

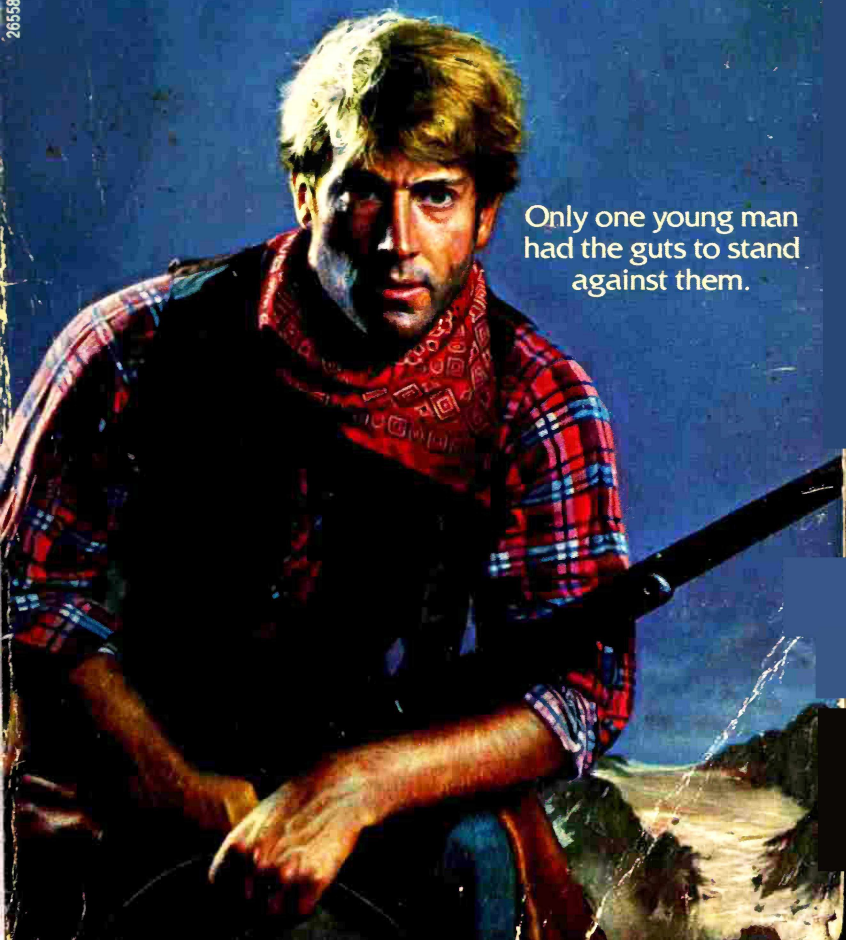
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## WHIPHAND

Half-blinded and stunned, Dave Myatt's reaction to the cruel bite of Wendell Caulfield's whip was instinctive and instantaneous. His gun cleared leather as both horses reared high. Letting the quirt dangle from his wrist, Wendell went for the weapon holstered on his right thigh. Chief Caulfield, Wendell's father, wheeled his mount around to intercede.

The younger Caulfield's gun went off with a flashing roar and the hot breath of lead fanned Dave's scarlet-striped cheek. His horse bucked as Dave fired his revolver. Flame leaped at Wendell, but the bullet hummed past and struck something solid behind him.

Chief Caulfield stiffened up, high and wide in the saddle, one great hand clutching his massive chest where Dave Myatt's bullet had struck.

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# THE HARD MEN

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*In memory of —  
Grandma Hubbard,  
a true pioneer and  
a great lady*





# One

There wasn't the feeling in Freeland Fork that a home town should have, Dave Myatt thought, as he stepped from the saddle and wrapped the reins about the tie rail in front of the Prairie Queen. The mark of the Caulfields was on everything and everybody, here, as it was throughout the Colladeen Valley. An air of constraint and servility held people cold and silent, aloof and withdrawn, as if they were afraid to be at all friendly and cordial. Anger stirred in Dave Myatt as he moved from the morning sunlight into the shade of a wooden awning, leaning on a weathered post and spitting distastefully into the yellow dust, wondering again what kept him in this place.

There were no opportunities here for a young man, particularly if he came from the Narrows. The Caulfields ran everything, in town as well as on the range, and they hired nobody from the homestead families. Dave Myatt was no longer needed at home, now that his brother Kenny was sixteen, old enough to help Dad work the farm. The only tangible reasons for staying were the presence of Alma Caulfield, and the prospect of getting a job as stagecoach guard, both vague and remote, Dave was forced to admit.

Fishing out a sack of tobacco and papers, Dave Myatt shaped a cigarette and lighted up, smoking moodily, with his hands in the empty pockets of his frayed and faded blue jeans. He didn't even have the price of a drink in the saloon next door. His blue shirt, worn thin and bleached gray from many washings, was torn at one shoulder, frayed in the sleeves. His hat was old and stained, his half-boots nearly rubbed through from the stirrup irons. But his shell belt and holster were of the finest leather, handmade with skill by his father, and the Colt forty-four was so well-kept it looked like a new gun.

The southbound stage was making up over in front of the Wells-Fargo office. Dave Myatt walked across the bright street when he saw Trechock, the driver, come out on the porch and stand broad and solid, chewing his tobacco.

"I was hopin' to have you ridin' shotgun by now, Dave," said Trechock. "But old Hank ain't ready to quit yet. He oughta—he's gettin' too old—but he's hangin' on. I don't like it, Dave. It ain't safe with them Comanches actin' up again. But what can I do?" He spat expressively, shrugged wide sloping shoulders, and spread his worn calloused palms. "I put your name in with a good recommend. Soon as there's an openin'..."

"Unless the Caulfields kill it."

"That could happen," Trechock said, "things bein' the way they are in the Colladeen."

"Well, I'm sure obliged, Trey," said Dave Myatt. "What I ought to do, I reckon, is get out of this country."

"Your folks wouldn't like that none, Dave. They kinda need you on the farm, don't they?"

"They maybe think so, but I don't know why." There was a bitter edge to Myatt's voice. "That spread's so small, Dad and Kenny work it easy without me. And Sal helps out—more'n I do lately."

"Had any more trouble with the Caulfields?"

"Not much. The Chief must of told his boys to let us alone in the Narrows. If Jason and Wendell had their way they'd run every homesteader off. The Chief's got some heart in him, and Norman's all right too. But Jay and Wendell and that Morehouse..." Myatt's lips thinned as he shook his head. "They're bastards."

"A bad bunch," Trechock agreed. "Funny how some folks are never satisfied, ambition and greed eatin' on 'em like a disease. The more they got the more they want. It sure beats me, Dave. How about that girl of the Caulfields?"

Dave Myatt laughed briefly and without humor. "If things was different, Trey, but the way it is we haven't got a chance. I've got nothin' to offer a girl like Alma Caulfield, and her brothers threaten to shoot me if I so much as speak to her."

Trechock's rough craggy face registered sympathy. "Things'd be different if Cleve Caulfield was alive. Cleve was a lot of man, and he sure could handle Jason and Wendell."

"Cleve might be livin' somewhere yet. They never found his body."

"No, but they found his horse and things in the Vermilions. I reckon somebody put Cleve under, but old Michael Topliff never did it."

"Well, they hanged him for it, Trey," said Dave Myatt wryly. "And left his son to carry the name."

Trechock swore and shook his head, looked at his watch. "Time I was takin' her outa here, Dave. Sure wish you was ridin' beside me, boy. Hate to think of them Comanches hittin' us with old Hank up there. Take care of yourself, kid, and don't fret. Somethin'll be turnin' up for you."

Dave Myatt nodded and wished him luck, watching Trechock go to the office door and let out a yell, turn and climb to the high seat on top of the stage. Standing there in the boot, Trechock stuffed a fresh twist of kinikinick into his leathery cheek, chewing with relish and taking the reins from an hostler. Old Hank Kurner and two passengers came out and clambered aboard, the old-timer making it with some difficulty. Trechock kicked off the brake, cracked his long whip over the six horses, and the Concord coach lurched forward, creaking and rattling, to roll its dust cloud out the main street of Freeland. Trechock waved and grinned back at Dave, looking perfectly at home and happy as he settled into the driver's seat, handling the ribbons and whip with the expert ease of a master.

Dave Myatt watched the stage swing out of sight at the end of Main, and heard its hollow booming thunder on the bridge over the junction of Bittersweet Creek with the Colladeen River, on the southern outskirts of town. With Trechock gone, Dave felt utterly alone and friendless. There was nobody else in Freeland proper you could talk frankly, openly, honestly to. Saddened, he let his gaze follow the saffron dust unfurling to the south, picturing the route in his mind—Selbro's Ford, the Broadlands, Watertown and Red Butte, at the far southern end of the Colladeen, where the Rentana Range and the Granada Mountains closed in from the west and east respectively, to pinch the valley in rugged rocky folds.

Dave Myatt recrossed the street, walking with the rather stilted grace of the rider, a tall straight young man with strong solid shoulders and a slim supple waist. His darkly-tanned features were regular and even, plain and pleasant, the nose

sharply straight, the mouth wide, mobile and sensitive, the lines of the jaws clean and firm. His hair was sandy brown and sun-streaked under the hat, his eyes brown and deep with a trace of brooding melancholy. There was something sad and wistful in his lean solemn face, some resentment and bitterness. Life was not developing as he had expected it to in earlier youth; events and people were disappointing. Dave Myatt began to fear that he was doomed to the everlasting poverty that had always dogged his father.

The Myatts, along with other homestead families, had staked a small claim in the eastern extremities of the vast Caulfield lands, a poor, broken, scrubby strip between the Vermilion Hills and the Granada Mountains, watered meagerly by Bittersweet Creek. It was poor graze, territory that the Caulfields had found no use for, but even so there had been fierce opposition to the nesters, mainly on the part of the younger Caulfields. Old Man Caulfield, the Chief, had mellowed once his dynasty was established and he had become supreme and secure in the Colladeen, but his sons were arrogant and warlike, filled with the cattlemen's contempt for dirt farmers.

There was trouble from the first, brutal brawling with bare hands that led inevitably to gunplay, greater violence and bloodshed. The people of the Narrows were forever stealing Cross-C beef, the Caulfield boys asserted. Nesters were flogged and shot, for real or fancied offenses, homesteads were burned, and a few Caulfield riders were killed in retaliation. Things would have been even worse if big Cleve Caulfield hadn't held his younger brothers more or less in check.

The climax came when a stack of Cross-C hides was uncovered on the Topliff farm. Michael Topliff, protesting his innocence and swearing that the skins had been planted there, had to flee into the hills with the Caulfield crew on his trail. Michael returned first, declaring that he was guiltless and would run no more. The Caulfields came back with Cleve's horse and gear, reporting that Cleve had been killed by Michael in the Vermilion Hills. The body was never produced, said to be lost in the quicksand of Devil's Brew, but Michael Topliff was lynched by a band of night-riders, presumably the Caulfields avenging the death of Cleve.

There followed a time of stress, strain and suspense, the

people of every homestead in the Narrows waiting for the horror to visit them. The Myatts expected it because Topliff's widow, Eileen, was Dad Myatt's cousin. But days passed into weeks and no riders came to spread destruction with torch and gun, and gradually it became known that Chief Caulfield had decreed no more warfare, that the squatters in the Narrows were to remain unmolested. This restored hope to the settlers of the barren Strip, but it did not help Eileen Myatt Topliff. They found her with the top of her head blown off, the gun that had been her husband's lying beside her. And young Mike Topliff, Dave's second cousin and closest friend, was left alone.

Dave Myatt thought of all these things as he loitered there on the slat sidewalk. He believed in Michael Topliff's innocence, for Michael was neither a thief nor a killer, not a fighting man at all. But young Mike *was* a fighter, wild and reckless, full of fire and fury. Young Mike had often pleaded with Dave and his friend Phil Allenby to go on the loose with him, make a living with their guns, and sometimes Dave was inclined to agree that Mike had the right idea.

"Where the hell does it get you, all this honesty and perseverance and hard work?" Mike would demand. "Where did it get my father and your fathers? Nowhere, that's what the straight and narrow path leads to—nowhere and nothing!"

Yes, there was a lot in what Mike Topliff said. The nester families were foredoomed to failure, the deck stacked cold against them, struggling to make homes on land they didn't own, in a country that did not want them. The name of this town itself was a mockery: Freeland! You couldn't even buy land hereabouts, let alone getting it free. All you could do was borrow it temporarily from a big benevolent man like Chief Caulfield.

Dave Myatt turned to the hitch-rack and looked at the big slate-gray gelding with the white mane and tail. Here, at least, was one thing he could take a deep genuine pride in. Big Gray was a magnificent horse, rangy and rawboned, powerful and fast, his sleek hide gleaming richly, the mane and tail like flowing silver. Much horse, as the Mexicans would say. There wasn't a finer mount in the Colladeen. The Caulfields had tried repeatedly to buy him, but Dad Myatt and Dave had raised Gray from a colt. He was part of the

family. No matter how much they needed money, they weren't selling Big Gray.

Dave Myatt was reaching for the reins when he saw Cub Goelet strutting along under the board awnings, somehow furtive in spite of his huge size and swagger. Goelet lived in the Narrows and attempted to pay court to Sally Myatt on occasion, but there was no pleasure or warmth in Dave's recognition of him. Cub Goelet wore a yellow shirt, red scarf, cheaply ornamented gun-belt and boots, clumsily aping the colorful dress affected by Wendell Caulfield. His features were bold, the large nose and prominent cleft chin giving an illusion of strength, belied by the slackness of the full-lipped mouth, the shiftiness of the beady eyes. Approaching Myatt now, he glanced discreetly about before speaking.

