as he would to a horse. Trevor was aware of movement under him. For the first time he realized he was lashed to the back of a horse. Somehow he got his eyes open in his aching head, staring straight down at the sleek hide of a horse. He could see his wrists tied to a rope that disappeared under the belly of the horse. The other end obviously lashed to his ankles.

By turning his head he could see a collection of booted feet and a woman's shoes. But he could not turn himself enough to see their faces. Willie was arguing with Laird Meager.

"You come along to Anchor with me," Willie said.

Kerry Meager sounded indignant. "Uncle Laird, are you going to let Willie order you around like this?"

"Reckon I got no choice," her uncle mumbled in an embarrassed voice.

When they were out of town Meager tried again to keep from accompanying Willie to Anchor. "I don't trust you," Willie stated flatly. "If I left you in town Kerry might jab enough with a sharp stick to get the truth outa you. Everythin' workin' my way. I aim to keep it so."

At each step the horse took across the rocky ground, Trevor thought his skull would split. What he wouldn't give for a drink of water. He could expect no consideration from Willie.

Willie rode close to test Trevor's bonds. "How you feel, killer?" he chuckled.

"You know I didn't kill Prendle—"

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Laughing, Willie leaned over in the saddle and backhanded him across the face. Trevor shuddered and tasted blood. And he wondered then why he hadn't finished Willie instead of knocking him out of the saddle that day with a swinging gun barrel. . . .

It was Willie Holtganer's day of triumph there in the Anchor ranchyard when he led the prisoner up to the front door and shouted for Uncle Ez to step outside.

When Ez Holtganer saw Trevor tied to the back of a horse he burst out laughing. The crew streamed up from the horse pens and bunkhouse. Sam Bissel hobbled up on a homemade crutch, one leg dragging.

"I could kill him for what he done to my leg!" Bissel shouted, shaking his fist.

Willie turned his head. "You'll feel like killin' him twice, when you hear how he gunned down your old friend Tex."

This news brought a stunned silence to the yard. Bissel recovered first. He tried to reach Trevor, who was dangling upside down over the back of a roan. But Willie shoved him aside. Bissel lost his balance, falling across his crutch. Some of the men picked him up.

Ez got Willie's version of what had happened in town that day. And when his nephew finished the telling, Ez shook his head. "And here I thought you didn't have brains enough to kill a sacked-up snake with a scattergun."

Willie flushed when some of the men tittered.

Ez Holtganer turned to Meager, who stood nearby, eyes dead in his pasty face. "How about it, Laird. Did Willie do it alone? Or did you give him a hand?"

Meager licked his lips, caught Willie's glittering eye on him, then said, "Willie did it all by himself, Ez."

Ez Holtganer caught a handful of Trevor's sweated hair and jerked up his head away from the horse's flank. "Hood couldn't finish the likes of you in the war. Took a Holt-

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ganer to do it." Holtganer released his hold on Trevor's hair. "Hey, Red, step out here an' take a look at what Willie caught in his bear trap!"

Trevor tensed as a large shadow presently blotted out the sun. "How are you, Captain suh? Ready to have your brains kicked out—"

Ez Holtganer snapped, "I want him alive. At least for now. We'll put him in the root cellar under the kitchen. Reckon he won't stink up the place too much." He laughed.

## VII

UNABLE TO STAND when cut from the back of the horse, Trevor was carried into the house like a roll of canvas. It took four men to do the job. A trapdoor in the center of the kitchen floor was pulled open by Willie. Then Trevor was carried down a short flight of stairs to the cellar dug into the earth beneath the house. At Ez Holtganer's order, Trevor was lowered to the floor and his ankles tied.

Then Holtganer ordered jerky and water brought to the prisoner. When this was done he shouted for the rest of them to clear out. When he and Trevor were alone, Holtganer sat on one of the steps, yellow eyes watching Trevor, a hard grin on his lips.

"Eat," he said.

Trevor managed to pick up the canteen that had been placed beside him. But it took some doing to drink, his limbs were still so paralyzed from the tight lashings Willie had put on in town.

"Fattening me up for the kill?" Trevor demanded soft-

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ly as he chewed some of the jerky. His head still ached, and the side of his face was swollen where Willie had back-handed him.

"Murderers hang in Texas," Holtganer said.

"I didn't kill the deputy or your rider."

"Willie claims different."

"Meager knows the truth. But you've got him too scared to even move."

Ez Holtganer chuckled. "Threat of a hangrope down in Galveston keeps Meager in my camp."

"I heard about that. Hell of a thing to do to a man."

Holtganer's yellow eyes hardened. Then he shrugged. "Too bad you an' me couldn't partner up," he said thoughtfully. "My kin never had spine. Willie least of all. My brothers dead, Bob an' Ches. My cousins. Hell, Trevor, I lost most of my family to the war."

"We all lost."

"Your side started it."

Trevor shook his head. "You pulled out of the Union. We couldn't let that happen."

"So we killed each other over it," Ez Holtganer reminded harshly.

"Not very much was solved," Trevor agreed. "But we are still one nation."

"They can run a Yankee bayonet down my throat. But I'll never salute their goddam flag."

"I believe that."

"An' I still ain't forgot how you killed my brother."

"I think even you know Jollet's story doesn't hold water."

"Nobody's story holds much water these days." Holtganer shouted for Meager to step down. And when Meager shuffled down the stairs, lowering the trap door to close off sounds of the house, Holtganer fixed him with a steely gaze.

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"Laird, I want the truth," the rancher snapped. "About the shooting in town."

Meager told him. When he had finished relating the circumstances that led to the deaths of Prendle and Hurley, Ez Holtganer rubbed his jaw. "I figured Willie was lyin'." He gave Trevor a sour smile. "But it ain't goin' to help you none."

Trevor straightened up from his sitting position on the cellar floor. There was only one small opening high in the wall. His only ventilation. He could feel sweat dampen his shirt.

Ez Holtganer said, "Sheriff won't like it that his deputy was gunned down. He's got trouble at the south end of the county, so I hear. He won't come to Rincon till he cleans up the mess he's got now. But when he does come he just might find you gone. That is, if you take tonight to think things over. Then sign over them cows of yours, come mornin'."

"You can't bluff me."

"You'll do what I say and clear outa Texas. Either that or—" He let the threat dangle.

Trevor got it all right. Either play along with Ez Holtganer or face murder charges.

Holtganer stood up, his peak of thick black hair brushing the underside of the kitchen floor. "Like I told you once, my brother's life is worth a helluva lot more than a bunch of cows."

"You and Bob never had any love for each other. Why pretend?"

Ez Holtganer gave him a cold smile. "Same holds true for my nephew Willie. I got no more use for him than I got for a busted gun. But I'd bury the man that done him in."

Trevor started to get to his feet, moving cautiously so



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his bound ankles wouldn't throw him. Holtganer ordered him to stay seated. "Put your hands behind your back."

Trevor debated. Circulation had returned to his arms, so that he now had some control over them. If he could grab Holtganer by the legs and pull him down—

Holtganer must have sensed his thoughts. Drawing his gun, he aimed it at Trevor's head. "Laird, you tie him."

Woodenly Meager took the short length of rope Ez handed him. Trevor could do nothing but sit there and let Meager wrap his wrists.

Even then Holtganer did not fully trust Meager, and carefully inspected the bonds to make sure they were tight. He gave Trevor a final warning. "You better be ready to do what I say, come mornin'."

Then Holtganer herded Meager out of the cellar. The trap door was lowered. A bolt rattled into its socket.

Quickly Trevor managed to get to his feet. He hopped about the cell, hoping to find some means of cutting into the ropes. The missing bootheel was an added handicap.

Twice his bound ankles caused him to lose his balance. He fell headlong on the hard floor. Grimly he picked himself up and continued his awkward tour of the cell. A quick inspection of the walls showed them to be caliche, smooth and hard, not even a rough-edged stone protruding that might in time wear through his bonds.

Finally he halted, drenched with sweat. His knees trembled. Again he could feel circulation being cut off from his arms. He was turning toward the stairs when he heard a rider pound into the yard. Someone shouted. Trevor hopped to the wall nearest the yard, straining his ears. The front door banged open and Ez Holtganer yelled a question that Trevor could not hear.

A murmur of voices came from the yard. Then a man was saying, ". . . an' damn if she didn't figure to ride

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clean over to Valleyheart Junction. Alone, mind you. A purty gal like that. Wa'al, I told Smithson you wouldn't like it none that she rode one of his hosses. So Smithson rode after her an' brung her back to the stable."

"Who you talkin' about, anyhow?" Ez demanded.

"Kerry Meager."

"What was she goin' to the junction for?"

"The sheriff. What else? I figured you wouldn't want the sheriff messin' in this."

"You done right, Sanborn," Holtganer muttered. Then his voice rose. "Laird, your niece was hired to teach school and not go pokin' her nose in things that's none of her business."

"Kerry's got a mind of her own," Meager replied. Then he added, "A punky girl."

"She sure never took after you, did she?" was Ez Holtganer's cutting remark.

"Guess I'll ride to town and see that she's all right," Meager said.

"Laird, you stay right here. You an' me will play some monte. I don't feel like sleepin'. Rest of you hit your blankets."

Trevor, his weight balanced against the dirt wall, tried to hear more. But from the sounds out in the yard it appeared that the men were drifting for the bunkhouse. He heard the house door slam. Then boots scraped on the floor above him. Ez Holtganer and Meager starting their card game, he supposed.

Again he hopped the length of the dirty floor. He sank to one of the lower steps. His wrists pained, and his heart pounded from the energy expended in the clumsy way he had to move about his cell. He looked around at the shadows deepening now. His own private Andersonville. The Rebs, it seemed, were still taking their prisoners.

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He fell to thinking about Kerry Meager. At least there was one member of the Meager family with enough gumption to take positive action. He didn't know how far it was to the county seat, but from what he had overheard it must be no easy ride. And for a girl to try it alone—

Sitting here on the step in a mood of dejection would solve nothing, he told himself. Quickly he began to search the steps with his eyes. He could see nothing that would help. Turning his back he felt around the thick planks with his fingers. Little feeling left in them now, just stubs of flesh and bone at the ends of his numbed hands.

But he did not give up. Keeping his back to the steps he began to inch his way up. Exploring every inch of the splintery wood. On the third step he felt a shred of hope. It was on the underside of the tread where the point of a spike protruded, driven at a slant through the tough wood. He clenched his teeth and strained his body to reach the half-inch of jutting metal. His first attempt brought a grunt of pain to his lips as the point of the spike gouged skin, not rope.

But finally he got the range. Due to the cramped position he was forced to maintain on the steps, the torture could only be endured for a minute at a time. He would rest, listening to the sledge of his heart, then try again. Blood was warm against his wrists. Pain flooded him with a new desperation. Somehow he had to get out of this trap. Everything, including his life, depended on it.

If he failed to escape and did sign over the herd, Ez Holtganer could shoot him down. And who would question it? Surely not the sheriff, who had lost a deputy.

Trevor took a deep breath and again slowly rubbed the lashings over the point of the spike. No longer did he feel pain in his wrists. His body seemed incapable of feeling. Only his brain lived.

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Hour after hour passed. Occasionally he would hear Ez Holtganer laugh when the cards were good. Darkness deepened so that he could not see across the cell. Another burst of laughter from Holtganer. Winning money from Meager, Trevor guessed. Already he had the man's ranch. Why wasn't he satisfied? But the Ez Holtganers of the world were never satisfied, Trevor reflected, and winced when the spike end dug into his flesh. Well, he was not quite dead, at least. Pain deep enough, severe enough, could still touch nerve ends.

Thunder rolled in the distance. Finally, above the throbbing of his pulse, he heard a splatter of rain in the yard.

Now and then Trevor would pause in his labors and try mightily to twist himself free of the ropes binding his wrists. But they seemed as secure as before. He wanted to give up, to allow his tortured body to roll down the steps and onto the dirt floor. To close his eyes in sleep. To hell with Ez Holtganer. Let him have the damn herd. But some spark deep within his consciousness spurred him on. Something thudded against the floor above. He did not stop.

When exhaustion seemed about to drain the last energy from the husk of his body, Trevor felt a slight give at the ropes. Hope flamed through him.

Just when he felt that he could not lose, there was a slight scraping sound above the trap door. Alerted, Trevor froze there on the steps. A wedge of lamplight spilled down on him. He fully expected to hear Ez Holtganer's laughter; to let him work himself half to death, with freedom only a few minutes away—then to give him that sardonic grin and retie him.

But it wasn't Ez Holtganer there at the head of the stairs. Laird Meager, fat face ashen, held a lamp in one hand, a pistol in the other. He gave a fearful glance over his shoulder, then began to descend the stairs.

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Meager halted on the step above the one where Trevor crouched. He said, awed, "I might've known you'd free yourself."

"Not quite," Trevor said through his teeth. "Cut me loose—"

"It's my death warrant," Meager said tensely. "I suppose you know that."

Trevor jerked his head. "Quickly, man—"

Placing lamp and pistol on a step, Meager drew a short-bladed knife from the pocket of his black coat. "I guess it was hearing that my niece has more sand than I have—Well, anyway it shamed me."

Trevor was aware of the knife tugging at the half-severed ropes that held his wrists. "Where's Ez Holtganer?"

"Unconscious—at least for now."

"Hurry," Trevor breathed. He twisted his upper body, to watch for any movement above the trap door. Sweat ran coldly down his back. Then the ropes were through and his arms fell to his sides like stone limbs. Meager moved to Trevor's ankles and began to cut through the ropes there.

Trevor clenched his teeth as circulation began its agonizing return. As he slumped there, momentarily immobilized, he asked Meager what had happened upstairs.

"Ez reached for the coffee pot on the stove. I hit him with a chunk of firewood."

"Wonder you didn't kill him."

"Take more than that to kill Ez." Meager wiped nervously at his moist face. "I tied him and put a gag in his mouth."

"Anybody else in the house?"

Meager shook his head.

"I'm surprised Ez would let you run around loose."

## THE RINCON TRAP

### VIII

MEAGER GAVE HIM a bitter smile. "Ez doesn't worry about turning his back on a rabbit. Can you walk?"

Trevor grunted and reached out for the revolver on the step, his own .44 taken from him in town. Somehow he managed to creep up the stairs. In the kitchen, he huddled a moment, breathing hard. Beyond a heavy table he could see a man stretched out on the floor, arms and legs roped, a twisted bandanna across the mouth. Ez Holtganer. Even as Trevor watched he saw the rancher stir, roll on his back and try to sit up. On the second try he made it. His yellow eyes glittered.

Grunting, Trevor got to his feet, the missing bootheel tipping him against the table. "Give me the knife," Trevor said, as Meager came up with the lamp.

Meager was astounded. "You intend to cut him loose?"

"He's our insurance. We'll take him with us."

Meager was visibly trembling. Trevor feared he would drop the lamp. He took it from him and set it on the table. Then he limped over to Holtganer and cut the ropes that bound the man's legs. He hauled Holtganer to his feet. Meager stared at the cowman as if seeing his executioner.

Holtganer swayed, eyes slitted. Trevor steadied him. Sounds of rage issued from behind the bandanna. A trickle of blood had wormed down the back of his neck from the wound made by Meager's blow.

Stepping behind Holtganer, Trevor made sure the arms were securely bound. He saw that Meager had taken a rifle from wall pegs near the stove.

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"We'll keep behind Ez as we leave the house," Trevor instructed. "We'll get horses and—"

Trevor heard a sound coming from the entrance to a hallway that evidently led to the rear part of the house. Looking around he saw Willie Holtganer. Even with the lamp wick turned low, Trevor could see a triumphant grin on the nephew's lips. The lampglow also touched the shotgun that Willie Holtganer gripped in hands that shook slightly.

In that moment Laird Meager let out a groan of despair. Trevor took a backward step to come up against the solid edge of the table. It jarred the lamp, causing it to flicker.

"Pays a man to sneak around in the dark," Willie said in his whining voice, "and see what's goin' on."

Trevor barely breathed as Willie moved deeper into the kitchen, angling so that his back was now to the front door. Something of the bronc leaped into Willie's eyes as he steadied the shotgun on the three of them. Meager, standing a few inches to Trevor's right, seemed to shrink into his black suit. Ez Holtganer was hunched against the table, body rigid, the roped arms seeming to be frozen where they were crossed behind his back.

The rancher's lips worked frantically behind his gag as if to warn his nephew against any reckless discharge of the lethal weapon. Discharge that shotgun in a fit of anger, and he'd slaughter kin and enemy alike, Ez seemed to be trying to tell his nephew.

Willie smiled, aiming the shotgun so that the spread shot would catch the three men bunched by the kitchen table.

"Uncle Ez," Willie Holtganer said in that crazy whine, "I'm your only kin. Reckon it's time I had a little somethin' for myself—"

Before Willie's finger could tighten fully on the trigger and blow the three of them to pieces, Trevor moved with blinding speed, so swiftly that Willie Holtganer's reaction

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was the shaved part of a second too slow. Trevor's hand swept the lamp from the table. He hurled it straight at Willie's surprise face. Frantically the younger man twisted aside. The lamp caught him high in the chest. It burst into flame. Reflex caused Willie's finger to jerk on the trigger. Buckshot blasted into the ceiling, sending down a funnel of powdered mud.

His clothing afire, Willie Holtganer dropped the shotgun and ran screaming from the house.

Flames from the spilled coal oil were licking across the floor. Shouts came from the bunkhouse.

"Outside!" Trevor ordered, and gave Ez Holtganer a shove toward the door.

But men were swarming from the bunkhouse now. In the yard, near the front of the house, Willie was rolling his body over and over in the tall, rain-dampened grass. The fire was out and he had stopped screaming. But he did not get up.

Even bound as he was, Ez Holtganer was a wildcat. Smoke spewing from the burning floor helped to cover his movements. He wheeled suddenly and rammed a shoulder into Meager. Force of the blow knocked the fat man backwards against Trevor.

And then Holtganer was plunging out the front door, his back exposed, as if daring Trevor to cut him down.

"Back door!" Trevor yelled, and jerked Meager by an arm to propel the man at a run. At the rear door a figure loomed. Trevor shouted a warning. Flame leaped at him and a bullet whipped an inch from his face. He fired. The shadow collapsed, groaning.

At a hard run now Trevor shoved Meager to the side yard. A horseman pounded around a corner of the house. Not recognizing Trevor in the dark, the man shouted, "Which way'd they go?"



Trevor leaped, caught the surprised rider by an arm and hauled him out of the saddle. The man came down in a pin wheel of flailing arms and legs. He did not get up.

Even though the rain had tapered off, the ground was slick. Trevor caught the reins of the lunging horse and hauled it in. From inside the house came a hissing sound as somebody emptied a bucket of water on the flames. Now even that small light was gone.

Out front somewhere Ez Holtganer gave a bellow of rage. And Trevor knew that the Anchor men had freed him of the gag and his bonds.

"Meager, into the saddle," Trevor ordered.

But the fat man slipped in the mud. "Go on—I can't make it—"

Holding the reins in one hand, Trevor caught him by the coat collar and jerked him erect. Trevor led man and horse at a run toward the shelter of tall trees. Before those from the front of a house began to swing in, they were deep in the cottonwoods.

A gun blasted behind them. A man cried, "I got one of 'em!"

Another voice said, "You crazy fool, that's me you shot at!"

In the blackness of the wet Texas night confusion was intensified. Riders pounded around all sides of the house, unable to tell friend from foe.

Somehow Meager got enough of a second wind to overcome his fear. He ran beside Trevor, who still led the horse. Deeper into the whispering cottonwoods where shadows lay thick as smoke. Suddenly around one of the circular stone horse pens appeared a gangling man with a lantern.

Trevor glimpsed clots of mud on the man's spur rowels. Before the man knew what had happened, Trevor's revolver barrel clubbed him. The man fell back against the wall

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of stone, dropping the lantern. It died with a hissing sound against the mud.

Ez Holtganer's distant shout reached them. "There they go yonderly—"

This followed by a roar of hoofbeats. As Trevor tensed, he realized the riders were going away from them. Not toward them. Trevor licked his dry lips, stepped across the unconscious form of the man he had struck down. The horse was quieter now. At the far side of the horse pen they came upon another saddler, probably one of those either left for an emergency or ridden by the man with the lantern who had dismounted to seek them out afoot. No matter what, they had two saddled horses. Sheer luck so far, Trevor reflected. But how long could it last?

"Let's get out of here," Trevor whispered tensely. "Keep to the trees as long as possible. And stay at a walk unless we have to ride for it."

"Yeah—" Meager's voice was a croak.

Beyond the haphazard growth of tall cottonwoods, the earth dipped. They rode down into a long canyon, eyes strained against the shadowed night that walled them in. From the direction of Anchor headquarters could still be heard shouts, the occasional firing of a gun. Hoofbeats sounded on the canyon rim to the west, pounded south, then faded altogether.

"You know the country better than I do," Trevor said quietly. "What's up ahead?"

Meager said the canyon ended after a mile. "How'd we ever make it this far?" Meager said with a gusty sigh, his voice stronger now.

"We're not out of it yet."

"Ez will never stop till he has me dead for what I did," Meager groaned.

"He'd like both of us dead. We just might fool him."

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"If I know Ez he'll try and cut us off at San Felipe Creek."

"We'll circle clear to the river if we have to." Trevor felt his tiredness now, and the realization that death's cold finger had pointed at him this night was sobering. Willie Holtganer and a shotgun. And then the Anchor men roused from slumber by Willie's screams, milling about in the yard, firing at shadows, chasing shadows.

"Thank God for a moonless night," Trevor muttered, and Meager said amen to that.

For miles they rode west and north. Finally the sky cleared a bit so there was a peppering of silver stars and the moon bloomed yellow as a sun flower. But all this began to blend in with a finger of gray to the east, and then was lost altogether as the day came alive.

"I guess this kind of evens the slate, Meager," Trevor said when they came in from the west and saw the first of Trevor's cows on the San Felipe grass.

"Kerry's grass, not mine." Meager gestured with a plump hand to encompass the broad plain flanked by distant dun-colored hills. "She told me I had to tell you this. That she would honor your lease, no matter what."

"At the school doings I had the feeling she despised me."

"Kerry hates violence." Meager sighed. "God knows violence is no stranger in these parts."

As they cut across the flat, Trevor strained for any sound of gunfire. But under the vault of the brightening sky there was only a whisper of wind in the clumps of sotol, the plodding of the horses taken from Anchor.

The silence meant that Holtganer hadn't made his move yet. But he would. Perhaps he first would even the score with his nephew. If there had ever been a chance for a peaceful settlement of the differences between the Rincon

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Cattle Company and Ez Holtganer, it was done now, Trevor realized. Dead as the brows singed off Willie Holtganer's homely face. He wondered tiredly about Willie's fate. But he really didn't care at all.

"How about this man Ez claims you killed in Galveston?" Trevor asked.

"I was drunk. There was a fight. I don't really know what happened."

"But Ez skinned you good in a land deal?"

"Right down to the britches," Meager said, his voice bitter. "I should've stuck to cows. Man's a fool to try another game."

Trevor asked Meager if he had friends across the river where he could stay until the business with Holtganer was concluded—with guns.

"I've got no friends," said Meager. "Anyway, Ez would hunt me down. He knows every Mexican along the river."

The morning was half gone when they reached camp. Pete Doud, sunlight angling across his bearded face, stepped from the shadow of the rebuilt wagon. Trevor asked if there'd been trouble. Pete Doud shook his head. When Trevor introduced Meager, the foreman only grunted, and did not offer his hand.

Doud exclaimed over the torn flesh at Trevor's wrists, made by the spike in the cellar stairs back at Anchor. The foreman produced a bottle of linament and used it on the wounds. Then Trevor took a long pull from the bottle he kept in his bedroll. He extended the bottle to Meager.

Meager started to reach for it, then shook his head. "Poison for me. It's brought me ruin." Meager sank wearily to the ground, his back to a wagon wheel.

Bill Aspen, who had been cleaning a derringer, came up. He peered at Meager. "I 'member when his daddy was the

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biggest man nawth of Laredo," Aspen said in his Texas drawl. "Looks like ol' Ez has got his brand on this one for sure."

"You know Ez?" Trevor watched the *Tejano* narrowly.

Aspen was short, stocky. "Me an' Ez lifted a bottle a time or two, yeah. Back before the secesh. I knowed Bob and the rest of the Holtganers when they was alive."

"How do you feel about the Holtganers now?"

Aspen gave him a hard smile. "I'm workin' for you now, ain't I?" Dropping the derringer into his pocket, he walked away.

Trevor pondered the reply, but his weary brain refused to seize on anything but thoughts of immediate survival. Quickly he told Doud of the shootings in town and of his capture and escape. He warned Doud to keep guards posted. Then Trevor managed to get a few hours of sleep in the shade under the wagon.

Trevor slept past noon. Then he ate cold beef and drank coffee with Doud. Doud inclined his head at Meager, rolled up in a borrowed blanket across the clearing.

"That snake double crossed you once. You aim to keep him around?"

"I'll have to take my chances with him," Trevor replied.

Doud frowned and gave a tug at his beard. "I think we oughta round up them cows and push north."

"And give up everything we've sweated for?" Trevor gave a violent shake of his head. He lounged back against a bed-roll. Hot coffee and the beef had renewed his strength. His eyes squinted against the far ridges, tawny now in the glare of an autumn sun. "Pete, I don't intend to let Ez Holtganer push me out of Texas."

"You and your mule blood," Doud muttered, his bearded lips twisting in a tight grin.

"I think Ez Holtganer was stunned when he realized his nephew intended to kill him. It may keep him off balance

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for a few days. At least long enough so we can make some plans."

"He wasn't much off balance when he tried to run you an' Meager down," the foreman reminded, and shifted his bad arm to a more comfortable position.

"The fact that he hasn't swarmed down on us here makes me begin to wonder. Maybe he wants to see if any more of the hands were on Willie's side of the fence before he makes a real try at having a showdown with us."

Even if the theory proved correct, Trevor reflected, they didn't have much time to plan a defense. And there was the added hazard of a sheriff riding over from the county seat to investigate the death of his deputy. It might be in a matter of days. Or perhaps weeks. Distances were vast and a lawman was constantly beset by problems in his far flung domain. It might take time, but eventually the sheriff would be riding this way.

Trevor sent one of his men with the two horses he and Meager had appropriated from Anchor, with instructions to turn them loose south of the creek. He didn't intend to give Ez Holtganer one more lever; accuse him of being a horsethief.

When Trevor saddled a fresh mount he saw that Meager was up, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "Reckon you want me to clear out," Meager said.

"You're on our side of the fence now," Trevor pointed out. "You stay put. I don't want Ez Holtganer hunting you down just because you sided me."

"I can use a gun," the fat man said, his voice firming. "If there's trouble, I'll do my share."

"We need a headquarters. A place to make a stand if we have to. You know the country. Any ideas?"

Meager told him about an adobe house about five miles east, with the roof partially burned away. "Comanches hit

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it back in the fifties. Some Mexicans living there were killed or driven off. When my father took over here we used the place for a line shack."

To Trevor it sounded like what he had in mind. He told Meager to grab something to eat, then they'd take a look at the 'dobe structure. Meager insisted that he could eat on the way. He seemed intent on trying to make up for his treachery at Paso. He grabbed some chunks of cold beef which he munched while they pushed east.

The line shack proved to be everything Trevor had hoped for. Walls four feet thick were scarred from bullets and fire arrow. Behind the house a high mud wall enclosed a yard. Part of the enclosure could be roped off for a horse pen, Trevor decided.

"An ideal place to make a stand." Trevor grinned despite his misgivings about the future that had so weighted him since arriving in this remote corner of Texas.

"The Mexicans didn't do so well," Meager pointed out, "when the Comanches came."

"We'll do better."

During the next few days they moved in. Trevor kept guards out on the ridges, but there was no attack. However, one man was fired upon from a distance, but the shot missed. Trevor wondered if Ez Holtganer's strategy was shaping up—to thin out their ranks, a man at a time. Again he sent a rider to the river in an attempt to hire vaqueros. Talk of a possible range war had increased. Holtganer's reputation for violence was too well known for a man to risk an early grave, no matter what the financial inducements might be.

Grabbing only a few hours of sleep at a time, Trevor found his nerves thinning. One of his men, following an argument with Bill Aspen, rolled up his blanket and quit, riding south toward Laredo.

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Trevor eyed Aspen. "You're *Tejano*. I'm surprised you didn't join him."

Aspen turned his back and walked away.