"Howdy, Dave."

"Careful, Cubby," said Dave Myatt coldly. "Somebody'll tell the Caulfields you're associatin' with me."

Cub Goelet scowled and glared ferociously. "You talk like a fool, Myatt! What's eatin' you anyway? You hate everybody that don't go around buttin' their heads into stone walls?"

"I don't like people whose knees bend too easy."

"That pride of yours is goin' to backfire on you, boy. It don't make sense, actin' like you and Mike do. We're all together in the Narrows, Myatt."

"Are we?" asked Dave Myatt with a thin smile. "I wouldn't say so. Somebody in the Narrows stashed those hides on the Topliff place."

"Meanin' who, mister?"

"I don't know—yet. But I'll find out."

Cub Goelet growled in his thick throat. "You ain't scarin' nobody, Myatt. One of these days I'll break your friggin' back!"

Dave Myatt laughed softly. "That's the day I'm waitin' for, Cubby. Run along now, buster." He waved a casually disdainful hand, unwrapped the reins, and stepped into the saddle on the big gray gelding.

A man came across the street, muttering to nobody in particular, "The Caulfields are comin' in." Dave Myatt and everyone else within hearing looked up toward the northern end of town, and Cub Goelet moved hastily away to shoulder the swing-doors into the Prairie Queen. Dave Myatt's bronzed face went blank, somber and sullen, and his long body

became cold and rigid in the leather. He should ride out, he knew, but it was too much like running away. Keeping a close rein on Gray, he held him there, restless and dancing at the side of the street, while a hushed tension grew in the sunlit forenoon.

## Two

The Caulfields, superbly mounted with the serene composure of world conquerors, loomed large, handsome and perfectly assured in the hand-tooled leather of their saddles. The Chief himself was in the lead, a gray-haired ruddy-faced giant of a man with a fierce black mustache and mild blue eyes. There was a kingly air about him, but the years had tempered it with a patient and kindly tolerance, a quality entirely lacking in Jason and Wendell, reflected only in the eldest son, Norman.

The Old Man was flanked by Norman and his foreman, Pike Morehouse. Norm resembled his father in appearance and disposition. He was a big handsome fellow, calm, mild-mannered and easy-going, pleasant and friendly, open-handed and generous. Pike Morehouse was a solid granite block of a man, square and sober and tough, ambitious and shrewd, a man of great driving strength and will, without any relieving grace or warmth. The man Alma Caulfield was supposed to marry.

Riding behind them came Jason Caulfield, lanky and sparse to gauntness, harsh, bleak and scornful. Jay loved power and authority, despised all underlings and nesters in particular. His dark sour face, prim-lipped and icy-eyed, was cut with cruel relentless lines. Since Cleve's death, Jason had been the real leader of the clan, his ruthlessness curbed to some extent by the Chief and Norman.

Bringing up the rear with a flamboyant flourish was Wendell Caulfield, the youngest of the boys and the firebrand of the family, tall and slender, sharp and intense, with a hair-trigger temper and a kind of satanic beauty and charm.

Wavy black hair grew to a peak on his forehead, the nostrils of his fine nose flared a trifle, his smile flashed as bright and reckless as his sparkling long-lashed eyes of vivid blue. Wendell was a gun-fighter, a laughing warrior, gay and insolent, a devil with the women in his rakishly colorful clothes.

These were the men of the Caulfield clan, and that is the way Dave Myatt sized them up as they cantered in between the frame and adobe buildings of Freeland, wooden awnings shading the false fronts and forming arcades on either side of the street. Townspeople greeted them obsequiously along the way, all but bowing into the dust before the rulers of the Colladeen, a sight that sickened Dave to the bottom of his stomach. It was beyond his understanding that human beings could grovel so readily and humbly in serfdom, willing to lick the boots that trod them under. Only the Chief and Norman bothered to return the greetings showered on the Caulfields from all sides.

The brown gaze that Dave Myatt bent upon them was dark and narrowed with feeling. Something about that outfit always filled him with the bitter burning need of violence. Bone-deep in him was a hatred for Wendell and Jason, and for Morehouse to a lesser degree. Despite Dave's hard outer shell of defiance, however, the Caulfields had the power to make him feel small, shabby and mean inside, corroded with envy and resentment that only served to increase his hate. It was rankly unjust that some should have so much, while the majority had so little. It fired Dave Myatt to rebellion against all the existing orders and patterns, set him ablaze with a lust to cut down the Caulfields and equalize things.

Big Gray seemed to share his emotions, becoming more skittish and high-headed as those horsemen approached, snorting a trifle, arching the silver-maned neck.

Chief Caulfield had married three times, his first two wives having died. Cleve and Norman were the sons of the original union, Jason and Wendell born of the second match, and Alma the daughter of the last and living wife. Dave Myatt was grateful that the girl was only a half-sister, but the brothers regarded the relationship as full-blooded. From their first meeting Alma had preferred Dave Myatt to the other young men of the valley, but Jay and Wendell soon put a stop to this attachment.

The head of the column was passing Myatt's position



now, the Chief and Norman with casual friendly nods, Pike Morehouse and Jason without any acknowledgement. Wendell's glossy, spirited black mare sidled out of line toward Myatt as he drew abreast, and Big Gray edged out to meet the black. Dave Myatt could have pulled him back, and should have, but he stubbornly refused to rein up.

Wendell laughed aloud and let his mare shoulder into the big gray gelding.

"Get the hell outa my way," Wendell ordered contemptuously, flicking the quirt in his right hand, his blue eyes merry and malicious on Myatt.

"You don't own this street, do you?" Dave Myatt said quietly.

Wendell stared at him in surprise. "Back off, you fool!"

"You're out of line," Dave told him. "You do the backin'."

Wendell's good-looking face twisted into a snarl of fury. "Why, you poor sad sonofabitch!" The quirt snaked out from his hand, the lash searing Dave's cheek with a wicked crackling sound, the fiery pain eating deep, rocking Dave's head back.

Half-blinded and stunned, Dave Myatt's reaction to the cruel bite of that whip was instinctive and instantaneous. Suicidal as it was, he reached for his gun and the long barrel cleared leather as both horses reared high, pawing at one another. Letting the quirt dangle from his wrist, Wendell Caulfield went for the weapon holstered on his right thigh. Big Gray came down on all fours and charged forward, ramming the black mare sidewise and back. Chief Caulfield wheeled his mount from the front of the small cavalcade, and came bounding back to intercede.

Wendell's gun went off with a flashing roar and lead whined viciously in the sunlit air, the hot breath of it fanning Dave's scarlet-striped cheek. Big Gray bucked and pitched as Dave Myatt threw down and pressed the trigger. Flame leaped at Wendell, but the bullet hummed past and struck something solid behind him, the impact audible through the stomping hoofs, swirling dust and racketing gunshots.

Chief Caulfield stiffened up, high and wide in the saddle, his broad florid face shocked and incredulous, one great hand clutching his massive chest where the numbing blow hit him. Blood trickled and ran between his fingers, and the Chief looked down at it with disbelieving eyes, while his enormous bulk slumped in the leather. Wendell, forgetting

Myatt and the gun in his own hand, yanked the mare over to his father's side. The hat fell from the Chief's noble gray head as it sagged suddenly, and he collapsed forward onto the neck of his horse. He would have tumbled to the ground if it had not been for Wendell's restraining grasp.

Big Gray had quieted and Dave Myatt sat there, senseless from shock and horror, the Colt hanging in his hand. The close drone of a slug brought him back to life, and he saw Jason trying to line his gun again, with Norman hacking at his arm, their horses curvetting and kicking up dust. Pike Morehouse opened fire through the billowing yellow haze, the bullet tugging at Myatt's ragged sleeve as he swung the gray gelding sharply, driving him hard across the street, crashing over a plank sidewalk into the nearest alley. Shots splintered the corner walls and shattered window glass somewhere.

Dave Myatt twisted in the saddle and fired back at the first horse to show, Jason's buckskin, dropping him in the mouth of the alley, forcing the others to pull up there to avoid trampling Jay, who was down in the boiling dirt. Dave Myatt swung the rear corner, out of sight and range, with bullets burning the air and raking the alley walls behind him. Big Gray needed no urging and Dave let him run in full stride, through back yards and lots to the eastern outskirts, hurtling over ash piles and rubbish heaps, setting tin cans and bottles acclatter under flying hoofs.

Leaving the town, Dave Myatt glanced back and saw that no one was coming after him. They would figure there was no hurry, they could pick him up any time they wanted to. They'd be back there with the Chief now, clustered anxiously about to find out how bad he was hit. But Dave kept Gray going at top speed until the town was well behind, heading east into the broken timber of the Narrows, knowing he would need all the time he could possibly gain. He was certain that Chief Caulfield was dying, or perhaps already dead. The whole country would be up in arms after Dave Myatt, and he could expect little or no help from his own people in a case like this. He was alone, an outcast fugitive, cut off from the rest of mankind.

The enormity of what he had done overwhelmed Dave Myatt in chilling waves of anguish and despair. All the settlers in the Strip he was heading for might well lose their

homes as a result of this. If the Chief, who had been their friend and benefactor, died, Jason would take over, become head of the family, even though Norman was his senior. Jason, who hated squatters and small ranchers with a fanatical hatred. Jason's first act, after running down the killer of his father, would be to burn and drive every homesteader out of the Narrows. And the Myatts would be in the gravest danger of all.

Dave shuddered and sickened as he rode, terror and hopeless grief clawing in his chest, choking his throat, flooding his mouth and stomach with vile acid. He had not only ruined himself, he had betrayed and brought disaster home to his family and all those other families. That it had been unintentional, an accident, would not lighten his guilt in the least. Dave Myatt saw himself as a lone wolf, hunted and hounded and harried to the death, with no place in the world to turn to, no human hand lifted to aid him. His own neighbors were as likely as not to shoot him down.

This was on his head and shoulders, his alone. It was no fun being a fugitive, forever running, hiding, dodging, sneaking, living in constant dread and fear. No one would wilfully choose such an existence. Men only lived that way when they were compelled to, as he was now. Face the facts, Myatt. You're on your own, boy, all alone, single-handed against the world. Marked for an early grave.

Dave Myatt swore softly as Big Gray slowed to a walk on Lookout Ridge, Bittersweet Creek and the Narrows before him, the Vermilion Hills rolling rough and red to the north, the Granadas shouldering high and craggy on the eastern skyline. Why couldn't that shot have hit the man it was aimed at, Wendell Caulfield? Or any of them except the Chief? But if it had, it would have brought the same reprisal, less universal but fully as effective. You couldn't get away with lifting a gun against any Caulfield. He must have been out of his head to try it. And it didn't matter that Wendell had slashed him with a quirt, that Wendell had fired first. There was no self-defense plea against the Caulfields. Sheriff Ackeret was a good man, but neither he nor his office was big enough to stand up against the Caulfield clan.

Below on the main trail, Dave Myatt observed the dust cloud lifted by a rider in a hurry, and thought ruefully that it was no doubt Cub Goelet hastening to spread the news among the homesteaders, making Dave's part even blacker

than it actually had been. Some day, if he lived through this, Dave was going to take care of that big bastard.

Dropping from the crooked ridge into the wild valley of the Bittersweet, he followed the rutted wagon road along the winding stream with its marginal willows and cottonwoods. Dave Myatt dreaded to go home and tell his folks, but it was necessary to give them fair warning, and he had to pack food and supplies before striking into the mountains. Already he could visualize the look on their faces, the tragedy in their eyes, their brave quiet resignation.

If we were only strong enough to stand up and fight them off, he thought, teeth clenched until they ached numbly into his muscle-ridged jawbones. It's got to come, sooner or later. People can't hang on by their fingertips forever, kicked in the teeth and trampled on the barren edge of oblivion. The ultimate showdown will bring either death or security, and even death is preferable to this empty, desolate existence.

The noonday sun soared high overhead, raying bright and hot through the branches and brush, and the creek chuckled happily along its brown-pebbled shallow bed. Dave Myatt knew every turn, dip and rise of this trail, and yet it was altered somehow, different from ever before. Strange, how suddenly and completely an individual's world could change.

One minute everything was normal and orderly, natural and in place, and you were all right, not exactly satisfied or contented perhaps, but without any drastic worries or threat of imminent danger. And then, in the space of a few hot words, an exchange of gunshots, everything was blown sky-high, cockeyed crazy, scattered into fantastic bits. A man lay dying on his horse's neck in a familiar sunny street, and you were a murderer, a fugitive in a land all at once strange and hostile, the legitimate prey of any law-abiding citizen. As rapidly as that, you were robbed of everything but your horse and guns and the will to survive, and it was simply a matter of time before they ran you to earth, pumped you full of lead or stretched your neck with a rope. He remembered with horror how old Michael Topliff had looked, hanging limp and shrunk from that gnarled oak limb. Dave Myatt resolved then and there that they would never take him alive. Never, by God.

Better to fight until you died, or even to bite down on the barrel of your gun, the way Eileen had.