Pete Doud thrust his bearded face at Trevor. "Easy, Cleve," the foreman advised impatiently. "We need every man. Keep on and you'll rile Aspen into quitting."

"Just so he knows which side of the creek he's supposed to be on."

"You suddenly trust Meager. Why not Aspen?"

"They're both Texans, sure. But Meager saved my neck—"

"Wasn't for him you wouldn't be in this mess," Doud reminded.

"Yeah. And I'll keep one eye on Meager, don't worry about that. But I'd hate to depend on Aspen if, say, Ez Holtganer tossed a couple of gold pieces in his hat."

The rest of the week passed without incident and Trevor began to breathe a little easier. Perhaps his theory was proving out; the defection of Willie had produced a crisis of sorts at the Anchor ranch. Maybe Willie was dead, for all he knew. Dead from burns or a victim of his uncle's wrath. A comforting thought, but Trevor was realist enough to know that once Ez Holtganer settled whatever personal problems might be plaguing him, the war would be on. The rancher would never back off now.

One noon Pete Doud said tensely, "Riders comin'." Trevor had been catching forty winks on the brush mattress where his bedroll was spread in a corner of the thick-walled house.

Snatching up a rifle, he stepped to the yard. Now he could see that it was a woman who appeared, flanked by two horsemen. It was Kerry Meager who spurred forward, hat far back on her golden head, held in place by a chin strap. She wore a boy's shirt and levis. Sight of the girl lifted Trevor's spirits.



But there was no warmth in her greeting. "I have a dual purpose in this trip," she stated coolly, as he helped her from the saddle. "To tell you that I have learned the truth about my uncle."

"So—"

"He is a fraud and I suppose you were justified that day in calling him a blackleg."

"He's redeemed himself considerably."

"By helping you escape from Ez. I heard about that. But my uncle is scared to death of Ez. I imagine it was as much to save his own skin as to save yours."

Trevor invited her inside, but she declined. She stood in the warm sunlight, back to the scarred wall. The two men who had escorted her from town had dismounted. They eyed Trevor narrowly. He ignored them. He got the girl some coffee. "You look tired," he said with a smile.

She thanked him for the cup. As she sipped the strong brew she now and then gave him a sidelong glance. "I want you to know that your lease is valid. It's my land, not my uncle's."

"He already told me."

She bit her lip. "Now I have a favor to ask."

He tensed, not liking the sound of it.

"Your herd will be safe here on the lease," she told him. "Your men can guard it—"

"And I'm supposed to clear out, is that it?"

"It would save trouble—much bloodshed, many lives."

The suggestion angered him. "I didn't start this trouble, Miss Meager," he reminded her stiffly.

She nervously twisted the chin strap that dangled across the front of the faded blue shirt. "If you'd only go back to Paso and wait till spring—"

"I'm not running," he stated flatly. Now he was beginning to wonder why her image had been in his mind so often

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these days. She was, after all, just a rattle-headed female, refusing to face up to the realities of a harsh male world.

"You must remember," she said, "that the town believes you shot down John Prendle in cold blood—"

"They sure haven't done much about it," he snapped.

"They're merchants, mostly, not gunmen. The sheriff is trying to straighten out a water dispute that could blow up the south end of the county. When this business is straightened out, he'll be after you."

"Do you think I killed Prendle in cold blood?"

Her gray eyes swung to his face, then to the ground where she dug with the pointed toe of a small boot. "I do know that you deliberately exposed yourself so those—those blind fools in town wouldn't shoot toward the school." She gave him a wan smile. "I tried to tell them that—"

"I didn't kill Prendle. I didn't kill that Anchor rider either." He suddenly recalled that she had started to ride all the way over to the county seat to summon the sheriff, only so he would have a fair trial and not be subjected to the Holtganer brand of justice. He found some of his antagonism slipping away. "I'm sure your sheriff, Texan or not, can see that I'd have no reason to gun down his deputy."

"But who would believe it?" she wanted to know.

"Your uncle was there. He could tell the straight of it."

She finished her coffee and placed the empty cup on a 'dobe window ledge. "I'd like to believe the best of Uncle Laird. Unfortunately I can't."

Meager, just riding in from his four hours of guard duty, heard the last. He turned pale. These past days he had lost weight. The fancy black suit fit him badly.

"I'm sorry you have so little faith in me, Kerry—"

She whirled, flushing at the sound of her uncle's voice. Then she stiffened. "Uncle Laird, all I'm interested in is avoid-

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ing a range war. Those children I teach—they have kin folks who will be involved if this trouble comes, as everyone seems to think it will."

"Ez Holtganer is the one playing with a lighted candle in the powder shed," Laird Meager said. "If the place blows up, he's the one responsible—"

"Uncle Laird, I want you to do one decent thing. Convince Captain Trevor to leave this part of Texas."

Before Meager could formulate a reply, Trevor tried to make the girl understand his position. He put a hand on her arm. But she pulled away. Again she tried to get him to pull out, but he refused. Angrily she walked to her horse. She swung lightly into the saddle and rode out, her escort trailing. Dust rose in their wake. Trevor had half a mind to ride after her, to make one last attempt to convince her of the many reasons for his staying on the San Felipe grass.

But he gave up the idea. Better to let her reach the safety of the town once again, rather than to detain her in hopeless argument and thus expose her to possible danger.

Meager stared at the drifting dust lifted by the three horses. "When your own kin turns against you—" He didn't finish, but shuffled dejectedly into the house.

Pete Doud, who had overheard the exchange between Trevor and the girl, now came up, hands shoved into the pockets of his worn pants. "Ez Holtganer is threat enough," the foreman pointed out. "But what if a posse shows up here? Are we s'posed to let them ride you off to jail?"

"If and when a posse does show up is time enough for worry."

Doud gave a doleful shake of his graying head. "You got more odds against you than a one-armed man up to his

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chin in quicksand. And fightin' off Comanches with a busted gun at the same time."

"Things were worse in the war," Trevor said, his eyes bitter at memory of the carnage.

"Like I pointed out before," Doud said. "You got no army behind you now. Mebby the gal has some good advice—"

Trevor turned away from his foreman, to glare at Meager through the doorway. Despite the man's apparent desire to redeem himself, Trevor could not help but silently curse the fat man. His glib talk there in Paso had convinced Colonel McVail that the Meager name still meant power in land and cattle.

The following day clouds rolled in from the north and soon the valley was slashed by a downpour. On two counts Trevor gave his thanks: that his cows were no longer bunched and therefore primed for another senseless stampede, and that he had at least a partial roof over his head.

But no sooner had these comforting thoughts crossed his mind than he realized the storm could also offer a screen for raiders. Throwing on a slicker, he rode out into the storm. Meager, hat jammed to his ears to keep it from being blown off, insisted on accompanying him. Trevor shrugged. Even though the man was exposing himself to the elements in an obvious attempt at atonement, Trevor took no chances. Trevor recalled the long trip with the man down from Paso. Then he had made Meager always ride ahead of him. He did the same today. Meager looked hurt. With a coat sleeve he smeared rainwater from his face, seemed about to say something, then changed his mind.

At last they came to a rocky ledge where Aspen was huddled out of the storm in the lee of a towering boulder. At sight of the approaching pair of riders, he leaped to his

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feet, snatching up a rifle. When he recognized Trevor he lowered the weapon.

"You aren't keeping your eyes open," Trevor snapped, then realized that he sounded more like a captain of cavalry than a cowman. He tried to ease it with a stiff smile. "If it was Holtganer riding up, you'd be dead by the time you got that rifle cocked."

The chunky Bill Aspen gave a short laugh. "Ez wouldn't cut down an old Texas boy like me."

Trevor felt a chill of apprehension. But he tried not to let it show on his face. He needed good riders. And that was Aspen, all right. But the loyalty part of it—Trevor just didn't know.

"Holtganer could sneak up on us in the rain," Trevor pointed out, trying to keep the military note from coloring his voice. He wished mightily that he could forget the damned army. He supposed four years of tension, of living with death's hand always reaching out, made old habits hard to break. Trevor asked Aspen if he had seen any suspicious riders.

"Hour or so ago I seen somebody." Aspen waved a square hand toward the south. "Over yonder. Big man."

Trevor was alerted. "Red Jollet, maybe."

Despite the driving rain Trevor rode to have a look at the spot where Aspen said he had noticed the rider. Aspen trailed along.

"By the time I got here," Aspen said, swinging close, "the fella was gone."

"And no tracks," Trevor said, pointing at the unmarked ground. "The rain took care of that." As they rode back to the lookout post where Meager was waiting, Trevor said, "From here on out we'll have to be on our guard even more than before."

Aspen only shrugged, and Trevor felt he had failed to

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ease the strain that always seemed to develop between them.

Before swinging toward the 'dobe headquarters, Trevor and Meager visited two more lookout posts. None of the others on guard duty had spotted any strange riders. It was dark by the time Trevor reached shelter. By that time the rain had tapered off.

Wearily Trevor tried to sponge off some of the Texas mud he had accumulated during the day. Then he ate the inevitable evening meal of stringy beef and beans. He drank coffee strong enough to dissolve wolf fangs. Tired as he was, Trevor heated water and scraped off his beard. It made him feel reasonably civilized. He blew out the lamp. Those of his men not on guard duty were sprawled about the big room, wrapped in their blankets.

Trevor located Pete Doud. "Pete, you wake me at midnight," he told his foreman. "I'm going out and relieve Bill Aspen."

"You're about done in. I watched you shave. Your hand shook so I figured you'd be cutting your own throat."

"You wake me, hear? Don't feel sorry for me. And let me sleep."

"Yeah, all right." Doud, who was guarding the yard until another man relieved him at midnight, went outside to have a look around.

Trevor wrapped himself up in his blanket and sank down on the brush mattress. Through an unglassed slit of a window he could see a star blooming like a mote of polished steel. At least the storm seemed to have passed, but the wind still came up occasionally to rattle a loose board in the wall gate behind the house.

In the darkness he fell to thinking of Kerry Meager. He wished now he hadn't been so short with her. After all, it had been a long ride out here, even if her only pur-

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pose was to try and urge him to leave Texas to avoid more bloodshed. Now he could think of any number of arguments to support his stand. For instance, since when did running from a problem solve anything? He could have told her that this threatened war with the Holtganer tribe was just one of any number of hazards connected with the cattle business. Now that he thought about it, he supposed there were even hazards in teaching school.

She was still vivid in his consciousness when he fell asleep.

### IX

IT SEEMED TO Trevor that he had barely closed his eyes when he heard Pete Doud calling his name. Trevor sat up in the darkness, aware that Doud's voice sounded strange in his sleep-drugged mind. Other men in the house were stirring. The rider on guard duty outside said, "Hey, Trevor. Something's wrong."

Then came Doud's voice again, nearer now and sharp with pain. "Cleve—"

Trevor glimpsed him through the window. Hunched in the saddle of a horse, arms dangling. The rider on guard swung in alongside to steady him. Quickly Trevor sprang outside just in time to catch the foreman as he started to topple from the saddle. Trevor caught him under the arms and lowered him to the ground.

"Bring a lantern!" Trevor shouted. He didn't need a light to tell him that Pete Doud was badly wounded.

A man appeared with a lantern, the glow washing sha-

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dow and shards of yellow light over Pete Doud's ashen features. Trevor could see that his left side was stained with blood. Feverishly he pulled aside the shirt, seeing the lump under the mangled flesh that meant a bullet.

"Pete, what the hell happened?"

"Sniper," Doud groaned. "Rode out to relieve Aspen. Rifle shot—"

"Damn it, Pete, you were supposed to wake me. I was the one to relieve Aspen!" Trevor broke off. No use in berating Doud for disobeying orders. The man had lost consciousness.

Trevor got some of his men to carry Doud inside. They lowered him to Trevor's bed. Meager was up, stuffing the tails of a shirt into his shiny black pants. He wanted to know what had happened and Trevor told him.

"Bullet caught him from behind," Trevor said grimly. "A few inches over and it would've caught him dead center in the back." He looked around, his lips white in the lantern glow. "Any of you seen Bill Aspen?"

The men exchanged glances, then shook their heads. "Mebby Doud never reached him," suggested one of them. "Mebby Aspen's still out there."

"For his sake he better be." Snatching up a rifle, Trevor ran outside. He threw a saddle on a rangy roan. He shouted for Meager, and when the fat man emerged from the house, Trevor asked if there was a doctor in Rincon. Meager said there was.

"Meager, you take Doud to town in the wagon." Trevor swung into the saddle and turned to stare down at his men bunched there in the yard. A pickup crew of Anglos whose luck had gone sour in Mexico. What did he know about them? How far could they be trusted? "You boys spread out. Keep your eyes open. Come daylight we might have trouble from Holtganer."



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"You going after the sniper?" Meager asked.

"First, I'll see what Aspen has to say," Trevor snapped. Meager and some of the men were harnessing up the wagon.

Meager looked around. "You think Aspen had something to do with Pete Doud getting shot?"

"I don't know. If Pete comes to, see if you can get more details."

Meager's plump face was haggard in the lantern light. "Why would Aspen play Holtganer's game, if that's what you're thinkin'."

"For money. What else? Maybe I'm wrong. For his sake I'd better be."

One of the men was spreading blankets in the wagon bed so Doud would be reasonably comfortable.

"I'll see you in town, Meager," Trevor said, and spurred his roan away from the house.

"You better stay clear of Rincon!" Meager called worriedly. "Those boys thought a lot of Prendle. They might reach for a rope and not even wait till the sheriff comes."

But most of it was lost on Trevor. He rode cautiously, heading east into the darkness. Before he had covered a mile there was a streaky grayness in the sky. He rode with rifle across the saddle pommel. Contact with the damp brush soaked his clothing. His narrowed eyes scanned both sides of the trail. As he neared the lookout post where Aspen had been on guard, his nerves tightened. Now with the sky lighting enough to look for sign, he tried to backtrack Doud's horse. He could find no evidence that the foreman had ridden this far. But there were any number of approaches to the lookout post. He cut directly for the knob of rocky land where he had visited Bill Aspen yesterday. Now he could see the jumble of boulders above him. Cocking his

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rifle he began a cautious ascent, his horse picking its way around clumps of huisache. Nothing moved above.

"Aspen," he called softly. There was no reply. No challenging voice, no gunshot. When he reached the clearing he could find no sign of Aspen or his horse.

Dismounting, Trevor's narrowed gaze studied the ground. Cigarette butts littered the muddy ground. He could see the indentation made by Aspen's bootheels. There were other prints. Some left by Trevor and Meager when they were here the day before. One set caught his eye. Made by a big man. A damn big man.

A brownish stain on a sotol spear caught his eye. Perhaps blood. As the sun broke strongly over the eastern lid of the world he saw a reflection of light on metal, coming from a mesquite thicket. Kicking his way through the growth, Trevor saw what was catching the sunlight. The barrel of a derringer. A cheap gun. Checking the loads he saw that the weapon had not been fired. On one of the walnut grips initials had been scratched: W.A. William Aspen?

Trevor dropped the weapon into his pocket.

What the hell had happened here? If only Pete Doud had not taken it upon himself to ignore orders and decided to take Trevor's watch. The act of kindness could easily cost the foreman his life. Trevor licked dry lips. These past weeks had drained him, starting with the long fast ride out of Mexico to Paso, and subsequently finding a new enemy in Ez Holtganer the moment he arrived at the headquarters of what he had assumed to be Laird Meager's ranch. Sleepless nights had followed. He supposed it must show on his face, which prompted Doud's decision to let him sleep.

No sound now in the early day, only the snuffling of Trevor's horse. Trevor ranged in a wide arc, pushing through brush still damp from yesterday's storm. He followed two sets of tracks—those made by the big man, and the smaller

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set obviously belonging to Aspen. His rider had not been alone here at the lookout post, that much was certain. And how many men wore boots of a size that could leave such clear prints in the Texas mud? Red Jollet.

He didn't know what had taken place. But he'd damn soon find out. He could see where boot tracks were replaced by hoofprints. The tracks of two horses led south. Aspen and the big man were riding out together. Or were they. In the growing light he tried to decide if one set of tracks had been made earlier. But the trail was definitely of two horses in single file. Heading toward San Felipe Creek.

It was an hour later, with the sky washed dark blue by yesterday's rain, that he came suddenly upon Bill Aspen. Trevor's rider lay beside the trail in a tangle of brush, only fifty yards or so from the Rincon road. Nearby was Aspen's horse, hung up where the reins had fouled in mesquite.

Aspen lay on his back. His gray shirt was darkly stained high on the right shoulder. His eyes were open. His lips were drawn tightly across blunt yellowed teeth in a grimace of pain.

Trevor scanned the rolling country that stretched away to the hills, but saw no sign of a rider. Trevor swung down and leveled his rifle at Aspen's chest.

"You and Jollet have a falling out?" he demanded thinly.

"I told you I saw a big man yesterday—" Aspen's face changed. He tried to sit up. Evidently he was weak from loss of blood. He fell back deeper into the brush that his weight had smashed earlier. "Good God, Trevor, you think I was in with Jollet?"

"I trailed two horses."

"And I trailed Jollet. I got careless and when I come along here he 'bushed me."

Trevor's hard blue eyes raked the man, seeing that the

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right hand was incapable of holding a weapon. And his left, in plain sight, was empty.

"You also got careless at the lookout," Trevor said coldly. "And let him sneak up. If he *did* sneak up."

"Here's how it happened, Trevor. I heard Pete Doud shouting that he was riding in. Letting me know who it was so I wouldn't shoot him by mistake in the dark."

"Somebody shot him. And not by mistake!"

"I wouldn't shoot Doud. I like him. It was Jollet." Aspen's face drained of even more color when he finally forced himself to a sitting position. "When Doud yelled I didn't know Jollet was behind me in the brush. First thing I know Jollet's rifle went off in my ear like a cannon. I knowed Doud was hit. 'Cause I heard him yell."

Trevor lowered his rifle, his gaze again scanning the flats and the ridges and the hills. He didn't quite know whether to believe Aspen or not.

"You figured to fight Jollet with a derringer?" Trevor demanded.

"So you found it." And when Trevor nodded, Aspen said, "I emptied my rifle and my pistol in the direction I figured Jollet was hid out. But he was behind some rocks and I never touched him. I figured to use that derringer in his gut if he come in close."

"But he didn't come in close, is that it?"

"I kept outa his way till I could reload. Guess I dropped my belly gun out there somewheres."

"Why didn't Jollet stay around and finish you?" Trevor demanded suspiciously.

"Doud was shoutin' by that time. Firin' off his rifle. Guess Jollet thought mebbe Doud wasn't alone. He lit out. Soon's I got reloaded I went after him."

Trevor squatted on his heels. "I'll take a look at that

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wound." Trevor laid aside his rifle, but hitched the revolver forward for easy reach.

Aspen's eyes were bitter. "Still don't trust me?"

"This is Texas, and you're a native."

Trevor inspected the wound, saw that the bullet had struck just below the collar bone. Thankfully it had gone clear through. Aspen had been shot shortly before dawn, which made accurate marksmanship tricky. Had it been full light, Trevor knew, Jollet would have finished the job.

Trevor rose and walked a dozen yards to where Aspen's horse was tangled up in the brush. He led the animal back and tied the reins to a mesquite stump. "I'll give you a hand to the saddle," Trevor said.

"Don't figure I can make it yet. My legs feel like wet rope."

Trevor was staring at a trampled path through the brush, probably made by Jollet's horse. The tracks leading in the direction of Rincon.

Aspen was watching him. "You thought at first I was the one who shot Pete Doud."

"I guess after Meager, and then Ez Holtganer, I was ready to believe the worst about all Texans."

"Not everybody down here figured Jeff Davis was a god on a white horse." Aspen cleared his throat. "Is Doud bad hit?"

Trevor said, "Hard to say. He's no boy." Trevor went on to tell him to keep an eye open for Meager and the wagon bringing Pete Doud to town. "Tell Meager I said to give you a lift." Trevor lingered a moment, feeling he should say something further to Aspen. But the words just weren't in him. At the moment he had only one thing on his mind: find Red Jollet.

With his nerves screaming, Trevor pushed on. Later he sighted the mud-walled buildings of Rincon, drab in the

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Texas sunlight. Cautiously he approached, hat brim pulled low. If possible, he wanted to catch sight of his former sergeant before the giant spotted him. There was the possibility that Jollet had pushed on to the Holtganer place.

Dropping into a gully, he kept away from the main street and climbed to level ground near some sheds at the rear of the saloon that had been operated by the late John Prendle.

So far no one had seen him. He noticed an unusual lack of activity in the town. And this was all to his advantage. If possible he wanted to avoid any contact with the townspeople until he had settled the score with Jollet. Then he'd face up to the rest of it. First things first, he reflected.

He had just started riding across a weed-grown lot when he heard a smacking sound and felt his mount shudder. As he was frantically pulling free of the stirrups he heard a rifle shot spread echoes against the rear wall of the saloon. Then the horse collapsed soundlessly, spilling him. Trevor struck the ground, rolled.

Somehow he got to his knees, his head ringing. In the alleyway behind the saloon stood a stranger, a gaunt man in a stained suit, staring with his mouth hanging open. Trevor's lips pulled back from his teeth. He started to lift the revolver that he had managed to draw and to retain in the spill. Fear touched the man's eyes. Trevor realized too late that this was not the rifleman who had killed his horse.

Before he could dwell on this, something smashed against the small of his back. Force of the blow drove him face first into the dirt. He lost his grip on the revolver and saw it vanish in a tangle of weeds.

Behind him a sardonic voice boomed, "Captain suhl!"

Gasping for breath, Trevor managed to roll to his side. Jollet stood above him, tall as a barn, the right foot that

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had landed with such savage force against Trevor's back still extended.

"I could have killed you like I done the hoss, Captain suh. But there wouldn't of been no fun in that."

The rifle shot and Jollet's loud voice brought a stream of men around the corner of the saloon. One of them shouted, "It's the blue-belly captain. Somebody get a rope!"

A woman began to scream. "You'll not hang him in the street. Not in front of children—"

"The livery barn'll do. We'll keep the younguns away!"

Knowing his desperate gamble to settle the score with Jollet first had backfired, Trevor made a diving lunge for his revolver. Laughing, Jollet wheeled in. He stooped and seized him around the waist with his powerful arms. Trevor felt himself lifted high overhead, saw the sky tilt. At that moment his head cleared. Jollet hurled him toward the ground. Somehow Trevor broke his fall. He managed to scramble away before the former sergeant's heavy boots could smash his face.

"Let 'em fight!" a man cried.

Then Trevor heard Willie Holtganer's thin voice above the sudden shouts of argument. Turning his head, he saw Willie's horse-face, the brows singed; the hands holding a shotgun were wrapped in loose and greasy bandages.

"I got me five Yankee dollars," Willie Holtganer cried, "that says the blue-belly won't live long enough to hang. Stomp him, Red!"

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### X

IN THE WEEDS behind a row of sheds at the rear of the Great Texas Saloon, Cleve Trevor came to one knee on the damp ground. He saw the circle of unfriendly faces that ringed him. Beyond Willie Holtganer he glimpsed the girl, Kerry. Her pale hair was loose, brushing her shoulders. He saw her trying to fight her way through the growing crowd. But men held her back. This was not a woman's business.

Trevor's gaze shifted in that moment. He saw Jollet's thin smile. "You put a bullet in the best friend I ever had," Trevor said through his teeth. "If Pete Doud dies—"

Jollet rushed him. Trevor leaped up and swung hard at the giant. He even managed to withstand the battering of oversize fists for a few moments. But he was overwhelmed. Shouting men gave way as Jollet drove him back. He fell into the trampled weeds. Jollet, teeth bared, rust-colored hair tumbled about his angry face, tried to kick Trevor in the head.

Instead of the blow landing, Trevor came half off the ground and took the swinging boot toe under his left armpit. Pinning the foot against his side with his arm, he allowed his body to fall with all his weight on the leg. Jollet screamed, but managed to kick free. They both fell. The big man came to his feet, favoring the leg Trevor had twisted.

At least Jollet could be hurt, Trevor reflected in that splintered part of a second. Trevor sprang up. A large fist with tufts of hair between the knuckles grazed his cheekbone. Off balance, Jollet tried to correct his stance. It was Trevor's turn for the offensive. He smashed a fist to the side



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of Jollet's face. He struck at the bridge of the nose. Jollet staggered, blood streaming from the smashed nose.

Above the yelling crowd Trevor heard a voice. "Damn blue-belly has got guts!"

"He'll never whip Jollet," said another.

As Trevor circled, Jollet drew back an arm as if to protect the shattered nose. But when Trevor tried to close in, the big man lashed out with tremendous force, backhanding Trevor across the mouth. Dazed, Trevor tried to spin away. Jollet caught him around the waist, dragged him down. Spikes of dead grass jabbed at Trevor's flesh. One of Jollet's thumbs ripped for an eye. But Trevor turned his head, snapping a kneecap toward Jollet's groin. The big frame jerked. Trevor tried to gain his feet. Jollet seized him by the shirtfront, dragged him down to meet a slashing uppercut.

Darkness began to close in. Trevor felt as if he had been hurled into an unlighted tunnel. He heard screams.

Trevor knew he had surely reached the borderline of sanity when he heard Colonel Taylor McVail's voice reach him out of the din. "Cleve, get up! Get on your feet!"

Trevor got his eyes open to obtain a dim impression of the Colonel's mouth open wide under the bristling cavalry mustache. But this couldn't be; not the Colonel here in Rincon, Texas. The Colonel was on his way back to Chicago. Probably already there by this time.

It was proof enough to Trevor that Jollet's jolting fists had temporarily stripped him of his senses.

Kerry Meager cried, "No! No!"

And Trevor realized then that Jollet again was trying to press him overhead at arm's length. Just in time Trevor bounced back from the edge of darkness. As Jollet grunted and hoisted him, Trevor looped a fist into Jollet's smashed nose. Jollet let out a bellow of pain. He staggered, lost his hold on Trevor.

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They fell together in a tangle of arms and legs. Trevor squirmed away, came up quickly. Jollet gasped, the small eyes bewildered now. Knowing his life depended on a quick finish, Trevor gave Jollet no time to get set. This time it was Trevor who carried the attack. A left snapped with brutal force at Jollet's belt line. And as the man broke stride, a right smashed into the mouth.

"For Pete Doud—" Trevor breathed, and his knuckles raked the face of his ex-sergeant.

Finally when Trevor felt that his arms were weighted beyond all hope of lifting, he saw Jollet's bloodied mouth pop open. The slits of eyes were dazed in a framework of punished flesh.

Trevor marveled at the fact that he was able to bring up his right. To direct it for one final jolting thrust at Jollet's jaw. His reward came when he saw Jollet's knees start to cave.

Head down, Trevor listened to the roaring of his own breath. Grinning men swarmed around him. A hand slapped him on the back. He looked down. Through a crisscrossing of legs he could see Jollet stretched out on the damp ground, unmoving.

Then a woman reached Trevor's side. He felt her tremble against him. Looking down he saw Kerry Meager's pale hair. "It was a terrible thing to watch," she gasped. And he managed to lift a swollen hand to stroke the back of her head.

Gradually the shouting ceased. It was followed by a silence interspersed with a general clearing of throats. Glances were exchanged.

Then finally one of the townsmen put it into words. "That was a fight, boys. An' reckon we owe it to the Captain not to take justice into our own hands. We'll wait for the sheriff."

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Kerry clung to Trevor, her eyes wet, angry. "He couldn't coldly murder a man like John Prendle—"

And then Colonel McVail was stepping forward, gray suit immaculate, cavalry mustache giving him a certain dignity. A gray hat tipped back on his sleek head. Gray, reflected Trevor dully. An appropriate color seeing that the colonel was now in former enemy territory.

"Great show, my boy!" the Colonel said with a fierce smile.

"I see you're no hallucination, but flesh and blood," Trevor said.

The Colonel turned to the crowd, lifting his hands for silence. Still the Colonel, Trevor thought, expecting to be obeyed. Strangely enough, the crowd seemed interested in what he was about to say.

"I'm sure there had been some misunderstanding concerning Trevor's guilt in the shooting of your deputy—"

"He killed him!" Willie Holtganer shouted in his thin voice.

Trevor turned his head, seeing the vicious raw and reddened face of this Holtganer heir. Saw the shotgun clutched in the bandaged hands. Trevor stiffened. At that moment Ez Holtganer appeared from the press of men, yellow eyes raking the back of his nephew's head.

"Willie, shut your mouth," Ez Holtganer said harshly. And as Willie spun, his uncle grabbed the shotgun out of his hands. Willie gave a yelp of pain.