He thought of Alma Caulfield, a tall girl of willowy grace, slim and lissome but fully curved and rounded. She had black hair, lustrous and gleaming, waving back from that perfect brow. Her eyes were large and dark with a deep shimmer of liquid-fire. Her face was tanned golden-brown, the features carved fine and pure, a few freckles on the straight nose, the mouth wide and full-lipped, gracious and lovely. He recalled her firm chin, the clean exquisite line of the throat when her dark head lifted, proud as a young queen but gentle, tender, warmly human. A voice that flowed with effortless rhythm, a laugh that was lilting music.

That was a closed chapter now, if it hadn't been before. Dave Myatt groaned at the cruel irony of it. He had killed the father of the only girl he ever cared for. Now, as far as Alma was concerned, Dave Myatt was already dead. He wondered if anything in life came out the way you wanted it to, the way you felt it should. He doubted it. Possibly, yes, for people such as the Caulfields, but not for the Myatts of the world. And still, with all his immeasurable wealth and power, his thousands of acres and cattle, a man like Chief Caulfield died as quickly, easily and wonderingly as any mortal.

But was there any comfort in that final equality? Dave pondered. Any consolation in seeing revealed how thin and frail the thread of life ran? If there was, he failed to discern it. Rather, it made the entire thing a joke and a farce, proved conclusively that fate was a great jester.

Home was just beyond the next cedar-grown hummock. Dave Myatt swallowed the aching lump in his throat, and pressed the horse forward in a long easy lope.

## Three

The Myatt spread was a small ranch and farm combination, like most of the places in the Narrows, but built with more

care and kept cleaner and neater than the neighboring layouts. The long one-story house was solidly constructed of logs, comfortable and spacious with a deep porch across the front, the windows nicely curtained. The frame barn and sheds and corrals were well-made and substantial, the yard cleared and orderly except for the clucking chickens. There were milch cows in the barn, pigs in the pen behind it, and about thirty head of beef out at graze. Dad Myatt was a craftsman and the homestead showed it. They made a living here, but it was a ceaseless struggle, and Dave realized as never before that most of it fell on Dad's shoulders, Dad's and Mom's.

Mother, hoeing in the garden behind the log cabin, looked up and called as he rode into the clearing, "We ate early, Dave, but I saved you some dinner on the stove."

He thought it would be a long time before he sat down to eat in a house again, but he said cheerfully, "All right, Mom, I'll see you in a minute. Got to talk with Dad."

Dad Myatt looked up from the harness he was mending in the shed, as Dave dismounted and let Big Gray muzzle into the watering trough. Dad knew that something was wrong almost before he noticed the blood-crusted slash across Dave's brown cheek.

"Trouble, Dave?" he asked quietly, flicking a match to relight his pipe. When Dave nodded, his father went on, "Thought somethin' was up the way Cub Goelet looked when he rode by. Sally and Ken went over toward Standlee's after some strays. You can talk—if you want to, son."

"It's bad," Dave Myatt said dully. "I've got to get away from here, Dad."

"The Caulfields?"

Dave nodded again. "Wendell rode into me in the street, hit me with his quirt. We both drew, the horses rearin' around. He fired first, then I let go at him. The Chief rode right into my bullet."

Dad's grave face winced, the deep eyes contracting, but his voice stayed calm and level. "Is he dead?"

"Afraid so, Dad. It caught him in the chest."

His father stood up slowly, a medium-sized stockily built man, inches shorter than his rangy son, deliberate in speech and movement, his face engraved with pleasant thoughtful lines, his eyes brown and steady, the hair on his well-shaped

head thinning grayly. There was something patient and resigned about him, almost as if he had given up fighting, but there was still a solid rock-like strength under that mild surface. Dad was kind and generous to a fault, overly considerate of others, too honest and sympathetic for the world he lived in. But he was not a weak man.

"Is it any good to run away, Dave?" he asked at last.

"I'm not sittin' around waitin' to get strung up!" Dave said fiercely.

Dad shook his balding head. "If there was any justice, we'd have a case. But the Caulfields... I reckon you're right, son. You'll have to ride for it. Give me your saddlebags and I'll put up some grub and pack a bedroll."

Dave Myatt thought, You have to grow up to appreciate your father; young kids never know enough to. I used to get impatient and disgusted and half-ashamed of Dad, and he's the finest man I'll ever know. Dave said, "I'll need a lot of extra shells, Dad."

"Sure, we've got plenty of forty-fours," Dad said. "Now you'd better go see your mother, and tell her—somethin'."

Dave gulped painfully. "I'll say I'm goin' lookin' for work."

"That'll do for the time bein'. No use in worryin' her, son. You'll want a slicker, jacket, huntin' knife, hatchet, matches, extra clothes. I'll get everythin' ready."

Dave Myatt walked around the house into the garden. His mother straightened up and leaned on the hoe, her other hand pressed to her back, a humorous grimace on her thin clear face. A little gray threaded her chestnut hair and the blue eyes were faded, but she was still strong and active, remarkably slender and young for the mother of three grown children.

"Can't do what I used to," she said, lightly complaining. "And it's so dry here, the soil so sandy and poor. I don't know if we'll raise as much as last year." Then she saw the red stripe on his cheek. "Dave! What happened to your face?"

He forced a smile, feeling like a little boy on the verge of tears. "Oh, that's nothin'. I cut through the brush and run into a thorn or somethin'. Mom, I'm goin' away for a while—out to look for a job."

"Nothing on the stage line?"

"Not yet anyway. Old Hank's goin' to work till he drops, I guess."

"Do you have to go, Dave?"

"Got to do somethin'. There's nothin' around here." He bent to kiss her, seeing the new gray in her hair, the weariness in the washed blue eyes. Her arms clung to him in hard desperation. He murmured, "I'll be back. I'll be all right. Don't you worry now."

"Aren't you going to eat your dinner, Dave?"

"Can't, Mom. Got to hurry and meet Mike."

"Be careful, David," she said softly, her eyes brimming wet. "And be a good boy."

"I will, Mom." His own eyes were smarting and he turned away abruptly.

At the corner of the house he waved back at her, his throat throbbing full of pain. She raised one toil-worn hand in a brave gay gesture, trying to smile at him through her tears.

Dad had the saddlebags loaded with provisions and was strapping the blanket-roll on behind the cantle, the canteen already slung and the Henry rifle in its boot. He tapped the roll. "Extra shell belts in here. A good thing your saddle gun is a forty-four like your Colt. You headin' into the Granadas, Dave?"

Dave Myatt nodded. "I'll see if Mike wants to ride along."

"Mike'll go," his father said with assurance. "But Dave, don't do any more shootin' than you have to, boy. I'll have a talk with Sheriff Ackeret, soon as I can. Ack claimed he wasn't goin' to let the Caulfields take the law into their own hands any more."

"I hope they don't take it out on you folks, Dad," Dave said miserably. "If I hear of anythin' like that I'll be right back."

"We'll be all right, son. They won't harm us. Don't you worry about us. Maybe you'll see Sal and Ken over Standlee's way."

"I'll look, Dad. If I don't see them, you tell 'em good-bye for me." Dave held out his hand and his father gripped it, firm and hard, both reluctant to let go. When they finally did, Dad Myatt reached into his pocket.

"Here's a little money, Dave. Yes, you've got to take it.



You'll be needin' it. I only wish it was more. Be careful now, boy."

"Thanks, Dad," Dave said with difficulty. "I hope some day . . . You take care of yourself and the folks."

"Wish I was a little younger, Dave." Dad smiled his slow grave smile. "But we'll get along all right here. Ackeret's promised us some protection. Maybe I can get him to pull the Caulfields off you."

Dave Myatt swung into the saddle and lifted his hand. Dad's work-gnarled fingers went up in response, and they smiled at one another. Dave turned the gray away in a quick run, wanting to get off before his burning eyes overflowed. He glanced back and waved from the eastern edge of the clearing. His father still standing in the yard, his mother in the garden, were motionless as statues, shimmering in his blurred vision. More than anything else, Dave Myatt wanted to do something for them, stay alive in order to help them, repay in some small part all they had given him and the other kids. If the Caulfields hurt them in any way, I'll come back and kill every last one of them, he thought.

Slanting through scrub oak and cedar toward the Standlee homestead, he came upon his sister and brother hazing a half-dozen steers through the brush. Sally at eighteen still rode like a boy, but was fully matured, fresh and lovely in the first bloom of womanhood, a dark-haired girl with her mother's blue eyes and sweet sad smile. Kenny, two years younger, was an awkward gangling towhead, shy and bashful, his thin boy's face lighting with hero-worship as he saw his big brother.

"Where you goin', Dave?" demanded Ken, eyeing the bedroll and equipment.

"Out lookin' for a job."

"Take me with you!" the boy cried eagerly.

"No, Kenny, not this trip. You've got to help Dad take care of the family and the farm."

"Mike'll be going with you, I suppose?" Sally said.

"Maybe, but I'll bring him back."

"He's my cousin, silly!" the girl protested. "Cousin and friend. You two hellions will get into some awful kind of trouble."

"We aren't kids any more, Sal."

Sally tossed her chestnut head and laughed. "Old and

wise at twenty-three!" she scoffed. "Wilder than colts born up in the Granadas. Say, Dave, what's the matter with Cub Goelet today? He just gave us a funny gloating look when he rode into Standlee's."

"Don't know," lied Dave. "But don't you have anythin' to do with him, Sally. He's no good."

"Don't worry," she said scornfully. "I don't even speak to him now."

Kenny scowled and thrust out his chin. "I'll take a gun to him next time he comes around, Dave!"

Dave laughed and cuffed his brother's bony shoulder. "Attaboy, Ken! These brainless females need lookin' after. Well, I've got to drift along." He shook hands with them both. "You kids be good."

"You're the one needs that advice," Sally said disparagingly, but her blue eyes were glittering wet as they watched him ride on, a fine high figure on the splendid gray horse.

Dave Myatt turned into Standlee's spread, to find out what kind of a story Cub Goelet was bringing to the Narrows. Standlee was out on the rickety cluttered veranda, and one look at his gaunt grim face told Dave that Goelet was laying it on thick and black.

"You ain't welcome here, boy," Standlee said, his wide mouth clamped like a trap, his dark eyes glaring. He was a self-appointed leader in the Strip, a tall severe man with gray handlebar mustaches and flowing hair that was still thick and black, flecked but lightly with gray. He looked like a mountain preacher with his burning eyes and strong aquiline beak of a nose, the hollowed cheeks and stern iron jaws. "Ride on your devil-begotten way, young Myatt!" he went on, in sonorous tones.

Dave Myatt colored under the tan. "Don't believe everythin' you hear, mister. Especially from Cub Goelet."

"Do you realize what you've done?" roared Standlee. "You've brought devastation, ruin and most likely death upon all of us. The Chief was our friend—our only true friend in the Colladeen—and you had to kill him!" Standlee raised both clenched fists skyward. "If I was a shootin' man, I'd shoot you down like a mad coyote, right at my own doorstep. So help me heaven I would!"

"Would you take a whip across the face, and not lift a

hand?" Dave shot back at him, anger stirring red and hot in his blood.

"Neither would I ride my horse into the whole Caulfield pack!" cried Standlee, leveling a long accusing finger like a gun barrel. "If you'd kept your place and distance, nothin' would of happened in Freeland today. And our homes, our lives, would still be safe."

"Wendell Caulfield rode into me," said Dave, knowing it was useless even as he spoke. "Used his quirt on me."

"That ain't the way I heard it, young Myatt."

Dave kned Big Gray around. "The hell with the way you heard it!" He drove the horse back into the trail that led over the hump and on into the Narrows.

Standlee's black eyes burned after him as he thundered, "Go, murderer! And never come this way again!"

The road passed the pine-board shanty of Gillenwater, the gloomy bearded prophet. Old Gill and two of his lank, ragged, long-haired sons sat on the ramshackle porch with rifles across their knees, eyes fixed stonily on Dave Myatt as he rode by. Dave started to wave, decided against it, and pressed on, a chill along his spine once that trio was behind him.

"One rotten apple spoils the barrel," Gillenwater intoned from the clotted depths of his beard. "One loco steer stampedes the herd!"

The younger son brought up his ancient Sharps rifle and took aim at the rider's back, but Old Gill struck the barrel down. "Leave him to the Caulfields. They'll run him down like a mad dog. He'll die a thousand times before they finish him."

"Yuh, sure, and what happens to us, Pop?"

"That is in the hands of the Almighty."

"Maybe Myatt'll kill Goelet too," suggested the other son.

The bearded prophet nodded morbidly. "Once a man starts killin', there's no end to it, never until he dies. Young Myatt is dead right now, if he but knew it. He's still breathin', still ridin' that great fine horse, but his time is borrowed. He's the same as dead this minute, dead as the Philistines."

Dave Myatt had urged Big Gray into longer strides, uncomfortable under the scrutiny of the half-mad Gillenwaters, thinking resentfully how far his family was above the general

run of nesters, above all the inhabitants of the valley, for that matter. There was good blood, breeding and background, education and culture, behind his mother and father. Somehow the breaks of fortune, a perverse fate, had placed them way below their rightful level in life. Dad was too good, too gentle, kind and generous; that was part of the answer. He lacked the drive and greed, the ruthless selfishness, that makes for success.

The Allenby layout was strictly a farm, the yard littered with tools and equipment, overrun by cackling hens, the garden the largest in the section. A strong smell came from the cowbarn and pigpen. Young Phil Allenby, apparently alone, was cinching the girth on his white-faced bay gelding, shucking saddlebags and packroll into place behind the cantle, when Dave rode in. Allenby looked up, auburn-haired, red-cheeked and amber-eyed, dimpling as he grinned, a short stocky boy who appeared plump but was really solid and muscular under that padding of flesh.