"Listen, Uncle Ez, about that night in the kitchen. I didn't aim to shoot you, I just figured—"

"Lucky for you you got away that night. Only smart thing you ever done. You clear out of Texas. Don't never come back."

"Uncle Ez, I was aimin' to ride out to the ranch and explain—"

"You got a hoss. That's all you'll ever get from me. You

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ride that hoss outa Texas. I ever lay eyes on your homely face again, you'll wish to hell you'd never heard my name. You hear me, boy?"

While the crowd looked on in silence, Willie Holtganer tried to make his uncle listen to reason. Ez Holtganer's gaze was cold. "You're lucky to get out with a singed hide. You come back and you'll have worse than that."

"Uncle Ez—"

Ez jerked a thumb at the beaten Red Jollet, who had managed to sit up in the circle of trampled weeds. "Take Jollet with you. You're two of a kind. I got no use now for his busted carcass."

All this time Kerry Meager had been clinging to Trevor. Now he pushed her gently aside and directed his gaze at Ez Holtganer. "Jollet is your foreman. He shot Pete Doud. I hold you responsible—"

"They'll hang you for shootin' Prendle," Ez cut in, his mouth tight. "And that'll be the end of you!"

Trevor's legs trembled from fatigue. "Soon's I get my breath," he gasped, "I'm going to do a better job on you than I did on Jollet. You sent him to kill Doud—"

Holtganer, holding his nephew's shotgun in one hand, jammed down the other on the cedar butt of his revolver. "Any time you feel lucky, I'll be waitin'—"

Before Trevor could say anything further a man shouted, "Somebody's hurt!"

All eyes swung to a rider approaching from the saloon alley. It was Bill Aspen, hunched over in the saddle, blood from the shoulder wound staining one whole side of his shirt.

Bystanders helped Aspen out of the saddle. Aspen told about Laird Meager heading for town with a wounded Pete Doud in a wagon. "I come on ahead 'cause Meager didn't dare drive too fast."

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"What you tryin' to say?" demanded an onlooker.

"Meager don't want you boys to do anything crazy to the Captain. He'll tell the straight of the deputy gettin' killed. Trevor didn't do it."

A murmur ran through the crowd. Trevor looked around for Willie Holtganer and Jollet. They were gone. Both men had evidently taken Aspen's arrival as a cover to slip away.

Colonel McVail beamed at Trevor. "I knew everything would work out. I didn't have to drum you out of the corps after all." The Colonel chuckled at what he considered to be humor. Trevor was unimpressed.

Bill Aspen was being helped by a tall man in a rumpled brown suit. Somebody said he was Doc Norton, who had an office across from the saloon.

Kerry Meager turned to Trevor, her eyes anxious. "I've had a little experience in nursing. I'll help your rider. You'd also better let the doctor take a look at you."

Trevor shook his head, refusing to tend to his own hurts until Laird Meager arrived with the wounded Pete Doud. Trevor was about to borrow a horse and intercept the wagon. But at that moment it arrived. Trevor helped carry Doud into the doctor's office. Bill Aspen was straddling a chair, right arm in a sling. A bulky bandage covered his bad shoulder. He had regained some of his color.

Doc Norton removed a bullet from Pete Doud's left side near the rib cage. Kerry Meager helped him dress the wound.

In front of the office Laird Meager was addressing a group of townsmen. ". . . I was there." In a steady voice the fat man told how Tex Hurley had shot Prendle. And then tried to gun down Cleve Trevor. "Trevor shot him in self-defense."

"Willie Holtganer sure told it different," a man said.  
"Willie lied."

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"Where was Willie while all the shootin' was goin' on?"

"On the floor. Screaming.

This brought on some laughter. The men seemed relaxed, eager to accept Meager's version of the killing—the same bunch, Trevor reflected, who had tried to kill him in this very town not too many days ago.

Trevor felt a pressure of Kerry Meager's fingers against one of his bruised hands. She applied linament, which eased some of the soreness.

Later, he accompanied the Colonel to the latter's room at the hotel.

"I've been here two days," the Colonel said. "Hearing some bad reports about you. I'm glad you were able to clear yourself. It wouldn't have helped the Rincon Cattle Company if one of the partners was tried for murder."

"I can see you believed the worst." Trevor sank to a straight-backed chair. "When we parted in Paso you were leaving immediately for Chicago—"

"I got to worrying. There's too much at stake to allow some reckless move—"

"Colonel, I've had a bad time here in Texas. And I don't particularly care for your attitude."

Colonel McVail bristled, stammered some choice phrases concerning insubordination. But Trevor thinly reminded him that they were no longer in the army, and that rank counted for nothing. At last McVail, red-faced, managed to say, "We need each other, Cleve. Let's always remember that." Then he added, "You need a good soaking. I'll have them bring up a tub and hot water for you."

"I guess I've earned it," Trevor said sharply, and the Colonel flashed him a glance of speculation.

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### XI

IN THE GREAT Texas Saloon, Ez Holtganer listened to the crowd ask Laird Meager about more particulars of the gun battle that took the lives of Prendle and Tex Hurley. Then Ez could stand it no longer.

"All of a sudden you got spine, fat man."

Meager paled. "A little overdue, Ez, I admit."

Holtganer rubbed at a lump still visible at the back of his skull. "I won't forget that you like to cracked my head." Meager said nothing. "Laird," Holtganer continued, "one of these days I just might tie you to a saddle and ride you down to Galveston."

Meager looked startled and his lips trembled. A silence fell over the saloon, as onlookers speculated as to the nature of the threat.

"Remember this, all of you!" Ez Holtganer bellowed. "I ordered my nephew outa Texas. If he wants to argue, I'll tend to him myself. But don't none of you figure it gives you license to make a try for him. Mebby he lied about Prendle dyin'. Mebby he didn't. You only got Meager's word."

"I told the truth," Meager said stiffly.

"I hate Willie's guts," said Ez to the assemblage packed in the barn-like saloon. "But the man that kills him won't see another sun."

With that he stormed out, letting the swing doors whip behind him. On the walk were the five men he had ridden in with earlier from Anchor. Among them Sam Bissel, who had done more than his share of complaining since the day of Cleve Trevor's arrival. Bissel had tried to cut down on the

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Captain and instead had had his thighbone shattered by a rifle slug.

Bissel was sitting on a bench in front of the saloon, his face grayish. The bad leg was thick with bandage.

"Sam, you see Doc Norton about that leg," Holtganer ordered. "You done enough bench-settin'."

"I seen too many legs whopped off in the war," Bissel complained, his round face streaked with sweat. "If I go see the Doc, he's liable to reach for his saw—"

"I won't pay a rider that can't ride," Ez Holtganer snapped. He eyed the other four who had made the trip with him to town. "I got this to say. I'm my own foreman. Jollet's gone. So's Willie. Any man feels he wants to join 'em, speak up."

Not a man moved.

Ez Holtganer continued. "You spread the word to the rest of the crew. When I git home I don't want to find a man there who wishes he'd quit when he had the chance."

The men nodded and got their horses. Only Bissel stayed behind. Ez turned to the chunky man on the bench. "Sam, you mind what I said. You had your last day drawin' my pay without settin' a saddle."

Bissel got up and limped painfully across the street where Doc Norton had his office. Ez watched him disappear through the doorway. Everything had gone wrong since the day Trevor rode into the Anchor yard with that gutless Meager. Maybe not so gutless at that, Ez reflected, rubbing the lump on the back of his head.

Trevor coming back to Texas had altered a lot of things. For one thing it had given Willie nerve enough to sieze an opportunity to try for the big stakes. Ez turned cold whenever he recalled his nephew aiming the shotgun at him that night in the ranchhouse kitchen; all his plans, to end up with buckshot in the face.



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The irony was the fact that it was the damn blue-belly captain who had saved his life.

Ez Holtganer leaned the point of a shoulder against the saloon wall and shaped up a cigarette. He watched some small boys roll hoops along the street. He'd never had much time for fun when he was growing up. In those days it was cowhides to sell and Comanches to watch out for, and hell in general. Well, today he had cows. He had land. Two bit an acre was the value of Texas land. A Texas cow was hardly worth a plugged 'dobe dollar. Not unless you could deliver it in Kansas. A man needed a beef contract. Last year, Ez knew, a lot of Texas cowmen had come up on the short end of the stick. When a buyer got through with the whittling there wasn't much left. Now Ez knew what he had to do. He had made up his mind to it.

A man had his pride, sure. But you couldn't fry it for breakfast. Yesterday he'd got word that Colonel Taylor McVail was in town and wanting to see him. Ez had ridden in today, intending to have a confab with the no-good. Instead, he had blundered onto the fight of the decade, between Red Jollet and Trevor. Jollet had been so soundly whipped that he'd likely be gunshy from here on out, and not much use to a cowman who needed a tough ramrod. Jollet and Willie belonged together. They should team up. Maybe between the two of them they could dig up half a brain.

Presently Ez Holtganer was aware of a familiar voice loudly raised in the saloon. Peering over the swing doors he saw Colonel McVail occupying a place of honor at the bar. Evidently he had come down from the hotel and entered by the alley door. Holtganer's lips twisted at sight of the men listening with rapt attention.

Ez stepped inside, forced a smile at the assemblage.

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"Smell a Yankee dollar and a man forgets the war," he said with a thin smile.

"Just the man I want to see," the Colonel beamed.

"I recollect last year in *Chee*-ago, you didn't figure me taller than a lump of cow droppings."

"A year makes a lot of difference," the Colonel assured him. As arrogant and shined up, Ez thought, as if he stood with his foot on the rail at the Drover's Bar in Chicago and smoked a dollar cigar with his whisky.

The Colonel came up to take Ez by the arm. "You and I have some things to discuss. I think better when I walk. Do you mind?"

As the pair sauntered the length of the street, conversing earnestly, Laird Meager, fairly drunk now, gave a slow shake of his head there at the front window. "Gentlemen, behold a miracle."

"Wa'al, the war's over," said Blacky Catron, who'd been tending bar since John Prendle's death. "Mebby it's time we faced up to it."

## XII

FROM HIS SQUATTING position in a zinc tub that had been carried to the Colonel's second floor hotel room, Trevor surveyed the four poster, the chest of drawers, the window curtains. Naturally the Colonel would have the best of quarters. Trevor hadn't paid too much attention to the room directly following his brawl with Jollet. But now he rather enjoyed the luxury. He smoked a cigar and felt his muscles begin to lose a little of their ache in the warm water.

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A knock sounded on the door, and Bill Aspen's voice reached him. Trevor told him to come on in.

Aspen was still pale. "Figured to ride back to camp," he said. "Any message you want me to give the boys?"

Trevor shook his head, eyes settling on the bandaged right arm in the sling. "You shouldn't even be out of bed."

"Doc had to ride out somewheres to deliver a baby. That Meager girl's lookin' after Pete Doud. Now there's a female with spine."

"I agree." Trevor frowned, hesitated, then said, "There's something I've got to set straight, Bill. I misjudged you and I'm sorry."

Aspen eased his arm in the sling. "You evened things up. Jollet shot me and you busted his head."

"I didn't bust it enough." Trevor reached for a towel he had slung over the back of a chair. "Tell you what, Bill. You kind of keep your eye on Pete Doud. That Jollet might be loco enough to try and finish what he started."

"Everybody says he won't dare stay around this corner of Texas. Ez Holtganer ain't one to have an order disobeyed. He'll kill Jollet if he shows his busted face around here."

"Just the same—"

"Now that Meager has told the truth of how the deputy died, we could likely hire on some men here."

"Tomorrow we'll talk about it. In the meantime, you take it easy, Bill."

"I'll watch Pete Doud like you said." That ended the discussion, for Colonel McVail returned to the room. Aspen took his leave.

Trevor got out of the tub, dried himself and drew on his pants. "I followed you in the war, Colonel. And now it looks as if you're following me. At least to Texas. You might have let me know you didn't intend returning directly to Chicago."

## THE RINCON TRAP

"Remember I took some risk in coming here," McVail snapped. "Cleve, after you and Meager left Paso together I began reflecting on your attitude."

"My attitudel"

"Cleve, I don't care for the tone of your voice. You're offended because I found it expedient to check up on you. But there is a lot of money at stake." The Colonel made vague gestures with his hands as if grabbing at flies. "I had to reassure myself that you wouldn't do some fool thing—"

"Such as not trusting your great friend Meager?"

"Precisely."

"I didn't trust him in Paso. And I told you as much." Trevor's anger overrode his tiredness. "But you insisted on him as a partner. He proved to be a scoundrel. But he saved my hide and that counts for something."

"Scoundrel? Captain Trevor, I'm not at all happy to hear you slander the man."

"I remind you again. This is no longer the army," Trevor said coldly.

McVail blinked at the harshness of his former junior officer's tone. "Last year you recall me saying that there is no man I would rather have as my associate than you—"

"And I was flattered."

"We agreed that you would furnish cattle. But conditions changed in Mexico—"

"All right, we have Meager as a partner. But he no longer controls Anchor. Now what?"

"I had a discussion with Ez Holtganer and he told me that Meager could still retain a small interest if we thought the name to be of value—"

Trevor stood up, stomping into his boots. His fingers were stiff from the fight. He could feel cuts and bruises at many points of his body. The fact that McVail could

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blantly reveal a discussion with Ez Holtganer was infuriating. A discussion of cattle, what else?

"Doesn't the fact that Holtganer might have ended up by murdering me mean a damn thing to you?"

Colonel McVail chewed at an end of his mustache while he seemed to wage an inner fight to dredge up some reasonable explanation. Trevor wondered at the change he noted in his colonel. Something that had not caught his eye in the war, and only barely noticed in Paso. But now here in Rincon there was an obvious flaw apparent in the man. Too dazzled at the prospect of cattle wealth to notice much of anything before this. Too caught up in hero worship for this man during the war years. Now with McVail standing in a shaft of Texas sunlight that spilled through the hotel window, Trevor realized the difference in the man. No longer resplendent in a colonel's uniform. Now he was just a gambler who sought riches in cattle.

"Ez Holtganer has many fine qualities," the Colonel began. "But—"

Trevor gave a snort of laughter. "Laird Meager implied that if something happened to me you wouldn't be too concerned. Just so you get a herd of cattle in Abilene come spring."

"That's a cruel thing to say."

"I wonder if he knows you better than I do."

"Cleve, I've had a long trip. You've had—certain problems of your own—"

"Considerable problems," Trevor remarked dryly.