"Goin' somewhere, Al?" inquired Dave Myatt with a smile.

"I was goin' to look for you, Dave," said Allenby. "Reck-on it's true then. Cub Goelet stopped by here. A good thing my folks are in town today. I'm goin' with you."

Dave Myatt was touched and pleased, but he kept it hidden. "You better think it over, Al. It won't be any picnic."

"It's our chance to get out of here," Allenby said. "Like we've talked about so much."

"There's a good chance of gettin' killed, too. Anybody ridin' with me'll be fair game for the Caulfields."

Allenby didn't seem to hear him. "Come on, I'm all packed and ready. Left a note in the house for Ma and Pa. They'll sizzle some, but it can't be helped." He climbed into the saddle, grinning with dimpled cheer at Dave. "We'll stop for Mike. He'll be rarin' to go with us."

"It's goin' to be rough, Al," Dave Myatt told him. "Cold, wet, hungry and lonesome in the mountains. Hunted, hounded, shot at, maybe wounded and killed up there. The odds are pretty heavy."

"Maybe I'm not so soft as you and Mike think," Allenby said soberly. "Let's quit wastin' time and start ridin'."

Dave Myatt felt a warm, gratifying uplift of spirit as they jogged out of the barnyard. He had begun to think he was

alone in the world, hated and shunned, isolated from humanity. It was good to find someone on his side, willing and anxious to string along with him despite all the dangers and hardships. It was fine to have friends like Phil Allenby and young Mike Topliff. He never could have asked them to join him, but evidently he didn't need to. If Al was this ready, Mike would be more than eager.

Dave Myatt was deeply grateful.

"What was Goelet's story, Al?" he asked, as they traversed the irregular, sparsely wooded terrain along Bittersweet Creek.

"Accordin' to him you rammed out into the middle of the street, put Big Gray into Wendell's horse, and called him some names. Wendell laid the quirt onto you, and you pulled a gun. There was shootin' back and forth, but nobody was hit until the Chief came back to bust it up. Then it was kinda mixed up, Cubby admitted, with all the horses buckin' and dancin' around, but he says you threw down on the Chief and plugged him, plumb in the chest. He was dead before they got him out of the saddle."

"That sonofabitch Goelet," muttered Dave Myatt. "If I ever catch him around my sister again, I'll break him apart!" Then it occurred to him that he wouldn't be there to carry out any such threat, or to know whether or not Goelet was trying to court Sally. But he thought Sal could probably take care of that herself. Briefly he told Allenby the correct version of what had happened in town.

"I figured it more like that, Dave," said Allenby. "But the devil of it is, you're just as guilty as if Goelet was tellin' the truth."

"Sure," Dave said. "As guilty as if I'd gone deliberate and shot Chief Caulfield in the back."

Ahead was the live oak tree where they had hanged Michael Topliff, and underneath which his grief-crazed widow had swallowed a gun muzzle and pulled the trigger. Dave had always half-suspected that Cub Goelet was the one who planted those Cross-C steer hides in the Topliff shed. Phil Allenby was also scanning the oak. He said, "Maybe we'll catch up with Goelet at Mike's."

"Hope so," said Dave Myatt. "Few things I'd like to tell Cubby before we pull out."

## Four

The Topliff place, once the finest homestead in the Narrows, was gradually crumbling to ruin. Young Mike had sold off the farm stock and gear, leaving the barn and sheds to moulder and decay, letting the garden go to seed and weeds. Tall grass overgrew the sagging porch, broken windows lent an abandoned aspect, the general picture was one of rundown desolation and lonely poverty. Mike Topliff had no interest in farming or keeping up the place. All he did was run a few head of half-wild cattle, and sell a little whiskey to the drinking men of the Strip. Nothing much mattered to him—not since they had hanged his dad.

Mike's own appearance, however, was in marked contrast to the decrepit layout. Even in rough range clothes there was a certain elegance about him, an immaculate cleanness. He was blond, slim and lithe, with a quick easy smile and eyes that could change from clear gray to a dangerous glittering green. His ruddy bronzed face was smooth, clean-cut and boyish, but the eyes were somehow old and bitter. Mike was broad in the shoulders, willowy at the waist, long of limb, lean and sinewy as rawhide. He seemed always relaxed, loose and lounging, but he could move like a flash. There was a reckless wild streak in him, an unconscious swagger, a devil-may-care spirit. He was only twenty-four, but tragedy had made him far older than his years.

Saddling his chestnut mare with effortless assurance, Mike Topliff glanced at Cub Goelet, dismounted beside him. He had to look up a bit to Goelet's hulking height, but he conveyed the impression of looking down at the larger man. Mike smiled, but there was no amusement in his gray-green eyes.

"You sure lathered that horse, Cubby," said Mike Topliff, his voice low, musical and mocking, "to get out here with a story that don't hang together. Dave's got guts enough to go against anybody, but he's got good sense too. He wouldn't

start a fight with the whole Caulfield crew in the main drag of Freeland. Come again, Cub, with a little more truth in it."

"I was there, I seen it all," Goelet insisted. "That's how it was, Mike. I knew that Myatt was goin' to get himself in a jam. Too high and mighty for nesters, all them Myatts are." He turned his big-nosed jut-jawed face to look back down the trail. With all his bulk and power and aggressive attitude, Cub Goelet was always furtive, insecure, his eyes darting nervously about, his pout-lipped mouth working slackly. "I got to be haulin' along home, Mike. The old man ain't goin' to like this none."

"Nobody likes it much," Mike Toppliff said. "But it happened, so what the hell? Stick around, Cubby. You aren't afraid of Dave, are you?"

"Not by a damn sight!" Goelet said, growling in his bull throat. "I'd snap his spine like a rotten stick!"

"He'll be along. Him and Allenby."

"You're a fool to throw in with him, Mike. You and Allenby both. The Caulfields'll get you all."

Mike's smile was inscrutable. "I wonder how they'll find out we're with him?"

"Word's bound to get around," Goelet said, gesturing with hamlike hands.

"Yeah, it sure seems to," Mike drawled dryly.

"You don't think for a minute I'd tell 'em?" demanded Goelet with vehemence.

"Of course not, Cub," smiled Mike Toppliff, adjusting his saddlebags and poncho-wrapped bedroll, speaking softly to the sleek high-spirited chestnut with the four white-stockinged legs.

"Where'll you light out for, Mike?" asked Goelet.

Mike thought for a moment, frowning seriously. "Why, down Red Butte way, I reckon. That's well out of Caulfield territory, a good town to hole up in." His fine face crinkled and lighted with a smile then, even his eyes looking young momentarily, as Myatt and Allenby came clopping into the yard. "Hello, boys," Mike greeted them. "I'm just about ready to travel."

They dismounted. Dave Myatt handed his reins to Allenby, and walked casually toward Goelet. "You don't tell things very straight, Cubby. You ought to be more careful."

"What d'you mean?" Goelet blustered, towering three inches above Dave's six feet, looking about twice as wide and heavy.

"I guess you know," Dave said evenly. "Another thing, Goelet, keep away from our place. If I hear of you bein' around there, I'll kill you."

Goelet's thick lips writhed into a sneer. "Quite a killer all of a sudden, ain't you? But you ain't orderin' me around, Myatt. If your sister wants to see me, I—"

"She don't want to," cut in Dave Myatt. "And I'm tellin' you to stay clear. Now get on that nag and breeze. There are places you haven't spread the news to yet."

Goelet moved forward, his big hands coming up into fists, crouching and panting, "Big for your britches, for a little shit. I'll clean your plough for you, brother!"

Dave Myatt tossed his hat to Mike. "Another thing, Goelet. I think you placed those cowhides for the Caulfields."

Goelet exhaled with a snort and lunged into a ponderous swing. Dave Myatt ducked and slid in under it, ripping his right to the belly, driving it deep. Goelet gasped and doubled up. Dave lashed his left into that stricken face, whipping shoulders, back and legs into the punch. Goelet grunted and went over backward, flat and heavy on his shoulder blades, the dust smoking up through the weeds around him.

Thrashing wildly about, blowing blood and strangled curses, Goelet grabbed for the holster on his right side. The gun was halfway out when Dave's swinging boot caught it and kicked it twenty feet away. Goelet rolled and lifted his bootheels toward the groin. Dave dodged swiftly, took them on the hip, and went driving in to smash his knee into the crimson-streaming face. Goelet groaned and fell back into the dirt, kicking up viciously with both feet, connecting this time. Grinding pain tore Dave's abdomen and wrenched the breath from his lungs as he staggered back, sick and crippled for an instant, bent over in agony.

Goelet heaved himself up and rushed, snarling like a wounded beast, his bloody face hideous. Tremendous flailing blows jolted Dave's bowed head, shoulders and arms, numbing and hurting wherever they fell, flogging him into a backward reel. Goelet closed in like a grizzly, grappling and tearing. They went down entangled, Myatt on the bottom, Cub clawing at his face and throat, crushing him into the earth.

For a terrible moment Dave Myatt was helpless, dazed and lost under that immense weight and paralyzing power. Then, with an explosive burst of fury, Dave upset that great



bulk, flung it off and rolled free. Up with catlike quickness, well ahead of the clumsy Goelet, Dave was crouched and poised to strike, blood and sweat streaming from his face, dirt-plastered shirt in ribbons. Goelet came up out of the grass like some gory monster. Dave Myatt was in tigerlike to the kill, slashing left and right, rocking that huge shaggy head to and fro.

Goelet was on his knees and he never got any higher, swaying there under Dave's lightning hands, the blood spattering from his gashed eyes, broken nose, and swollen lacerated mouth. A final smash toppled him sideways, stretched him full length in the withered weeds, sobbing and moaning, thoroughly whipped, squirming feebly and sinking into unconsciousness.

"Tougher—than I—thought," Dave Myatt panted, massaging his raw knuckles, stumbling to the horse trough to duck his hot aching head, wash the dirt and blood from his face and hands.

Dave straightened up, revived by the water, and stood looking down at Goelet's silent battered hulk. "Should of—killed him."

Mike Topliff laughed quietly. "He's half-dead now, Dave. I reckon it's my job to finish—sometime."

Allenby picked up Goelet's six-gun and brought it to Dave. It was a forty-four Colt, Dave observed, and thrust it under his waistband. "Might come in handy." Bending over Goelet he unbuckled the cartridge belt and yanked it from under the man's body. "And we can use these forty-four shells."

"Well, are we ready to ride?" asked Mike Topliff.

Dave Myatt glanced from him to Allenby. "You boys know what you're gettin' into?"

"Sure do, Dave," said Allenby.

Mike simply nodded his blond head and smiled.

They mounted as Goelet began to stir slightly on the ground. Mike looked questioningly at Myatt, and Dave inclined his head toward the foothills and the Granada Mountains, rising with lofty grandeur in the east.

"Good," Mike murmured. "I told him Red Butte. That'll give us three days or so, if the Caulfields believe him."

"We got everythin'?" Allenby asked, frisking himself nervously.

Mike Topliff grinned. "I even got three bottles of whiskey."

"Leave it to cousin Mike," laughed Dave Myatt, suddenly feeling almost gay and exuberant, in spite of his lumps and bruises. "Mike thinks of everythin'!"

"Necessities I never forget," said Mike. "It's goin' to be cold at night, up in them mountains."

They followed the northeasterly course of the Bittersweet to Connor's Crossing, entering the water there and splashing upstream for over a mile, leaving the river separately and on the rockiest surface available along the far eastern shore. Beyond the creek, the bunchgrass and dwarfed trees thinned out into the sunburnt sand and rock of Hell's Fingers, an arid stretch of desert, scattered with boulders, mesquite and catclaw clumps, creosote bush and Spanish bayonet. Deeper in this barren expanse stood giant saguaro cacti with wide-spread green arms, brittle-bladed yucca and prickly pear, clusters of spiny-wanded ocotillo. The blinding sun struck down with a merciless glare, was reflected brilliantly from stone and sand; the scorching air was corrosive with alkali.

Steeple Rocks bordered the Fingers on the east, an area pillared and spired with weird stone chimneys of rust-red, burnt umber and ocher. Sharp-profiled mesas of reddish granite and broad table-like buttes loomed above the plain, and there were a few stunted oaks and desert cedars. They plodded on, horses and men in a heated stupor.

Shallow barrancas wound upward from the sand dunes into narrow twisting canyons, and then the foothills were rising and rolling about the three riders, a wilderness of bare and timbered slopes, knobbed and ridged erratically, tilted green-brown plains patching the woodlands, protrusions of rock thrusting jaggedly.

They were climbing all the time now, steadily and gradually going toward the snow-peaked ramparts of the Granada Range. The afternoon was hot, even on these shaded slopes far above Hell's Fingers, and the horses were still lathered and rimed, the men sweat-soaked in the saddle. Dazzling splinters of sunlight lanced down through leafy boughs, printing strange patterns on the rocky soil. They rode in silence for the most part, the gravity of the matter bearing down upon them. They kept their sweat-shining brown faces straight ahead, lifted toward the mountain barrier, resisting a compulsion to

look back at the Narrows. It had long since ceased to seem like a skylarking expedition; it was serious business indeed.

They halted to drink and rest at a pool formed by cold springs, bathing their inflamed faces and eyes, refilling their canteens. Dave Myatt worked with especial care on his welted abrasions, irritated to maddening torment by the sun and the alkali dust. The natural well was banked with delicate ferns and wildflowers—mariposa lilies, long-stemmed bluebells, asters of purple and lavender, forget-me-nots. Lounging on the cool moss, Dave amused himself by identifying them, thanks to his mother's teaching. A doe and two fawns daintily skirted the opposite rim of the pool, drank and fled over the next ridge, their white flags bobbing in the green gloom of the forest.

"Plenty of fresh meat up here," Mike Topliff drawled. "And lots of room to hide, boys."

"Funny, the different kinds of country," mused Dave Myatt, "crowded into a few miles, an afternoon's ride."

"That's what I like," Mike said. "Variety, Dave."

Phil Allenby said nothing, sunk in his own melancholy thoughts of the familiar comfortable world they were leaving behind, home and family, the security and peace of an ordered existence, three square meals a day, a roof overhead and a nice bed to sleep in. Dave began to speculate on how long Al was going to last. They should have insisted on his staying in the Strip, where he belonged.

Late in the afternoon, they climbed a broad park-like slope, timbered with ash, hickory, laurel, and some spruce, premature greenish twilight about them. Above stretched the somber darkness of pine forests. Mike Topliff spotted the fleeting figure of a deer and reached for his carbine. The buck paused to look back at them, poised with grace, and Mike squeezed off a shot. The deer bounded high and fell into the brush, as the crashing report rolled echoing through the woodlands.

Allenby turned on Mike. "You think that was safe?"

"Hell of a lot safer now than it will be later," Mike said easily. "Nobody on our tail yet, Al."

"We'll be needin' the meat," Dave Myatt agreed.

At the top of the slope they found an excellent campsite, sheltered by a rocky ledge and outlying boulders, with a small mountain stream making music nearby. The horses

rolled luxuriously in the grass after the saddles were removed, and the men enjoyed cigarettes and a nip or two from one of Mike's bottles. A couple of hawks circled overhead while Mike skinned and dressed his deer with an expert knife, and darkness welled slowly up from below as Dave kindled a fire.

A supper of venison steak made them all feel better, and Phil Allenby seemed more like his usual jolly self, getting out his mouth organ to entertain them. But later, when coyotes barked and slunk through the trees with luminous eyes, Allenby shivered morbidly and hunched his plumb body nearer the campfire. An owl hooted, a timber wolf howled mournfully and was answered in the distance, and Allenby scowled into the flames. The vast unbounded wilderness night relegated them to pinpoint obscurity and insignificance.

Dave and Mike exchanged discreet glances. They both knew that Allenby should have been left behind.

## Five

Cub Goelet put the spurs to his mustang, rowelling deep, the laughter of Sally Myatt still ringing in his ears, as he tore on toward Freeland. He had successfully bypassed every homestead in the Narrows until he came to Myatt's, the one he most wanted to avoid. Skulking the brush in a roundabout way, he had almost run into Sally, and the sight of his battered face sent the girl off into gales of mocking laughter. From this, Cubby was fleeing furiously. Just wait, you little bitch, he thought.

Two days after the fight, this day of Chief Caulfield's funeral, Goelet's features were still swollen out of shape and badly discolored, although the cuts were healing and the bruises partly covered by beard stubble. His eyes were puffed and purple-lidded yet, under the gashed brows. His big nose was flattened crookedly, looking larger than ever, and his front teeth were chipped and loosened behind the

split scar-thickened lips. Some of those marks he would carry as long as he lived.

Hatred was so strong in Goelet that the rancid taste of it filled his sore mouth. He had always hated Dave Myatt, while wanting Sally, but now it was a frenzied obsession, blotting out everything else but the need of revenge. I'll get even with Dave, and all the other Myatts, he thought fiercely. I'll get hold of that Sally sometime, bat her high head down a bit, squeeze her ribs in, kiss her until her white teeth cut into her soft red lips. They'll hear her scream in Boothill before I get done with her. Goelet had wanted Sal Myatt ever since he first saw her, but the nearest he ever got was an infrequent dance. And when Dave was present, she wouldn't even dance with Goelet.

The Myatts were nothing but squatters, like the rest of the Strip, but they had an air about them, a manner that was somehow superior and aloof. They seemed friendly and polite enough in their neighborhood relationships, but there was always a cool reserve, a quiet withdrawal, as if the Myatts had once known better days and ways of living, and expected to return to them again. Dave, for instance, acted as if nobody in the Narrows was good enough for him to associate with, outside of his cousin Mike and young Allenby. He had no use for the Goelets and Gillenwaters, or even for the Standlees, Connors, Hazens, and the rest. Well, Dave's string was about run out, and Goelet meant to help bring it to an end. Then he would take care of that flossy high-headed filly, Sal Myatt, fix her good.

In Freeland, men and women were talking about the funeral, the forthcoming pursuit of Dave Myatt, and the threat of an Indian uprising to the south. Cub Goelet paid but scant attention, riding through with chin sunk on chest and hatbrim pulled low. Funerals did not interest him, the chase of Myatt was just a question of time, and people were always talking about Cadnac and his Comanches going on the warpath. Goelet had more important things on his mind, and no desire to display his ruined face too openly about town.

The Caulfields had decided to bury the Chief before taking after Dave Myatt. There had been a big funeral at the Cross-C that morning, with hundreds of folks flocking in from many miles around to pay their last respects to the grand old cattleman. The Chief's passing was mourned for diverse

reasons, not the least of which was fear of Jason and the future. The people of the Narrows were not the only ones perturbed by the succession of Jason as head of the Caulfield domains. It boded ill for the entire Colladeen country. Jason was a narrow, selfish, cruel man, full of hate and greed and intolerance. Such power as the Caulfields wielded was dangerous in his hands, with only Norman left to advise moderation.

With Freeland at his back, Cub Goelet cantered north along the Colladeen River toward the Caulfield ranch, the afternoon sun blazing over the majestic rock-and-snow-pinnacled Rentanas in the west, flooding the long broad trough of the valley with golden light, burning red on the Vermilion Hills, touching the easterly Granadas with radiance. Grazing in the distance were the far-flung herds of Cross-C and Goelet marveled to think that large chuck-wagon crews traveled the year around to keep Caulfield stock branded. A mighty empire built on beef and horseflesh, the sweat and blood of hard-riding, hard-fighting men. The king was dead, but a new ruler sat in his place—a real tyrant this time.

Approaching the ranch, Goelet was filled with awe and misgiving, overwhelmed by the size and beauty of it. The grand central house was built of red granite blocks, with a deep white-columned gallery across the front. The long bunk-house, the stables, barns, sheds and out-buildings were well constructed and cared for, clean, trim and neat, solid and durable. The corrals were crowded with magnificent horses of all breeds and colors, and there were hundreds more out at pasture. The rolling grassland for miles in every direction was Cross-C graze. Only the news that he brought lent Goelet the courage to trespass here, humble in the presence of such wealth and luxury.

The relatives, friends and guests had gone, leaving the family alone after dinner. The Caulfield men, still in funeral black and white except for Wendell, sat on the shady porch with glasses in hand, cigars in teeth, watching Goelet dismount at the corner hitch-rail, without interest, curiosity or welcome. The fiery Wendell acted nervous, restless, impatient at all this delay, but the others seemed stolidly at ease. Wendell leaned gracefully on the balustrade, and laughed aloud at the visitor's bruised, misshapen countenance.

"He's been in a stampede," Wendell said as Goelet

paused uncertainly at the bottom of the broad stone stairway. "Got stomped real good."

Jason stepped to the rail, long, lean and dour, his eyes chilling cold in that cadaverous face, his mouth thin and taut, down-curved at the corners. "What do you want here?" he demanded brusquely.

"My respect and sympathy," mumbled Cub Goelet. "Thought you might like to know where Dave Myatt was at."

"You know?" Jason said indifferently. "You're Goelet, aren't you? Well, what about Myatt?"

"Headed for Red Butte. Topliff and Allenby with him. Saw 'em when they lit out."

"How do you know they made for Red Butte?"

"Heard 'em talkin' about it."

Wendell tossed his black curls and laughed again. "So that's what happened to your face?"

"It took three of 'em, mister," Cub Goelet said sullenly. "And my face's got nothin' to do with this."

"Fascinates me, though," grinned Wendell. "You sure there was only three of them?"

Jason waved him to silence. "What you got against Myatt? You're neighbors, aren't you?"

"Never did like him," Goelet growled. "Nobody in the Narrows does since he killed—since that shootin' in town."

Norman, big, genial, a little flushed and mulled with liquor, poured a drink and handed it down to Goelet, who grasped and gulped at it, too surprised to thank the eldest brother. It was the best whiskey Cub had ever tasted, at once mellow and warming.

Pike Morehouse turned his broad back and walked away on the porch.

Jason said, "Tell them in the Narrows to get ready to move out. As soon as we get Myatt we're cleanin' house of that rabble."

"But they ain't to blame," protested Goelet. "It ain't fair to drive 'em all out for what Dave Myatt done."

"Riffraff and scum," Jason said flatly. "They've got to go. The Chief was too easy on them—and see what he got for it."

"What about me—and my family? We always tried to help you."

"Everybody goes. We can most likely get along without your help." Jason's smile was more like a ghastly grimace.

"Don't be too hard, Jay," put in Norman. "We could give him some kind of a job."

Jason divided his contempt between Norm and Goelet. "Maybe—if his Red Butte story amounts to anythin'."

"I ain't guaranteein' nothin'," muttered Goelet, wishing he had not come here. "Just tellin' you what I heard."

"Sure, boy, sure." Norman smiled kindly at him. "We're obliged to you."

Goelet looked directly at Norm. "Want you to know, everybody in the Strip feels mighty bad."

"Fear is a powerful thing," Wendell said, draining his glass.

"Tell them what I said," Jason ordered coldly. "They'll either pull out peaceful, or we'll take torches and guns to them. That sinkhole ought to be burned out anyway."

"Where they supposed to go?" asked Cub Goelet.

Jason shrugged his spare shoulders. Wendell said, "Might try the Fingers. Nice and warm and dry there."

Goelet nodded, looked at Norman again, and said, "Thanks for the drink." As he lumbered toward the hitch-rack, his battered face smarted as if it had been scourged anew.

Riding out past the family cemetery, Goelet saw a tall graceful girl standing before the freshly filled grave, and knew it was Alma Caulfield. He was startled when she turned and beckoned to him, walking toward the stone fence of the plot to meet him as he reined over and removed his hat, awkward and embarrassed in the saddle. Her beauty fairly took his breath away. Her hair was as black as the mourning gown she wore, but lustrously alive and softly curled. The pure face was pale and wan under the tan, the dark eyes enormous and brimming with grief, the first sign of sorrow he'd seen at the Cross-C. Her luscious mouth was enough to drive a man mad, thought Goelet.

"You're from the Narrows?" inquired Alma Caulfield.

Goelet nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"How do they feel there?"

"Awful sorry, miss. And pretty scared, too."

"Yes, I know. I'm afraid myself. It's not the same world any more."

"But *you'll* be all right, for sure," Goelet said.

"All alone," Alma murmured brokenly. "Nobody left but Norm. And he can't do anything."



The big man on the horse made a baffled gesture and wagged his head. "I'm sorry," she whispered absently, with a faint sad smile. "But where did *he* go?"

"Who?" he countered hoarsely, wondering if she were out of her mind.

"Why, Dave Myatt," she said simply, as if he, or anyone, should have known instantly whom she meant.

"Red Butte," said Goelet, stupid with astonishment. "But what..."

"Alone?" she asked.

Goelet held up two thick fingers. "A couple of others."

"Oh, thank heaven!" Alma Caulfield sighed. "And thank you, thank you very much. He didn't mean to do it, I know he didn't!"

Goelet stared at her, shocked and awed. Alma lifted one hand, smiled formally, and walked with slow lissome ease back toward the grave of her father. Goelet thought, Who's she mourning for anyway, the Old Man or Myatt? Then a strange sort of understanding came to him, and he knew that she was mourning them both.

Wheeling back into the road, he went on toward Freeland, as the sun sank flaming toward the Rentanas, rimming the horizon with colorful fire.

"That girl," he grumbled to himself in bewilderment. "That Alma Caulfield. She's in love with *him*—with that goddamn Dave Myatt!"

The gray and lavender shadows of dusk deepened to blue and purple, settled and grew into full darkness, before Goelet reached town once more, feeling degraded and humiliated, even lower than he had after the physical beating administered by Myatt. Shame clung to him, crawling and unclean, and in his head drummed the burning need of avenging himself somehow on someone, anybody, the world at large. It had been foolish to run to the Caulfields. They despised him more than Dave Myatt and Mike Topliff did. He was a misfit, not belonging anywhere—unless with the half-crazy Gillenwaters. Rage and self-loathing swelled to the bursting point within his massive frame.

Counting the money, wheedled as usual from the pathetic savings of his doting mother, Goelet found enough for a bottle of cheap whiskey. He wanted to go to Pronto Pete's back-street dive, but something drove him instead to the

Prairie Queen, the biggest and best saloon in Freeland. If anyone snickered at his marked-up face, he would smash them, wreck the joint, even if he landed in jail. Screw them all.

Cub Goelet thrust through the slatted batwings into smoky lamplight, the hum of voices, clink of glassware, the slap of cards and clack of chips. Shouldering smaller men aside, he swaggered to the bar and ordered his pint, scowling and watchful for any slurring glances or remarks. The other customers, noting his ugly belligerence, avoided the angry truculent dart of his bruised eyes. Towering over the bar, Goelet took his bottle and waited for the free drink that generally went with such a purchase, but the bartender was turning away from him. Goelet rapped heavily on the wood to bring the man back.