"Nothing can be gained by losing our tempers. Cleve, ours is an old friendship. This is the last order I will ever give you. Take this room and I'll get another." He crossed over and placed a hand on Trevor's shoulder, "It was a remarkable thing you did today. Facing up to that brawler.

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Even Holtganer doesn't understand how you managed a victory. He admires you, grudgingly perhaps."

Trevor's lips twisted. He tried to lay tongue to sarcasm that would shred the irony. But he was suddenly drained.

"I'll send up a meal and a bottle," were the Colonel's parting words.

Later, sleep crept in on him as he thought of Kerry Meager. He wished he had the good sense to be his own man, to take such a woman as a wife and build his own empire. But the war had changed everything. Old values were ash and all that mattered today was the accumulation of dollars—the Yankee kind.

At dawn he was up, his muscles stiff. The tub still rested in the center of the room, its contents bearing a scum of soap and dirt. As he dressed he clenched and unclenched his hands, realizing the fingers were in no condition for any degree of gun speed. With any luck he might not have to use one, now that Colonel McVail had arrived and seemed ready to charm the snakes like Ez Holtganer out of their holes.

Events of the previous day crowded through his mind as he made his way downstairs. This morning he could view his future more objectively.

In the early light Trevor found Kerry at the doctor's office when he went to look in on Pete Doud. The girl's eyes showed fatigue. She had catnapped in a chair all night. Doctor Norton had not returned from the Miller place, she explained, where he had gone to deliver a baby. Probably complications had developed, she finished.

"You must be dead for sleep," he said, concerned. A glance into the room occupied by Doud showed the foreman to be awake.

"Pete, you old son—" Trevor broke off, grinning, tried to hide his apprehension at Doud's lack of color, his drawn

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look. "You'll be out of bed in no time." Trevor hurried in to stand beside the older man's bed. Doud's beard was tangled, in need of combing.

"Another half inch an' that slug would've had me shakin' hands with the gate watchers of hell." Doud attempted a chuckle.

Even at the early hour the Rincon Cafe was open. Trevor brought Doud an order of boiled eggs and some coffee. In the meantime, Kerry Meager tidied up around the combination office and hospital.

While Doud ate what he could of the breakfast, Trevor looked outside for Bill Aspen. He found the Texan at a vantage point behind the doctor's office, seated on a fire barrel, rifle across his lap.

"Like you said," Aspen yawned, "I kept an eye on Pete Doud."

Trevor thanked him, then asked for one more favor. Keep watch in the office until the doctor returned. Aspen agreed, trailed Trevor inside and leaned the rifle against a wall.

Trevor told Kerry he was going to walk her home, that she needed sleep. As they walked slowly toward her boarding house at the south end of town, she seemed more reserved than usual. Occasionally her gray eyes anxiously scanned his face. Finally he got it out of her. During the early part of the night several townsmen had stopped in to see how Doud was getting along.

"Everyone is talking about Ez Holtganer and your colonel," she said finally, when he pressed her for details of the visits.

"Last night I was ready to turn my back on the Rincon Cattle Company," Trevor admitted. "Now I don't really know."

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She seemed surprised. "You couldn't be so—so greedy that you'd let Ez soft talk you—"

"It's been pointed out to me that Yankees have a money sickness." He smiled, hoping to lighten her mood.

"After the way my uncle cheated you," she said, her voice shaking, "I should think you would have learned never to trust any of them."

They walked the rest of the way in silence. At this end of town, at least, no one seemed to be stirring. By the time they reached a frame house with a large gallery, she seemed to have regained a measure of her good humor. Turning, she gave him her hand.

"You could have killed my uncle for the things he did," she said quietly. "But you didn't. You have my thanks."

Before he could reply she whirled and hurried up the steps and into the house. A large door framed by leaded glass inserts swung closed behind her.

Thoughtfully Trevor returned to the cafe and took a stool at the counter. He supposed Kerry talked sense. But then there was the other side of it—the lost years of the war.

After his first mug of coffee he was aware that someone had taken the adjoining stool. It was Ez Holtganer. The rancher grunted a greeting and muttered something about playing monte all night at the saloon. His eyes were blood-shot and his temper seemed short when he ordered coffee from a fat waitress. "Had a run of luck," Holtganer said, and his yellow gaze swung to Trevor. "One thing about luck. It changes. If a man hangs on long enough."

"I hear you and the Colonel had a talk," Trevor grunted.

Holtganer twisted on the stool to regard him narrowly. "Remember this, I ain't forgot about my brother Bob. A shot in the back and the river takin' care of the rest of it. My main idea in life was to make you suffer for it."



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"I've suffered." Trevor took a sip of the bitter coffee. "You sent Jollet to do some sniping—"

"Not me. I don't fight that way. You whupped him an' I found myself shoutin' for you yesterday out back of the saloon."

"I'm not very flattered."

Holtganer chewed that over, then said, "You ain't easy like I figured. I thought we lost the war, not 'cause your side was tough, but on account of there was more of you than there was of us. I was wrong. There was a few tough ones on your side."

A concession for Holtganer to make, Trevor decided. But made with a purpose in mind. As Trevor ate the breakfast of cakes and fat meat, a climbing sun warmed the front window of the cafe that smelled of stale grease and sweat.

"Your observation about the war doesn't prove much of anything," Trevor said.

"Tell you one thing, Trevor. You're a lot like me. Tough as a Chihuahua boot. All you an' me give a damn about is cows and money. Down here it means the same thing." Holtganer picked up a fly-specked pitcher and poured milk into his coffee. "The way things are goin', you an' me will keep on till we kill each other off. And we ain't even got widows to weep at our graves."

Some men entered, nodding at Trevor and Holtganer, then taking stools at the counter. Now I'm one of the accepted, Trevor thought wryly.

"The time to have thought about us killing each other off," Trevor said, "was the day I arrived at Anchor." Trevor tossed a coin on the counter. He started to get up.

"I ain't through talkin' yet." Holtganer sounded peevish.

"I'm going to take a look around and see if your nephew and Jollet might be about to try for a hole in the back of my head."

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"They know better'n to hang around here—"

Trevor walked out, tipping his hat against the early sun. No one was on the streets. Those in the cafe, Trevor guessed, had either been participants in the all night game Holtganer mentioned, or observers.

Looking around, he could see Holtganer glaring through the streaked glass of the cafe window. The hell with his hurt feelings, Trevor thought, and crossed to the saloon.

### XIII

THE ONLY THING that saved the day or the night, for that matter, was the jug of whisky that Willie Holtganer stole from the nester outfit to the south of town. Outfit run by a sod-brain named Miller. And from all the commotion around the house, it was a good guess that the Miller woman was about to add to her brood. Doc Norton's buckboard in the yard only strengthened the possibility.

In addition to the jug of whisky, Willie found a shotgun and some shells on a shelf in the kitchen, which he entered in his sock feet. Jollet waited outside with the horses. With all the howling going on in the back part of the house, there wasn't much danger of being caught. And if he was, so what? If Miller and Doc Norton wanted to yell, they'd sure enough be in trouble. Buckshot had a way of settling differences permanently. Be a shame if Miller didn't live long enough to get a look at his new born.

Well, a shotgun was the only weapon Willie's burned hands could manage. And nobody was going to keep him from making off with it.

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When Willie slipped out into the yard he cursed his awkwardness because of the scorched fingers. Whenever he thought of that night when the Captain hurled the lamp, he turned cold. If he'd taken it full on instead of turning his body so that it glanced off— If the lamp bowl had been full instead of nearly empty, the tall damp weeds in the yard would never have doused the flames. Willie Holtganer would have been a length of charred bone and singed hair.

Without being detected he and Jollet rode out of the Miller yard and continued on a mile along a little used trail. Here they came to a 'dobe shack with only three walls standing. It afforded a shelter of sorts. There, seated on the ground, their backs to the mud wall, they passed the jug back and forth and cursed Cleve Trevor and Ez Holtganer.

The whisky reopened an ancient wound in Willie. "I was mighty sore when Uncle Ez made you foreman." Willie stared at the big beaten hulk of the ex-ramrod, barely visible in the growing darkness.

"Ez figured you wasn't man enough for the job," Red Jollet replied, his voice hissing through several gaps where Trevor's hard knuckles had knocked out teeth.

"I *am* man enough for the job," Willie snapped. Then he added meaningfully, "Man enough to run the whole place."

"But you ain't got the whole place," Jollet pointed out. "Ez has got it."

"My pa had a share of Walkin' R. But Ez won't never pass nothin' along to me. To him I'm just a two bit cowhand."

"Your uncle's meaner than a hurt snake."

"Me an' some fella I could trust," Willie said in a conspiratorial tone of voice, "might end up mighty rich."

Jollet jerked up his big head. "You mean do Ez in?"

"I damn near had him with the shotgun that night."

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Willie swore. "If only the Captain hadn't been close enough to the lamp to grab it."

"Only mistake you made," Jollet pointed out, "was in talkin' too much. You should've shot instead of talked."

"Won't make the mistake again." Willie took the jug, weight of it painfully heavy against his burned hands.

"All I got in my head is a picture of my captain. My captain suh." Jollet picked up a clod from the dirty floor and hurled it across the room at a packrat. The rodent scurried away into the brush. A wind came up stirring tall cottonwoods that ringed the place.

"You scared to make a try for the Captain?" Willie asked, and took a long pull at the jug.

"Who's scared?" Jollet demanded in a dangerous voice, still tough despite the beating he had received at the hands of the blue-belly captain. "I don't just want to shoot the Captain right off." Jollet made a vicious, chopping motion with the flat of his hand. "I want him to turn white when he knows for sure he's got no chance with me."

"Tie both hands behind his back," Willie couldn't help but say. "And this time you could whip him."

"I can whup him face up," was Jollet's retort. "This time he won't get no help from the crowd."

Willie Holtganer had to smile into the darkness. Nobody had given Trevor a hand during the fight and Jollet knew it. But for now Willie needed the big man. And he'd better stop riling Jollet. Plenty of time for that.

"Once we get shut of the Captain," Willie explained, "we'll go after Ez."

"You make it sound easy like catchin' flies."

"You n' me could trail a damn big herd of cows nawth, come spring," Willie pointed out.

Jollet remained silent for so long that Willie finally asked him if he had anything against such a grand plan that could

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make them rich. "Killin' the Captain right in town would take some doin'," Jollet muttered. "Ez catches sight of us first and we're liable to be layin' there dead before we can draw a quick breath."

"I hear tell that Trevor would do most anything for that foreman of his. Mebby it's lucky you didn't kill Doud right off."

"I figured that if I kept snipin' at Trevor's outfit long enough, one day I'd get him in my rifle sights, personal."

"I hear tell that foreman saved Trevor's life in the war."

"What you gettin' at, Willie?" Jollet demanded in that hissing voice.

"If we could use Doud for bait."

"You mean a trap for the Captain?"

"Come daylight, let's go see if Doc Norton is still fussin' out at the Miller place."

When the first grayish light spread to the east, they cut down through the hills and saw Doc Norton's wagon still in the yard.

Willie smiled. He rode with the loaded shotgun in a rifle boot; a dangerous thing to do. But he wasn't about to be caught short if they should suddenly run into the Captain or Uncle Ez.

It was still quite early when the two riders drew up in the alley behind Doc Norton's place in Rincon. A glance at the hotel showed window blinds drawn against the morning sun. Nobody was peering out. And from a slot between buildings Willie noted little activity at the saloon across the street. A look in a different direction showed a few men in the cafe. But that was all. Otherwise the town was quiet. Had it been a Sunday morning, with the town crowded with cowhands in for a Saturday drunk, it would have been a different story.

Holding his shotgun loosely in bandaged hands, Willie

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told Jollet to try the alley door. It was unlocked. Quickly entering, they tiptoed down a narrow corridor and then to a room where there were shelves filled with bottles. Across from these lay a gray-bearded man on a narrow bed. A man stood talking to him. The man was solidly built, his back to the door. He had a Texas drawl.

Doud was first to see the intruders in the doorway. His pale face showed instant surprise. "Aspen—behind you—"

But Bill Aspen had no chance to draw his belt gun. Jollet lunged forward, clamped a powerful hand around Aspen's wrist. He lifted the man's revolver, then sent him sprawling across the bed. Aspen gave a sharp cry of pain as he landed on his wounded shoulder.

"You two don't make one sound," Willie Holtganer warned in a tense whisper, swinging the shotgun to Aspen, then to Doud. "You open your mouths an' Doc Norton will find you both splattered on the wall. Now you do every damn thing I say."

Aspen's mouth was twisted in pain as he sat up, hugging the bad arm. A fresh stain appeared at the bandage.

Willie then ordered Doud to get dressed and Aspen to help him. Even hurt as he was, Doud was forced out of bed at gunpoint. Twice Aspen protested that the rough treatment could break open Doud's wound. But Willie rammed him with the shotgun muzzles to emphasize his orders.

It was not easy for Aspen, using one hand, to get the foreman into his clothes. Willie kept urging them to hurry. Jollet had an eye in his battered face at a crack in the front door, ready to cut down anyone foolish enough to walk in. When they were not interrupted in the deadly business, Willie gave a vast sigh of relief.

But they weren't out of it yet, Jollet reminded tensely. If only they could get out of town without being spotted, then the rest of their wild plan could go into operation.

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Only the early hour, with Doud and Aspen riding double on the latter's horse that had been tied behind the doctor's office, enabled them to clear Rincon without being detected. That and keeping to alleyways and off the streets.

When at last they arrived at the adobe ruin where Willie Holtganer and Jollet had spent the night, Aspen received his orders.

"You tell Trevor," Willie repeated for the third time, "that if anybody tries a fool play, Doud will get a full load of buckshot."

"I understand," Aspen said, licking his lips.

"Don't you an' the Captain figure to bring back a posse. You might get me an' Jollet, sure. But Doud will be layin' here with lead in his gut, beggin' for somebody to finish the job."

Aspen, white-faced, unarmed, rode toward Rincon to carry out his mission.

## XIV

WHEN TREVOR entered the Great Texas Saloon he found the half dozen early drinkers talking cattle. They seemed pleased to see him and eager to talk cows.

"I understand you been up the Kansas trail yourself, Captain," said an older man with a seamed face. "Mind tellin' us how you found the going?"