"No set-up, Charley?" he asked, chipped teeth showing through his thick scabbed lips.

"Thought you was drinkin' that here," Charley said, pouring him a pony glass of whiskey.

"Thanks," Goelet growled with heavy sarcasm.

Swallowing the shot, Goelet stared up and down the long bar with smoldering blackened eyes, wheeled and walked away, hoping somebody would bump him, laugh at him, or say something he could take exception to. Anything to unleash the rankling fury that was poisoning his entire system. Outside, he stood on the boardwalk, shaggy head cocked, waiting and listening. A minute or so after his departure, the laughter jarred out, jeering and ringing in his ears. Goelet snarled, his great hands almost crushing that pint flask. He wanted to go back and call the whole bunch, but he hadn't been able to get hold of another six-gun yet. Feeling flayed and scalded, Goelet climbed into the saddle and rode out toward home, grating his broken teeth and cursing at every step of the dun cayuse.

On the edge of town he unstopped the bottle and drank deeply. At regular intervals on the way out he swigged at the whiskey, until his blood and brain were at a seething turgid boil. The moon was low and yellow above the Rentana Range, the sky powdered densely with stars. Wild powerful emotions surged up in Cub Goelet as he rode and drank his way toward the Narrows, the shadowy landscape taking on strange and sensuous shapes, the liquor turning his blood to lava, firing

his flesh with terrible lusts. He had to do something tonight, exert his manhood and strength in some flagrant manner. Finishing the flask on Lookout Ridge, he smashed it against a boulder, and thought of Sally Myatt.

When Goelet rode forward it was with new purpose and eagerness, lovely visions of Sally and Alma Caulfield intermingled in his mind. Tethering the dun at a safe distance, Goelet crept ahead and scouted the Myatt clearing with the stealth and patience of a giant Indian. The mother was sewing, the father and Sally reading, Kenny working over something, all in the pleasant lamplit parlor of the log house. Goelet watched them, eyes fastened hungrily on the girl, resentful of the cheerful comfortable family scene. You'd think they were somebody, not just a poor, scrabbling nester family. Sally's dark chestnut hair was a soft shimmering crown in the lamplight, her eyes very blue, the relaxed curves of her body exciting. Goelet waited, crouching like some immense animal, dry tongue licking the puckered scar tissue inside his puffed lips.

After an interminable space, Sally Myatt put down her book and rose, stretching with languorous rippling grace, speaking to someone and then leaving the room. Goelet heard the front door open, the girl's footsteps moving in the direction of the river. Heart hammering violently in his chest, he went prowling after her in the darkness.

Sally was seated on a flat boulder at the river bank, lulled by the silken murmur of the stream, drinking in the beauty of the star-swept western night. The moon was high and white now, a flawless coin above the Rentana peaks, laying a broken track of silver across the current of Bittersweet Creek. She stood up quickly but made no outcry when Cub Goelet came out of the willows, although he was a fearsome sight in the dappled moonlight, a hulking monster with stark hunger in his ugly distorted face.

"What are you doing here?" Sally Myatt asked coldly.

"Want to see you, Sal," Goelet said, thick-voiced and hoarse.

"I don't want to see you, Cub. You'd better get along home."

He moved closer until the raw reek of whiskey was in her face. "We used to get along good, Sally. What happened anyway? Your brother . . . ?"

She laughed with a slight note of strain. "I don't need a brother to tell me about you. Go away, Cub, I don't want you here."

"Sally," he said. "Please, Sal—you and me . . ."

The girl started back but Goelet caught her, sweeping her close in his gorilla-like arms, holding her lithe body in a crushing embrace. She struggled desperately, helpless in his grasp, and then she screamed as Goelet's bearded face bent toward hers, a cry of terror and horror that splintered the night air. His heavy hands bruised the girl, his mouth reached for her hair and cheeks, until she stamped a high heel down on his instep. Goelet gasped and swore, tearing at her blouse, ripping it from shoulder to waist, hurling her to the ground as running boots pounded toward them.

Young Ken Myatt burst through the brush, an old Springfield rifle in his hand. The boy was bringing it up to fire from the waist when Goelet reached him with a mighty bound and struck him down with a savage backhanded blow in the face. Standing for an instant, tense and panting, Goelet heard Dad Myatt coming on the run. Dad would have a gun that he could handle. Cub had seen him at the turkey shoots. Snarling, Cub Goelet whirled and raced away, crashing through bushes and hurdling rocks, swinging a long ragged arc toward where he had left his horse.

Kenny sat up with the Springfield, blood pouring from his nose and mouth, and sent a shot booming through the cottonwoods after the big man. Dad Myatt arrived, listened briefly, and threw a couple of bullets from his Sharps carbine toward the retreating crackle in the brush. Sally was on her feet now, pulling her tattered shirt together, helping her kid brother up and wiping the blood from his thin childish face.

"Dave'll kill him for that," sobbed the boy.

"Are you both all right?" Dad asked. "Who was it, Sally?"

She told him, and Dad nodded, his grave face somber and seamed.

"He was drunk, I guess," Sally said. "Didn't really hurt me."

"Didn't hurt me neither," Kenny said stoutly. "But Dave'll get him just the same."

"Somebody'll have to, sooner or later," Dad Myatt said. "Drunk or sober, Goelet's no good."

"I wish Dave was here," said Ken. "When's he comin' home, Dad?"

"He'll be comin', Kenny—before too long."

"You're a pretty good protector yourself, Ken," said Sally.

The boy shook his towhead disgustedly. "Naw, I made a mess of it. I should of come in ready to shoot, instead of dumb like I did."

## Six

A posse of twenty men entered the clearing behind the Myatt cabin and moved unhurriedly across it with clopping hoofs, jingling bridles and the creak of leather. It was early morning, and the sun was still low and red beyond the Granadas, white mists shrouding Bittersweet Creek and filtering through the timber. Jason Caulfield rode at the point, lank and solemn in his plain black garb, bleached eyes cold and colorless in the gaunt bleak face. At his flanks were Pike Morehouse and Wendell Caulfield, the foreman square and solid in the saddle, Wendell gay and debonair in a bright blue shirt checked with red and yellow. Behind them trailed big Monte Hagar, hatchet-faced Ed Durkett, short squat Frog Krage and the other picked gunhands of the Cross-C. Norman Caulfield was not in the company.

Without seeming aware of it, Jason led them straight across the garden, the steel-shod hoofs trampling the carefully nurtured rows, crushing the tender sprouting vines and stalks and leaves, laying the whole tract in trodden uprooted ruin.

Mrs. Myatt shouted from the back door, "You fools! Look what you're doing to my garden. Get out of there."

"You won't be here long enough to need that garden," Jason told her. "You wouldn't got much out of it anyway. This soil's not right for raisin' things."

Behind him the riders were ranging to left and right, the hoofs ploughing, stamping, gouging and grinding, the dust

clouding up over the devastated plot, hanging dense and red in the early sunlight. Jason went on, skirting the house and pulling up in the yard, the others filing after him, spreading out between the cabin and barn, sitting their saddles with calm insolent ease.

Dad Myatt stepped out of the barn door, his Sharps .50 cradled in his right arm, finger on trigger, thumb on hammer. At his shoulder was Kenny, a thin stripling with cornsilk hair, clutching the old Springfield in hands too large for the rest of his body, staring at the horsemen, scared but defiant.

"Drop the guns," commanded Jason, "unless you want to die in front of your wife and daughter."

Dad Myatt regarded the towering riders with a steady mild brown gaze. "At least one of you'd go with me." And beside him the boy said, "Two, Dad—two anyway."

"You don't want the kid killed, Myatt," said Jason. "You don't want your womenfolks hurt. Put down the guns."

"What do you want?"

"We want your boy Dave—naturally."

"He's not here."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know," Dad Myatt said. "He's gone."

"Where'd he go to?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me. He just went."

"He told you all right," grated Jason. "Maybe we can help you to remember. You wouldn't want to see your daughter stripped down and whipped, would you, Myatt?"

Dad tilted the carbine up until it was fully on Jason, who had raised his left hand shoulder high. Jason said, "Get rid of those rifles. When my hand comes down the boys'll start shootin', Myatt. You got three seconds!"

Dad Myatt sighed and lowered the Sharps. "All right, Kenny. Let's put 'em down." They leaned their rifles against the wall of the barn.

"You goin' to talk now?" demanded Jason, giving a signal that brought several men from their saddles to the ground.

"I've got nothin' to say."

"Did he go to Red Butte?"

"Well, he mentioned it . . ."

"You're lyin'," Jason Caulfield said flatly. "All right, boys, take hold of him. Ed and Frog, get his shirt off and spread him on the rails, so Monte can give him a taste of the whip."

Ed Durkett and Frog Krage clamped Dad between them, tore off his shirt, forced him face forward against the corral bars and pinned him there. Two other men pulled his arms out, wide and high, lashing his wrists to the top rail with thongs of rawhide. Wendell had dismounted to grab the youngster and drag him to the front porch of the house, where the mother and Sally were standing, wide-eyed with horror. Flinging Kenny against the logs, Wendell placed his back to the door and remarked lightly, "You three are goin' to watch this, whether you want to or not. It'll teach you that it's bad business to kill a Caulfield." Laughing, he ran his blue eyes up and down the soft contours of Sally's figure, an expression of approval on his handsome features. "Not bad," he murmured. "These kids sure grow up fast. I've been missin' somethin' right under my eyes here." Mom Myatt stood staunchly with her arms about Sally and Kenny, all their faces drained and anguished, with horrified eyes and quivering lips. "You'll pay for this, you Caulfields," Mom said.

"We lost a father," Wendell said. "You're the ones that'll pay for that—startin' now."

"Your father wouldn't allow this."

"He was too easy," said Wendell. "Like Norman."

Dad Myatt was spread-eagled on the corral, arms extended full length and drawn high, wrists bound securely to the upper bar, his back naked and white in the clear morning light. The sun had climbed, changing from red to gold, and the mists were vaporizing over the river. Monte Hagar, tall, wide and brawny, measured the distance, planted his powerful booted legs, and flitted the heavy quirt in his broad right hand.

"You ready to tell us, Myatt?" asked Jason, still mounted.

"Can't tell you what I don't know," Dad said, sweating on the rails, praying silently for the strength to endure this, agonized already because his family was forced to witness it.

"Give it to him, Monte," ordered Jason.

Hagar swung his mighty arm and the whip cracked like a rifle shot. Dad Myatt swayed forward, the breath whistling out through his locked teeth. A long scarlet welt appeared across the shuddering white flesh of his back. Mom Myatt screamed and Sally cried out in bitter protest. Ken squirmed and looked at the ground, sick enough to die.

"Where is he, Myatt?" asked Jason Caulfield.

"I don't know—I tell you," panted Dad. "I don't know."

"Lay it on, Monte."

The quirt sang and slashed viciously again, the report crashing even louder. An involuntary gasp broke from Dad's dry lips as he jerked against the wood, and another ugly red stripe curled across his shoulder blades. Searing pain ate through flesh, sinew and bone into his spinal column.

"Where'd he go?" questioned Jason coldly.

"He doesn't know!" Mom Myatt screamed in hoarse frenzy. "Don't hit him again. Don't, *don't!*"

Monte Hagar looked up at Jason and Jason nodded, stern and unrelenting and merciless. "Pour it on, Monte." Hagar drew back his arm for another stroke, and Dad Myatt braced himself to withstand the shocking impact. The lash hissed and cracked deafeningly, driving Dad into the rails, agony biting all through him, cutting him in half with its roaring red intensity. The breath left his body in a great groan, and Dad Myatt sagged half-senseless on the corral, his back streaming blood. Mom Myatt fainted between her children, Sally and Ken lowering her gently into a chair on the porch.

Hagar's arm was raised to strike once more when there was a rapid onrush of hoofbeats, and a bullet whined overhead as a rifle spanged sharply through the glade. The men in the yard wheeled and reached for revolvers or carbines, but Jason's quick gesture halted them as the riders galloped into view. It was Sheriff Ackeret with Norman Caulfield and a half-dozen deputies, riding in with guns ready in their hands.

Ackeret's long face was drawn until the bone structure stood out plainly under the weathered grim-lined skin, and his pale deep-set eyes were flaring like fire under ice. "Enough of that!" the sheriff said crisply. "Cut him down from there." He motioned angrily to Durkett and Krage, then down at Hagar. "Put that whip up, mister!"

"Wait a minute," Jason protested. "You—"

"Wait, nothing!" said Ackeret. "Cut him loose, you men." He whirled his horse toward Jason. "You aren't the law here—yet."

"There was a murder the other day. Has the law done anythin' about that?"

"Let's be accurate," the sheriff said. "There was an



accidental killin' the other day—when your brother Wendell got a little free with his quirt. We're goin' to find Dave Myatt, Jason, and we're goin' to see that he gets a fair shake. There'll be no more lynchin's in the Colladeen."

Jason's dead-pan face showed some surprise as he studied the lawman. "What the hell's got into you. Ack?"

"Maybe I've decided to start bein' a sheriff." Ackeret's smile was tinged with bitterness and self-condemnation. "As long as I wear the badge."

"Maybe you won't be wearin' it much longer." Wendell drawled insolently from the porch, where Sally and Ken were working over their mother.

"That remains to be seen." Ackeret said calmly.

Jason was eyeing his brother Norman now. "I guess you had somethin' to do with this. Norm."

"Sure I did," admitted Norman, big and bluff and hearty. "I never did hold with things like that. Jay, any more'n the Chief did."

"You never held with anythin' but settin' back in comfort, drawin' money and drinkin' liquor." Jason's face and voice displayed the contempt he felt for this large elder half-brother.

"A man can change," Norm said quietly. "Even at thirty. Jay."

They had untied Dad Myatt's wrists, left him leaning weakly on the rails. Stooping to pick up the torn shirt, Dad nearly fell on his face, then recovered enough to stagger into the bars. Propped there, he draped the shirt over his mutilated back, as if in shame, gathering his strength, fighting the humiliation that was eating at his vitals. It was degrading to be whipped in public, before his own family and a crowd of hostile men. Doubly degrading for a man of Myatt's sensitivity and pride. His face and eyes had aged in that few minutes, and he wore a sunken, haggard, wounded look. The gashes on his back would heal in time, but the hurts inside never would.

"Thank you, Sheriff—and you, Norm," he said, and weaved unsteadily through the mounted men toward the log house, moving stiffly and painfully, the ripped shirt across his searing bloodied back, his balding head bowed as though in everlasting disgrace and shame. Sally and Kenny had gone inside with their mother. Wendell grinned as Myatt limped past him onto the porch.

"You took it pretty good, old man," he said, with a mixture of admiration and mockery.

Dad Myatt turned, balancing himself against a post. "Dave'll be runnin' into you one of these days, I reckon. We'll see how you take it then." He stumbled on into the house, Wendell's merry scornful laughter ringing after him.

Inside the house, three grief-stricken, tear-stained faces turned anxiously to him, and Dad Myatt wished suddenly that they had killed him out there, instead of shaming him in front of his wife and children. Mom was all right again, pallid and sick but on her feet, eager to help him, understanding the sickness and misery that was in this good gentle man she loved.

"I'm all right," Dad said, smiling at them. "It wasn't bad—except that you had to watch it."

Mom smiled bravely back at him. "Come on, Dad. Let me bathe your back and put some of that nice ointment on it."

He followed her into their bedroom and slumped face down across the bed, the pain knifing through skin and flesh, tendons and nerves, deep into the very bone and the spine itself.

Outside, men were still milling about afoot and on horseback, talking and arguing in the yard, scanning the landscape and weather, exchanging ideas and opinions.

"You can't stop us from ridin', Ackeret," said Jason Caulfield.

"No, and I can't make you take him alive—if you catch him," the sheriff said. "But you'll never find him in the Granadas, Jay."

Wendell laughed with a toss of his dark curly head. "We'll run that boy down to the ends of the earth, Ack."

"I sent a crew to Red Butte," Jason said. "But I doubt if they ever went that way. They're in the Granadas all right, and we'll get them."

"You've got no reason to kill Topliff and Allenby," said Ackeret.

"Not unless they get naughty and start shootin' at us," grinned Wendell. "And they're pretty apt to do that."

"I'll go back and tend to the ranch," Norman said.

"And stay where you belong, this time," advised Jason. "You can start any time now, Norm."

"We're waitin' right here," Ackeret said, "until you're out of the Narrows."

"Wait and be damned!" said Jason. "Come on, boys; we're ridin'."

Sally and Ken Myatt were watching from the cabin window, wide-eyed, breathless and shivering with fear and hatred, when the posse rode out in a haze of yellow dust, to hunt down their brother Dave and his two comrades like wild beasts in the mountain wilderness.

## Seven

Dave Myatt opened his eyes to thin pure highland air, shivered in the morning cold at that altitude, and burrowed deeper into the mattress of pine needles beneath his blanket. Sleep in the mountains was sound and refreshing, the head was almost instantly clear on awakening and there was a healthy glowing tingle through the body. Dave's first thought was of his folks, needled with nagging worry that the Caulfields might strike at them. His second embraced Alma Caulfield, vague and remote, but still persistently with him. Thirdly, his mind ran back over their week as fugitives on the trail. There had been no close pursuit as yet. Once, through Topliff's field glasses, they had glimpsed a posse far below and distant. There seemed to be about twenty men, but little immediate danger, although Allenby had been frightened.

Mike Topliff was already up and stirring about, keenly alert as ever in his easy relaxed way, blond hair in a bronze tangle above his fine-featured face. Phil Allenby, still slumbering, looked like a chubby petulant child with auburn locks awry, plump cheeks flushed from sleep and cold, mouth partly opened. Beyond, Dave could see the picketed horses, Big Gray taller than Mike's white-stockinged chestnut and Al's blaze-faced bay. In a sense, the mounts reflected their masters. Mike and Dave and their horses appeared capable of carrying on indefinitely. Allenby and his gelding were already worn out and weakening.

It was rough going in the Granadas, over the rugged shoulders, the sharp spurs and ridges, climbing and descending steeply, skirting great drifts of shale and jumbled heaps of boulders, the footing always treacherous and uncertain. They had adjusted themselves variously to this new mode of life. The adaptable outdoor-loving Mike Topliff took to it naturally, as if he had known no other existence. With Dave Myatt the transition had been slower, gradual and painful, but once acclimated he was nearly as much at home as Mike. But for Allenby, the conversion was virtually impossible. He was wholly out of place and unhappy in this primitive environment, missing the simple comforts and placid security of routine living at home. Allenby did not complain outright, but it was there festering under the surface, making it unpleasant for all three of them.

Mike had a fire going when Dave rolled out, and the fragrance of boiling coffee soon brought Allenby from his blankets. They breakfasted on the last of their bacon and biscuits, with brook trout from a tiny stream in an upland meadow, washing it down with strong coffee. They broke camp, smoking their first and best-tasting cigarettes of the day, and started on their southeasterly course. It was clear on the heights, but morning fog still rolled and clouded the lowlands.

Later, from a vantage point on the rimrock after the mist had lifted, they looked back and out over the entire Colladeen. The humped foothills below, the sere brown waste of Hell's Fingers, the green-wooded stretch of the Narrows, the rusty serrated ranks of the Vermilion Hills. The vast trough of the valley; Freeland, a tiny blurred cluster on the narrow coiled ribbon of the Colladeen River; and far off and incredibly high in the west, the stone-and-ice-crested barrier of the Rentana Range. It was a picture of awesome beauty, but they did not linger too long over it, fearing the homesickness that scene might bring.

About mid-afternoon, climbing from the sweet shade of pines into the silvery glitter of wind-blown aspens, they came upon the trace of an old wagon road, overgrown with grass and brush but still plainly discernible. Mike Topliff thought it might lead to a long-since abandoned silver mine, and they followed it up the mountainside. After a week's absence from civilization and other humans, it was heartening somehow to discover that men had traveled this way before.

The trail emerged from a fringe of tamaracks to a broad open shelf at the base of a sheer rock-faced cliff, and here were the mute but unmistakable evidences of previous habitation. Weathered and rotting stumps along the ledge, twisted rusty rails running through brush and weeds to the ore dump, the sagging remnants of a shaft-house, wooden platforms and crumbling board shacks. Broken iron wheels, rusted red, crumpled shovel-blades and blunted picks with moldering handles, tree trunks limbed to serve as masts and booms, with corroded cables and frayed ropes dangling from them. There was something eerie and fascinating about this spectacle, as there is about deserted houses and ghost-towns. Mike and Dave read the signs with mounting excitement, but Allenby remained dull and indifferent.

"A mine all right," Mike said, pointing. "That rock slide probably covered the tunnel there. Yes, you can see where it opened behind the boulders." He swung down from the chestnut mare.

"Hell of a place for a mine," Dave said, stepping out of his saddle and stroking Big Gray's silver-maned neck. "A hundred miles from nowhere."

"Most likely what licked it," Mike said. "Too far from any stamp mills. Too far from everythin', and too tough to get at. I'll bet there's plenty of silver left in there, Dave."

"I wouldn't wonder, Mike. Suppose we could get a look into that shaft?"

"We can try." Mike grinned. "Come on with us, Al."

Allenby had dismounted, but he shook his head. "No, I'll wait here, I guess."

Wrapping his reins about a sapling, Allenby watched the other two tether their horses and walk along the shelf toward the tumbled-down shaft-house and the debris of the landslide. Allenby sighed wearily and sat down in the shade, his back against a decaying log, sunk in apathy and dejection. He was not interested in old mines or anything else but getting out of this mess. He almost wished the Caulfields would catch up with them and get it over. Might as well be shot dead as to go on and on this way. It was his own fault, and he didn't blame Dave or anybody else. Dave had tried to warn him. A swooping shadow flitted along the ledge, and Allenby started and looked up as it crossed his vision. High above the cliff top, an eagle was soaring, serene and majestic in the

molten blue sky. Allenby gazed up with hatred and envy of the big bird's freedom, power and scope.

This was all right for Mike and Dave, but not for him. Allenby was too fond of the little luxuries, the orderly peace and safety of everyday existence. He wasn't cut out for adventure, and he realized it now—too late. They would all die up here, far away from their homes, families and friends, shot down like calf-killing wolves, meat for the mountain lions and buzzards.

Allenby thought of doing chores with his father—milking, cleaning stalls, pitching hay, hoeing the garden, feeding the hogs and chickens, ploughing, watering the horses—and wondered how he ever could have disliked those homely tasks. He smelled again his mother's cooking, saw the plates heaped with good food, and his yellowish eyes smarted, close to tears. He visualized his own room in the farmhouse, the comfortable bed with its bright quilted spread, his few tattered books and boyhood trinkets, pictures cut from calendars and magazines, and this time his throat choked up and the tears did come, spilling slow and hot on his apple-red cheeks.

Dave Myatt and Mike Topliff reached the ruins of the shaft-house, studied the situation, and clambered into the huge boulders piled at the foot of the cliff in front of the horizontal shaft, like small boys bent on exploring a cave. The entrance to the mine was only partially blocked, the upper section left open and clear. The sunlight penetrated about ten feet into the tunnel, and beyond that was utter blackness. The supporting timbers at the mouth were sagging, splintered and half-rotten. It didn't look at all safe and inviting, but some irresistible force drew them toward it.

They halted on the brink of the barrier, glancing at one another, feeling the skin pull tight on their faces as they grinned, conscious of a cold prickling up their backbones, a dryness of throat, a taut twitching of scalp.

"Have to be kind of careful," Mike murmured.

"Yeah," agreed Dave. "Better not go in too far."

With extreme caution they lowered themselves to the cluttered floor of the tunnel and crept forward, appalled by the dank fetid smothering air, a foul stench that grew in their nostrils. At the ragged perimeter of the sunlit area they paused, uncertain and more than a little scared, shrinking at

the sound of bats flapping somewhere in the deeper darkness of the cavern. They sniffed instinctively, their noses lifting, faces wrinkling with distaste.

"Somethin' died in here," Dave muttered. "Wonder if it's safe to light a match?"

"Shouldn't be any gas this near the outside," Mike said. "But somethin' sure stinks to high heaven. . . . I'll try a match, Dave."

Mike flicked one alight with a practiced thumbnail and advanced step by step, Dave at his heels with a handful of matches ready, the ghastly whisper of winged creatures rustling along the corridor. Mike's third match flickered and went out in an updraft, and looking up, they saw an open vertical shaft overhead, extending straight up with daylight showing dimly at the top.

"Funny, a shaft sunk this close to the mouth," Mike mused, scratching another light, shielding it in cupped hands, and taking one stride. He stopped so short that Dave bumped into his back. "For chrisake!" breathed Mike Topliff. "Look at that!"

"What is it?" Dave tried to peer over Mike's shoulder, feeling chilled to the bone. The feeble light faded and died.

"A skeleton," Mike said in awed hushed tones. "Or almost one. Dead a long time, anyway."

In the flare of another match Dave Myatt saw it and froze with horror. A human skeleton, a man with shreds of flesh and clothing still clinging to the bones. Dave lighted one of his matches, as Mike went reluctantly forward and crouched over that gruesome thing, a framework of bones with a gunbelt and holsters, boots and leather vest. A hideous nightmare figure on the tunnel floor.

"Initials or somethin' on one sheath," Mike reported. "One gun. I'm takin' it and the belt. Let's get out of here, Dave!"

There was a dry blood-freezing rattle and clash as Mike pulled the gun-belt from that skeletal form. Dave Myatt lighted the way back out, and sunshine had never looked so welcome and wonderful. They climbed hastily out over the barricade of boulders, dropping into shale and gravel, gulping in the fresh clean mountain air with tremendous relief and satisfaction. Moving away from the mine entrance, they halted to examine the grisly trophies Mike had brought out with

him, the reek of that unnatural tomb still in their heads, churning their stomachs into dry nausea.

The gun, rusted to ruin, was an ancient forty-four Walker Colt with a horn handle. Burned into one of the mildewed holsters were the twin letters—C.C. Mike's soft voice sharpened with excitement. "That could be Cleve Caulfield, Dave!"

"Could be," Dave said, tingling queerly all over as he inspected the gun. "Seems to me Cleve had an old Walker he liked better than any of the new ones."

"Sure, I remember," Mike said eagerly. "Cleve was always braggin' about that Walker. Had some notches filed in it, and there's notches in this one, too."

"The Caulfields could identify this gun and belt—if it really was Cleve's."

"Yeah. But would they do it?" Mike shook his blond head.