"You'll never experience anything tougher." Trevor looked around at the deserted deal tables; cigarette and cigar butts littered the floor. "Any of you seen Willie Holtganer or Jollet?"

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"Ez give his orders," the older man said. "An' that's all there is to it. Nobody, not even his kin, goes against Ez in these parts."

Trevor thoughtfully fingered a cut on his jaw, recalling the night when he had made his break from Ez Holtganer's private prison. "Willie struck me as the kind who could be goaded into taking a long gamble."

"Willie's halfway to Laredo by now. Jollet right with him. They know better 'n to cross Ez."

Trevor failed to share their certainty that the pair would stay out of the county. However, he did hope they were right. At the moment he had enough problems to face. The Colonel being in Rincon was something he had not counted on. He'd settle things today one way or another with the man, then return to his headquarters north of San Felipe Creek. Pete Doud would have to remain in town until the wound was completely healed. But he knew this would be hard to do. Doud was a prideful man and would not easily take to staying in bed instead of sitting a saddle.

Trevor had an early whisky with these former enemies who were gathered around, trying to get information about Kansas out of him. When he finished his drink, he said, "I'm hiring a few riders. Anybody wants to hire on, see Bill Aspen. He's my new segundo."

Then Trevor stepped outside, intending to cut across to the doctor's office. But he saw Colonel McVail, Meager in tow, coming toward him. Trevor waited for them in the center of the street.

"Cleve, I've had quite a talk with Meager," the Colonel snapped, giving the fat man a scornful glance. "He admits his deception."

"You didn't need to pull it out of him," Trevor said shortly. "I already told you how things stood."

Meager had evidently been drinking most of the night.



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His face was puffy from alcohol, the eyes bloodshot. "I had to take Holtganer's orders. I'm a coward. I admit it."

"It took guts to lay a chunk of firewood across the back of Ez Holtganer's head," Trevor said, and Meager brightened momentarily.

"No matter," Colonel McVail cut in stiffly. "I could never trust Laird again. Meager, a fine Texas name. And he destroyed it."

"Not quite," Trevor reminded coldly. "It's also his niece's name."

McVail gestured angrily. "I'm only glad that Laird's father—my friend—didn't live to see the mess he's made of his life."

Meager's face reddened. Turning abruptly, he weaved back toward the saloon. McVail, watching him, made a great point of shuddering, as if a rodent had just crossed his bare foot. "He's out of the company. At least that much is settled."

Trevor looked at him. "Was this a sudden decision to placate me?"

"Cleve, just why in the hell are you so difficult these days?"

"Boot Meager out, so I'll be more amenable to—a new partner."

The Colonel tried to hold his gaze to Trevor's. Then he lowered his eyes, tugging at the end of the cavalry mustache. "Walk with me, Cleve." He started off down the street, and after a minute Trevor stepped after him, long legs scissoring morning shadows.

"Here's something to consider, Colonel," Trevor said, falling in step with the older man. "Ranchers hereabouts are eager to trail to Abilene. We could form a pool. We don't need Anchor—"

The Colonel gave a weary gesture. "Cleve, that's so

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tenuous—" Down the street a hostler appeared in the wide doorway of the stable, yawning, scratching himself as he viewed the new day.

"Cleve," the Colonel continued, "to put it bluntly, I'm in a bind. My late wife's money has been invested in the packing house. Some of the funds—er—belonged to a niece and a nephew. But the money is well protected," he hastened to add.

"As long as the east remains hungry for Texas beef," Trevor said.

"I must have a cattle source I can depend on in order to compete with larger outfits." The Colonel gave Trevor a sidelong glance, trying to gauge his reaction. "For one reason or another, Ez Holtganer has never made a Kansas drive. You have. You know the game. It's a tough business. I have obligations to the family of my late wife, so—"

"You're trying to talk me into joining up with Holtganer."

"Anchor and Walking R could supply us with all the beef we need. This added to your own herd that you're going to build here in Texas on the San Felipe lease."

"Holtganer is the enemy. I learned in the war to go easy in trusting one."

"A lot of the trouble between you and Holtganer was because of Jollet's hatred."

"The hatred is not surprising. I broke him to ranks for insubordination and brutality towards his men."

"No doubt deserved. But the war was an ugly business all around." The Colonel paused, then added, "Such as you being forced to kill Bob Holtganer—"

"I didn't kill Ez Holtganer's brother—"

"Whether you actually pulled the trigger or not is immaterial. But Bob was in your charge. You can't deny a certain responsibility."

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"My only guilt was laxity, perhaps. Because I liked him. And maybe it gave him the courage to attempt escape."

"But Holtganer's brother *was* killed. This is a fact, Cleve."

"Make your point, Colonel."

"Ez Holtganer is willing to make concessions. To overlook the death of his brother. Even he realizes Jollet's version is a little incredible."

"A belated realization," Trevor said heavily.

"Damn it, Cleve, don't be so mule-headed."

"A failing of mine, perhaps."

"This morning you left Ez sitting at the cafe counter. He was only trying to have a civil discussion. But no, you've got to climb a tall saddle."

"I don't like the man."

"Cleve, you're throwing away a fortune. This is your chance to become a rich man. It's there for you to take." The Colonel extended a hand. "I'm begging you. Don't let me down."

Trevor halted, the Colonel swinging in beside him. Ahead was the boarding house where Kerry Meager slept. Somehow the whole thing balled up in Trevor's stomach. "You and Holtganer could do it alone."

"Look, I need your strength. Me in Chicago and you in Texas."

"Holtganer has all the strength you need."

"That isn't the same and you know it, Cleve." Sweat beaded the Colonel's forehead under the tipped back gray hat. "Cleve, we're the lucky ones. We survived the war. Think of the poor souls under the Virginia sod. We're alive, not dead. By seventy-three we can be as big as anyone in the cattle business. The lost years, Cleve. Let's make up for them!"

"There were some lost years," Trevor had to admit.

Sensing triumph, Colonel McVail seized his arm. They stood

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together at the far end of the street where it became little more than wheel tracks disappearing into the wilderness. "Cleve, talk to Holtganer. The three of us sit down and have a rational discussion. It's all I ask."

"I'll have to give it some thought," Trevor replied seriously.

Colonel McVail gave him a thin and calculating look. "That girl. She's put her pretty head into this," he guessed.

"Are you a mind reader now, Colonel?" Trevor asked.

"I should think you'd have had quite enough of the Meagers."

"Not quite."

They started back toward the center of town. A few clouds blanked the sun, to draw shadows across the building fronts. Trevor halted near the doctor's office.

"I'll take a look at my foreman," Trevor said, and the Colonel nodded.

"See you at the saloon for a drink. I'll get Ez in a good frame of mine." The Colonel forced a chuckle, then walked briskly across the street.

He thinks he has me, Trevor reflected. And maybe he has.

Trevor opened the door to Doc Norton's office, his nostrils twitching at the pungent odors of disinfectant.

"Pete, when are you going to stop loafing on the job?" he called jokingly. Then he froze when he came to the doorway of the back room and saw that Doud's bed was empty. Blankets had been pulled onto the floor. Doud's clothes were gone. The back door stood open.

## XV

A SOUND IN the doorway caused Trevor to spin, hand dropping to the butt of his belted .44. Bill Aspen, face tense and pale, stood there. Trevor noticed that the bandage and sling were dirt stained and smudged with fresh blood.

"Been tryin' to get your eye," Aspen said in a drawn voice, closing the door against the street noises. "But you was with the Colonel—"

"Where's Pete Doud?" Trevor demanded harshly.

Aspen told him in detail.

When he finished Trevor was in a rage. "They shouldn't have moved him—" Then Trevor broke off. What the hell could Jollet and Willie care? They had about as much feeling for their fellow man as a rattler toward the crippled bird it cornered. "If Pete dies because of this," he said in a deadly voice, "those two will pray for the Comanches to come along and finish what I've started."

"We better ride," Aspen said grimly. "They said I had till noon to get you there. They'll kill Doud if things don't go right. They ain't foolin' one damn bit."

"I'll get a horse," Trevor said, then for the first time he noticed Aspen's empty holster. "What about me?" Trevor wanted to know. "Was there any stipulation about me coming unarmed?" Trevor was surprised at the steadiness of his voice. And at a time when he was dying inside.

"They never said," Aspen replied. "They know you won't do no shootin'. Not with Doud there."

Trevor swore. Jollet, damn him, knew that the bond between Trevor and the older foreman was stronger than even that between most blood kin.

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"Meet me at the stable," Trevor snapped. He ran for the livery where his saddle had been taken after his horse was shot down by Jollet. Quickly he hired a gray from the hostler and threw on his own saddle. As he tightened the cinch he recalled Aspen's derringer that he picked up at the lookout where Jollet had done his sniping at Pete Doud. By rights he should return the weapon to its owner. Instead, he removed it from the saddlebag where he had placed it when approaching Rincon the day before. Quickly he examined the pocket gun, making sure it was loaded. Not much of a weapon, but at close range it could make a fatal wound. With a hand that shook slightly, he shoved the weapon into his belt, under his shirt. Swinging into the saddle, he rode out into the bright day where Aspen awaited him.

They cut south from Rincon, at a walk, so as not to arouse comment and perhaps invite interference by those who might sense something was up and wish to help.

Trevor sat his saddle like a dead man, rifle in the boot, .44 at his holster. Under his shirt the derringer.

Wind whipped his face when they put their horses to a gallop. He was lashed with spray when they crossed a creek. They swung their dripping horses into a canyon walled by shale cliffs where stunted cedars grew.

"Bill, how much farther?" Trevor demanded hoarsely.

"Mile." The redness at Aspen's bandaged arm and hand had spread. Trevor gave him an anxious glance.

"Bill, when we sight this place, you do exactly what those two swine told you. Don't make a wrong guess."

"You'll never make it against them two alone."

"It's Pete that counts first. I'll worry about my own neck later."

"Them two want you dead. They ain't foolin'."

"Others have also wanted me dead. I'm still here."

"You don't know Willie an' that Jollet—"

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"I know them," Trevor said shortly.

"They got a powerful hate for you." Aspen added, "I stopped by the saloon while you was havin' your talk with the Colonel. Boys there said you made me segundo."

"Yeah."

"It makes me feel damn fine, Trevor."

They climbed from the canyon, angled along wheel-tracks nearly overgrown with brush. On all sides mesquite grew to towering heights. Finally they came to a clearing where Aspen signalled for a halt. He pointed at a crumbling adobe Trevor could barely make out on a rise of ground where tall cottonwoods grew.

"They got him in there," Aspen said tensely.

"What did they tell you to do now?"

"Wait here till they come down."

Both men dismounted. Trevor anchored his bootheels in the damp ground. From a distance came Willie Holtganer's burst of wild laughter.

Then Willie shouted, "Trevor, unbuckle your belt. Pistol an' rifle on the ground. Then move back!"

Trevor obeyed, his chest and stomach muscles so taut they ached. As he stepped back from the weapons he had dropped to the ground he could feel sweat roll coldly from his armpits. Pressure of the derringer at his belt was a reminder that he had one slim chance.

A minute passed. Five minutes. Behind them some twenty paces, their two horses stirred nervously. Trevor concentrated on the distant mud wall until his eyes hurt. In his mind's eye he knew the exact location of rifle and revolver in front of him on the ground. But would they ever let him get his hands on the weapons? Of course not.

Finally he saw Pete Doud emerge, the man's beard a pale flag in the sunlight. Jollet loomed behind, prodding the

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foreman with a rifle. They started downslope in single file along a narrow path through towering walls of brush.

Trevor said from a corner of his mouth, "For God's sake, Bill. Don't make a wrong move. Jollet will kill Pete sure as hell."

Aspen nervously cleared his throat. "Mebby we'll have some luck, Trevor."

"You keep out of it," Trevor warned. He shifted his gaze from Pete Doud and Jollet behind him with the rifle. His mouth was dry. "Where's that damn Willie?"

Then he caught a movement in the mesquite to Jollet's right, still some distance away. Someone moving clumsily through the underbrush. Trevor thought of Willie's hands scraped by the thorny growth. In that terrible moment it was the only comfort.

The three of them drew nearer. Fifty yards. Forty. Jollet herding a white-faced, bearded Pete Doud along the path. Doud stumbling now and then. Willie in the brush, the crown of his hat visible from time to time.

Aspen said quietly, "They don't aim for either one of us to leave here."

"Yeah." Trevor keep his eyes straight ahead. Again he warned quietly, "Keep out of it, Bill—"

"Soon's they get close enough they'll kill us."

Something in Aspen's tone struck at Trevor. Shifting his gaze slightly, he glimpsed metal in Aspen's bandaged hand. He saw Aspen's face twisted with pain at the effort of gripping a short-barreled revolver.

"I knew you'd argue if you figured I had it," Aspen said quietly. "Borrowed it at the saloon when I was in town."

"I've got your derringer. So let me make the play. A wild shot could kill Pete."

"I don't figure on no wild shot—"



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Willie's sharp voice came suddenly beyond the wall of mesquite. "Trevor, you an' Aspen quit the talk!"

As Willie drew near, a hawk floated high over a ridge. Trevor licked his lips, trying to catch a glimpse of the man in the brush. "If the pair intended to shoot him down, along with Aspen, then what would happen to Pete Doud? A foolish question, Trevor reflected. Somehow he retained control of his nerves. He could hear Willie's boots crack dried twigs, closer now.

Then Willie finally appeared, his horse face poking through a towering growth of mesquite. His hands were bandaged, heavily greased. He handled the shotgun gingerly. Willie gave a careful look around.

"Had to make sure you really came alone." He slanted the shotgun at Aspen. "You tell anybody in town, fella?"

"I done just like you said," was Aspen's reply.

Willie removed one hand from the shotgun, tugged a short length of rope from his belt, and tossed it at Aspen's feet. "Tie the Captain's hands," he ordered Aspen. "Ain't no sense in killin' a man right off." Willie gave Trevor a hard grin. "I got things to settle with you, Captain. And Jollet sure as hell has."

"I only got one hand I can use," Aspen said. "I can't tie Trevor one-handed."

Lines appeared on Willie Holtganer's singed forehead as he frowned at Aspen's bandaged right arm and hand. "Never thought of that."

Up the path two dozen yards Jollet had halted with Doud. The foreman's knees sagged. Jollet hauled him in roughly by an arm. Doud's shirt was bloodied from the reopened wound.

"Got Trevor tied yet, Willie?" Jollet called down, evidently irritated at the delay.

"Got a better way. I'll just put buckshot in the Cap-

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tain's legs. Soon's I fix his friend here—" Willie started to bring the shotgun fully to bear on Aspen.

At that moment Aspen's bandaged hand seemed to explode. Impact of the bullet knocked Willie Holtganer off balance. Before Willie could recover, Trevor ripped the deringer from his shirt. He fired. A small blue hole appeared at Willie's chin. Willie spun slowly, a look of surprise on his horse face. Reflex action discharged one barrel of the shotgun into the ground. A geyser of damp earth and pebbles was flung against Trevor's boots.

With a frantic lunge Trevor snatched up the rifle he had discarded earlier. He heard Pete Doud scream an oath. Heard Jollet's harsh shout of surprise.

Wheeling, Trevor glimpsed Pete Doud fling himself headlong to leave Jollet exposed. As Trevor levered in a shell he saw Jollet aim his rifle at the prostrate foreman. In desperation Trevor snapped off a shot. He missed. But slashing lead through the hatbrim alerted Jollet to his danger. Ignoring Pete Doud now, Jollet tried for Trevor. A bullet whipped past Trevor's face. Behind him Aspen gave out a strangle cry of pain. Cut off short. Trevor felt the Texan's body sag against him. Suddenness of the man's weight knocked Trevor to one knee. Even as he went down, Trevor snapped off shot after shot at Jollet as fast as he could work the loading lever.

But Jollet was gone, pounding through the brush, hidden now. Pete Doud got to his knees, holding a hand to the wound at his side.

"Go after him, Cleve," the foreman managed to cry, then toppled over.

Trevor hurried up to where Doud lay. He felt for a pulse. It was weak. Somewhere beyond the adobe ruin sounded a sudden rattle of hoofbeats. From the sound Trevor knew Jollet headed south, away from present danger.

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To pursue him would leave Pete Doud exposed.

Only when the hoofbeats could no longer be heard did Trevor manage to get Doud to his feet and walk him to the clearing. There the foreman sank down. On the Texas earth Aspen was crumpled near Willie Holtganer. Too many battlefield corpses in the war had conditioned Trevor to recognize death when he saw it. Aspen had been shot in the side of the head.

Sickened, Trevor took precious seconds to pile rocks on Aspen's body. The least he could do at the moment. Willie Holtganer he ignored. One predator consumed by others would be justice in a way, he supposed.

Pete Doud was sitting up, still very weak. Somehow Trevor got him into the saddle of Aspen's horse. He held him there all the way to town. There he could find no trace of the doctor. But he did rouse Kerry at her boarding house where she was making up for sleep lost the night before. When Trevor explained, she quickly threw a shawl over her shoulders and hurried with him to Doc Norton's. She rebanded Doud's wound and suggested that someone be sent to the Miller place and fetch the doctor. Trevor found a willing messenger and pressed a silver dollar into his hand.

When the man hurried south, Trevor alertly scanned the main street of Rincon. It was his guess that Jollet would keep going for now. Maybe Ez Holtganer considered an order given was one to be obeyed. But Trevor knew Jollet; the man would seek vengeance for the beating if it took ten years.

Kerry came out to the walk where he was standing. "It was a terrible thing to make your foreman ride a horse, and in his condition. He's not a young man."

"Willie can't pay for what's done. But Jollet can." He recounted the gunfight south of town.

"Oh, my God!" she whispered, her face going white. "Ez

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will never forgive you for killing his nephew. No matter what the circumstances."

"It's something I'll just have to face," he said grimly. "But at the moment I'm going to track down Red Jollet."

"Please, no." Kerry's gray eyes peered anxiously up into his face that bore cuts and swellings from Jollet's fists. "It's a matter for the sheriff. Someone should ride over to Valleyheart Junction—"

"This is something I'll have to settle—"

She drew away from him, her mouth pale. "You're no gunman. Look at your hands. Even if you managed to kill Jollet, you can't face up to Ez with swollen hands—"

"If he won't listen to reason, then I'll have to."

"Ez Holtganer is a dead shot. Can't you understand what I'm saying?"

Trevor started to argue the matter, but at that moment Colonel McVail shouted his name. Turning, Trevor saw the Colonel just emerging from the Great Texas Saloon. With him was Ez Holtganer, yellow eyes shaded by a low-pulled hat-brim. And Trevor knew then that the business with Jollet would have to wait. At any time Willie's body might be discovered by some cowhand or drifter. And Trevor wanted a showdown on his terms, not Holtganer's

As Trevor slowly crossed the street he glanced at the cedar-handled revolver Ez Holtganer wore at his belt. He recalled Kerry Meager's statement concerning the cattleman's ability with a gun.

Colonel McVail seized Trevor by an arm, beaming happily. "I've finally convinced Ez that his future is with us, in the Rincon Cattle Company. Now all I have to do is convince you."

"I've got something to take up with Holtganer first. Alone. Just the two of us." Trevor sensed a man's unfriendly eye on him and shifted his gaze. A chunky man seated on a

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bench on the saloon gallery, one leg outthrust and bulky with bandage, was glaring at him.

"That's the blue-belly that shot me," the man grumbled at Holtganer. "You got no right to talk partners with the likes of him."

"Shut-up, Bissel," Holtganer snapped, then put his gaze back on Trevor. "What you got to settle with me?"

Colonel McVail intervened. "Now see here, Cleve. Nothing is more important than our cattle deal. Ez and I agree there have been stupid moves on both sides. But we blame Meager for stirring up trouble. He's out of it completely, as you know."

Trevor felt tense, irritable. "Colonel, please keep out of this—"

McVail's mustache seem to bristle. "Just when I've gone and fixed things up for you—"

"Holtganer," Trevor said stiffly, "will you walk down the street with me?"

"What the hell is this?" Holtganer began, but the Colonel cut him off.

"Cleve, you and Ez might not be able to shake hands just yet, but you can surely work together—"

"I told you!" Trevor shouted, his nerves unraveling. "I've got something to take up with him first." He started away, saying over his shoulder, "Coming, Holtganer?"

Trevor walked on, not knowing whether the cowman would follow him or not. He clenched and unclenched his bruised fingers. If it came to a showdown could he draw his .44 fast enough?

At a vacant lot Trevor halted and waited for Ez Holtganer to come up.

Trevor said, "We've got something to settle. Better now than later, if you're a mind to make an issue of it."

"Something about the Rincon Cattle Company?"

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"Colonel McVail might just lose one of his partners. Maybe both."

Ez Holtganer squinted his yellow eyes. "That's a long trail you're ridin', Captain. Make it a short one."

"I don't know how you're going to take this. It's up to you. Your nephew Willie—"

### XVI

IN THE Great Texas Saloon Laird Meager was talking in a voice thick with whisky. Only a few of the patrons even bothered to look at him.

". . . and when Trevor pays me the lease money I'll take a long trip—"

"Why don't you face up, Laird?" said the barkeep impatiently. "You got no money coming from the San Felipe lease. It belongs to Kerry. Your late brother saw to that."

Meager's hand, holding a glass of whisky, began to tremble. Some of the liquor splashed the front of his shirt and the heel plates of the gentleman's revolver he wore under the shabby black coat.

He started to bluster, but a sudden hush had fallen over the saloon. All eyes were pinned on a narrow rear window that overlooked the alley. Looming there was Red Jollet, his face raw as pounded beef. Jollet stepped down from a sweated horse. In one hand he held a rifle, in the other the lead rope from a small Mexican mule that bore a man's body. Head of the dead man lashed to the mule was turned in such a way that everyone in the saloon could see the

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singed profile of a long face, the eyes staring, the mouth dark with a dried gummy brown fluid.

"It's Willie Holtganer," a man whispered into the stillness.

Jollet strode in, carrying the rifle. His eyes were so swollen that he had to tilt back his head in order to scan the astonished faces.

"Where's Ez?" he demanded.

"Jollet, ain't you scared to come here?" a man asked. "With Ez warnin' you away?"

"Worth the risk to see Ez finish off the Captain."

"You kill Willie?"

"Cap Trevor done it. Somebody go fetch Ez."

There in the vacant lot Ez Holtganer twisted his mouth in irritation at Trevor's hesitation. Up the street a sudden commotion had caused Trevor to look around.

"Say what you got to say about Willie," Holtganer grumbled, then broke off as he turned to see what had caught Trevor's attention.

A fat man burst from the saloon to stand in the center of the street, shading his eyes as he looked wildly around. Spotting Trevor he waved his arms and yelled, then started running. "Trevor—get away from Ez! Get—away!"

Ez Holtganer swore. "What the hell's the matter with that crazy—" And then behind Meager, Red Jollet loomed, big as a Chisos pine.

Jollet cupped his hands and cried, "Ez, come see what the Captain done to Willie!"

Ez Holtganer stabbed a glance at Trevor. "If you fixed Willie," he snarled, "you'll pray for a bullet in the head before I'm through with you!"

Holtganer started at a dead run toward the saloon, with Trevor sprinting after him. After a dozen paces Trevor caught

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up. He grabbed Holtganer by the arm and swung him around so hard the rancher's hat sailed into the street.

"Holtganer, you better listen to me," Trevor panted. "Willie—he and Jollet kidnapped my foreman—"

Enraged, Holtganer twisted free of Trevor's grasp. He ran toward the saloon, like a man gone berserk. Meager, breathing hard, had halted in the center of the street. He had to step out of Holtganer's way or risk being bowled over.

Trevor started after Holtganer again, shouting for him to turn around. "Finish it here! Now! *Holtganer . . . !*"

Trevor's voice was lost on the cattleman. Ez, his long hair flying, seemed intent on one thing: to see for himself whatever it was that Jollet had to show him.

Slowing now, Trevor watched Holtganer smash his way through the swing doors and into the saloon. And Trevor knew that it was his responsibility to finish it. You corner a rattler and have within your grasp the tool for killing the reptile. But somehow you allow the snake to escape. To live to kill again— In his present raging mood there was no telling what Holtganer might do. Gun down Pete Doud in revenge, for one thing. Maybe gun down others—

As Trevor neared the saloon, Laird Meager, face drenched with sweat, tried to halt him. Trevor kept right on going.

Meager said, "God, I tried to warn you, Trevor—"

Gun drawn now, Trevor broke into a trot. His own hat was gone. Up ahead frightened men shouted, sprinting desperately out of the area of potential danger.

Across from the saloon, in the doorway of Doc Norton's office, Kerry Meager stood as if frozen.

Trevor had his own freezing moment of fear as he realized her danger. He tried to wave her back, at the same time keeping an eye on the street in front of him.

"Kerry—get inside!" he cried.



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Then he saw Jollet's shadow move deeper into the mud-died street there in front of the Great Texas Saloon. Jollet gripping a rifle in swollen hands. Hat tipped back on rust-colored hair. His gargoyles' grin taunting.

"Captain suh—" Jollet stood there, waiting.

Trevor slowed to a walk, a chill of death knotted in his stomach. Only a fool denied tasting his own fear. The distance between them narrowed.

Odds too great for a single gun, Trevor knew full well. Jollet in front of the saloon, frightened men peering around building corners, over fire barrels, from windows of the hotel. Ez Holtganer inside the saloon, insanely shouting now.

Trevor's mind steadied. Kill Jollet first, he told himself. Then face up to Holtganer. With any luck he would survive. He *had* to survive.

Trevor tensed his thumb on the drawn-back hammer of his .44. The next instant of his life was shredded into segments. Trevor narrowed his eyes against Jollet, the ex-sergeant's tremendous legs wide spread. A man beaten yesterday, then banished from Texas. Now back with a corpse.

Another segment of the second of time showed a man stirring on a bench in front of the saloon. A man with a stiffened leg. Too late Trevor remembered him. A jet of orange-red flame leaped from Sam Bissel's lap.

Trevor found himself lying on his back, unable to move his legs.

Framed above him now, against the sky, was the swollen face of Red Jollet. The man peering down, the eye of a cocked rifle pointed at Trevor's mouth.

From the bench Sam Bissel yelled, "Jollet, stand aside. He's mine. He crippled me!"

There was a gunshot. Bissel's voice thinned to a piercing scream. Jollet turned his head slightly to watch the

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Holtganer rider roll loosely off the bench and across the walk.

Trevor released the tension in his thumb and the hammer of the .44 slammed downward. A bullet caught Jollet under the heart, driving up into his body. He wavered like a tall tree bearing the shock of a lightning bolt. Jollet, half-turned, managed to find strength enough to line his rifle at something down the street. It was easier to aim in that direction than to twist around to finish Trevor. Jollet fired and Laird Meager's cry of pain ended in a choking gasp.

Jollet was able to get off only the one shot before he toppled, the side of his face crashing against a street rut.

Somehow Trevor was up, his left thigh streaming blood. Not a face showed at saloon windows. Patrons were crouched away from the doors, some taking refuge behind tipped-back tables.

Only Ez Holtganer was up. He came straight through the swing doors, gripping a revolver. He halted on the gallery to glare at Trevor.

"I guess I knowed from the first I'd have to kill you!" Holtganer cried.

Their guns flamed at the same moment. Trevor, falling away on the bad leg, felt a thumb of lead rip painfully across his side. In the time it took him to fall into the street, he emptied the .44 at Holtganer.

At last a quiet settled over the town, and a breeze stirred the tendrils of powdersmoke.

Two men helped Trevor up. He saw Meager crumpled a few yards away. "Is he hurt bad?" Trevor wanted to know.

"Dead," said a man bending over the former owner of Anchor. "Him shootin' Sam Bissel is what saved your neck, Captain."

Then Trevor felt a wave of dizziness. He awoke in Doc Norton's office, with the doctor showing him a chunk of lead

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dug out of the thigh. The scratch across his ribs was not serious. He saw Kerry Meager's tear-stained face turned his way. He reached for her hand.

"I'm sorry about your uncle."

"A terrible thing," she whispered brokenly. "So many are gone. Four men dead out there in the street. But thank God you're alive—"

From an adjoining bed, Pete Doud said, "Next time you figure to do some hellin', you wait for me to give you a hand."

Trevor managed a smile. And then he saw Colonel McVail enter the room, hat in hand. The Colonel seemed almost stunned by all that had happened that day.

"Cleve, you're too tough to kill." He cleared his throat. "Will you have a herd for me in Abilene next spring?"

"You get the money together. I'll be there." Then he said, "We'll be there." His fingers tightened on Kerry Meager's hand.