"Norm might."

"If Jay and Wendell didn't shut his mouth. Hey! What's this?" Mike was extracting a wadded yellowed piece of paper from one of the leather sheaths, careful not to tear it as he unfolded and smoothed out a brittle envelope. The inked address was nearly illegible. They could barely make out some of the letters, for the ink had faded and run watery. But it was enough. "Cle . . . . lfield, C . . . oss R . . ch.

"It's him, for sure," Mike Topliff said, and they stared at one another with awed incredulous eyes.

Mike turned the envelope over, and on the back was a ragged blurry scrawl, cramped and painful in pencil, very faint. Almost holding their breath, they deciphered it slowly together, "Dying here killed by Jason and Wendy my brothers. Hope somebody finds—Cleve C."

They shook their heads in silence, both unable to speak for the moment, seeing in their minds big Cleve Caulfield, shot in the back by his half-brothers, Jason and Wendell, and dumped down that mine shaft. Cleve, riddled and broken, coming to enough to scratch out a note with dying fingers on the back of an envelope, thrusting it into that holster with his last strength, hoping as he died that someone would find and read it. Jason and Wendell riding in with Cleve's horse and gear, saying that Michael Topliff had killed him and Cleve's body had gone down in the quicksand of Devil's Brew in the Vermilions. So they had hanged young Mike's father, and



his mother had killed herself under the same live oak.

Finally Mike could speak, but his voice was unrecognizable and terrible, with all the bitterness and heartbreak of the world in it. "Jesus Christ! And they hanged my father!" His eyes flared jade green, wild and reckless, full of murderous fury. Turning abruptly, he strode away and stood looking down the mountainside, off into space.

Phil Allenby, seeing that something was up, summoned enough energy and interest to get up and walk to Dave Myatt's side, curiosity growing on his round pink face. Dave showed him what they had discovered in the mine, and Allenby knew at once what it signified. They looked after Mike with full deep sympathy, wanting desperately to ease, comfort and help him, knowing there was nothing they could say or do for him. Nothing could reach Mike in his present depths of distress and despair. A man went to rock-bottom alone, and had to pull himself back up the same way. Nobody else could lift him out of it, regardless of how much they wanted to lend a hand.

Dave Myatt sat down and made a cigarette with exceeding care. Allenby slouched beside him, amber eyes fixed on that old belt and gun, as if under a hypnotic spell. Realization of the torment Mike was feeling shamed Allenby into casting off his own minor troubles and dissatisfaction. His mouth grew firm and his full face hardened.

"I been a fool, Dave," said Phil Allenby. "I reckon I'll be different from here on in."

"Sure, Al," Dave said. "You'll be all right, boy."

When Mike Topliff walked back to them, his face was calm and reposed again, his eyes softened to grayness, his manner mild and controlled. "Don't know why I should act up, when I figured somethin' like this all the time. Somebody ought to take this stuff in to Sheriff Ackeret. My job probably—but if Al wants to go, it's all right with me."

Here was the opportunity Allenby had been yearning for a few minutes ago, a chance to escape from this and get back home. Mike was giving him a break, because Mike knew Al was softening up, sick of the whole show. But Allenby raised his rosy-cheeked face, shook his auburn head slowly, and smiled with dimpled cheek for the first time in days.

"No, Mike, you go ahead," said Allenby. "I'd rather stick with Dave." He laughed with quiet mirth. "Why, I'll probably

get lost or somethin' on the way. You're the boy to take it in, Mike."

"That's right," agreed Dave. "You take it yourself, Mike."

"I don't like leavin' you boys," Mike said. "But maybe this'll break up that manhunt, so you can come home. If it don't, I'll meet you—somewhere. I'll give my message to Trechock on the stage. You can swing back into the valley farther south, and stop Trey along one of his runs."

"Good idea," approved Dave Myatt. "We'll do that, Mike. And you watch yourself on the way in, kid."

"I'll be all right," Mike said, as they drifted back toward the horses. Opening his saddlebags, he took out the last bottle of whiskey and handed it to Dave, stowing Cleve Caulfield's gun and belt in its place and buckling the bags securely. The envelope he placed carefully in an oilskin pouch, tucked it into a shirt pocket and buttoned the flap down. He shook hands with Allenby, drawling, "Al, I figure you're goin' to buck up some the rest of the way."

Allenby nodded. "You never figured anythin' righter, Mike."

Mike and Dave clasped hands and smiled, without any further need of words. Mike mounted the chestnut mare, waved casually, and started back down the way they had come. The other two watched him drop out of sight into the tamaracks below.

"It's goin' to seem like at least three people are missin' all of a sudden, Dave," said Phil Allenby.

Dave Myatt nodded his sandy brown head with a somber smile. "It sure is, Al. And that Mike's as good as any three men we could have on our side, either out here or in there."

They stepped up into the leather, and headed south along the shelf at the base of the rock wall.

## Eight

Mike Topliff made fast time on the homeward trail. The second day after leaving Dave and Al, he encountered the

posse, hearing the clatter of its coming and swinging wide to dodge a meeting, knowing they'd probably shoot on sight. Angling warily back through the green gloom of jack pines, Mike got a careful look at the crew. Neither Sheriff Ackeret nor any of his deputies was along. The bunch, led by Jason and Wendell Caulfield, seemed somewhat smaller than it had when observed through the field glasses, about seventeen men as Mike counted them. Monte Hagar, Frog Krage and Ed Durkett, three of the toughest Cross-C gun-fighters, were missing, he noticed. They might have started a flanking movement to the south, or they could have branched off to try Red Butte. Pike Morehouse was not with the group either.

Mike let them get well up-trail and then started on downgrade. The posse might pick up his fresh sign and some of them turn back after him, but after a time it was apparent that they had either overlooked or ignored his single track. The Caulfields could safely assume that it was not Dave Myatt heading for Freeland.

Mike was worried about those two he had left on the heights. Allenby's bay would slow them dangerously, if the chase became real close and hot, and Al himself wasn't quite up to this kind of a game. But the Caulfields would have a bobcat on their hands when they jumped Dave Myatt. They'd have a tough time before they ever took that boy.

The fury and the hate were still in Mike Topliff, so strong that he'd had to stifle the impulse to open fire on Jason and Wendell back there, but he had the emotions under better restraint and control now. The law, he understood, would not be exactly eager to prefer charges against the Caulfield brothers, for the law in the Colladeen had never been as powerful a force as the Caulfield clan, although Ackeret was an honest and conscientious man. But Mike did believe that his discovery in the mine would put a stop to the manhunt for Dave, place Jay and Wendell on the defensive, cause them considerable anxiety, trouble and apprehension. It was proof, beyond any reasonable doubt, that they had murdered their elder brother Cleve, then doubled their crime and guilt by hanging an innocent man—Michael Topliff. And they also had been directly responsible for the death of Mike's mother. If Ackeret couldn't handle them, Mike meant to call in a United States marshal.

What pleased Mike the most about the whole affair was that he now felt absolutely free, and even duty-bound, to kill both Jason and Wendell at the first opportunity, providing the law failed to bring them to justice. And that was precisely what Mike intended to do—unless Dave Myatt got to them first. It was for something like this that Mike and Dave had spent long arduous hours of practice at drawing and shooting, with shells they could ill afford to spare. Mike Topliff wore a double gun-belt, the sheaths tied low on his legs, and he was fast and accurate with either hand.

Pushing his chestnut mare through the foothills, Mike wondered about the reasons and motives behind the murder of big Cleve Caulfield. Jason and Wendell had been jealous of their half-brother, of course, because he was the Chief's favorite and right-hand man, the family leader as the old man withdrew gradually into semi-retirement. Cleve had been the most like his father, having his will and strength, as well as the milder qualities that Norman inherited. Jason and Wendell were totally unlike that first pair of brothers, just as Alma differed markedly from the latter two. It was a strange and intriguing family pattern, the diverse fruit of one father and three mothers.

Mike Topliff threaded his way through the grotesque stone spires of Steeple Rocks at dusk, and pressed on across the arid expanse of Hell's Fingers in the first blessed coolness of night. There was no homecoming joy for him in returning to the Narrows, for the loss of his father and mother had left him as homeless as a man can be, although he still occupied the family spread. The Allenbys and Myatts were the only folks he wanted to see, knowing how the other nesters must have turned immediately against Dave Myatt. They were a sorry lot anyway—the Goelets, Gillenwaters, Standlees, Hazens, Connors and the rest—and it wasn't difficult to see why the Caulfields held them in such contempt.

Fording the moonlit Bittersweet, after drinking and watering Socks, Mike rode into the dreary desolation of the Topliff yard, stopping only to pick up a few things he thought of, the most important of which was another bottle of whiskey from his cached supply. He went on, avoiding the wagon road and cruising the cottonwoods along the river, scouting the Allenby layout thoroughly before making an entrance. There

he told Phil's parents that their son was all right and would soon be home, safe and well as ever. There was nothing at all for them to worry about. Mr. Allenby thanked him with grave courtesy, and Mrs. Allenby was weeping softly and still offering her thanks to the Lord when Mike drifted on into the night.

Detouring widely around other homesteads, Mike swerved back to the riverside to approach the Myatt place, exercising the utmost caution because he knew that Caulfield guards could have been posted to watch Dave's home. He had paused to drink from the bottle, some distance yet from his objective, when the sounds of another rider broke the darkness ahead. Mike stepped down, tied his rein, and stalked silently forward, placing his boots with care, loosening his guns in their holsters.

From a cedar-grown knoll above Bittersweet Creek, Mike saw Sally Myatt, dismounted on the river bank, idling there in lonely contemplation of the waning moon, the sparkling stars, and the silken swish of the stream flowing among its boulders. Mike Topliff smiled and his heart went up singing as he watched her, anticipating her surprised pleasure at his appearance. Sally was the only girl to interest Mike, second cousin or not, even though they were friends rather than lovers. She was the one for him, Mike felt with an instinctive certainty, and sometime their relationship would blossom into something richer, deeper and finer; the boy-and-girl fondness would ripen to mature love. Mike had had the usual experience with dance-hall girls, part of the initiation to manhood and no more important than the first drunk, but that didn't count for anything, hadn't even prompted a return visit on his part. Sally Myatt was going to be his woman some day, his wife, and the rest mattered not at all. It was all right for second cousins to marry.

Mike Topliff had just started forward when another hulking figure loomed on the river bank, rising from the willows and closing in on Sally before she could move, grasping her with sudden brutal strength, holding the girl tight and covering her mouth to prevent an outcry. Leaping into a run, Mike recognized the man as Cub Goelet, and flame erupted in him as he raced down the slope toward the struggling couple on the shore.

Goelet was so maddened with greedy lust that he didn't know anyone was coming until Mike's gun barrel clipped his skull with stunning force, beating him to his knees. Sally sprang clear as Goelet's arms loosened, her eyes wide and her lips parted as she saw Mike Topliff standing there, slender and lithe, over the kneeling bulk of the other man.

"Mike!" she cried breathlessly. He nodded and smiled, eyes and gun steady on Goelet.

"I got—no gun," panted Goelet, wagging his huge shaggy head.

"I ought to shoot you, armed or not," Mike Topliff said. "But I reckon I can't. I'll take off my guns, Cubby."

"I'm hurt," mumbled Goelet. "It ain't fair, Mike."

"You're going to get hurt a lot worse," Mike said gently, sheathing his right-hand Colt, unbuckling the belt and handing it to Sally Myatt. Then, as an afterthought, he unbuttoned a shirt pocket and gave her the oilskin pouch containing Cleve Caulfield's dying message. "Valuable, Sal," he said. "You don't have to watch this, you—"

"Look out!" screamed the girl.

Mike whirled swiftly and saw Cub Goelet heave himself erect and charge with a jagged rock in his hand. Mike ducked low and lunged at him, as Cubby let the stone go. It whistled close, skimming Mike's shoulder, crackling off into the brush. Mike struck the big man low, slamming a shoulder into that massive girth, driving hard with his legs, lifting and hurling Goelet backward down the short steep bank.

They hurtled through the air together and landed with a resounding splash in the shallows, Goelet on his back on the boulders, the breath wrenched from his lungs in an agonized wheezing grunt, while Mike plunged on over him and hit the water in a flat dive. Surfacing and wheeling back, waist-deep in the current and boots slipping on the smooth-pebbled bottom, Mike found Goelet still floundering about, snorting and thrashing in the rock-studded stream.

As the giant came part way up, Mike Topliff smashed him solidly in the face, left and right, and then again. Goelet was going down when Mike caught and clubbed him once more, bringing his right fist down like a hammer into that broad face. Goelet groaned and went under with a splash. Mike rammed in to pin him beneath the surface, but Goelet lashed out with both legs, the heavy boots crushing Mike's chest,

flinging him back into midstream, winded, hurt and gasping even before the dark water closed over him again.

They came up almost simultaneously, but this time the advantage was Goelet's, jarred and crippled as he was from the boulders and the beating. Mike Topliff was trapped in chest-high water, almost helpless, with the current tugging at him, the air gone from his bruised chest, the slimy, stony bed treacherous under his feet. Cub Goelet waded out toward him, ploughing the shallows, a great rock raised overhead to smash Mike into oblivion.

Under the cottonwoods, Sally Myatt screamed in wild protest and yanked at one of the big revolvers in the gunbelt she was holding.

Seeing his chances narrow into nothingness, Mike Topliff thought fleetingly, What a fool I was not to shoot him! Now I'll never get a crack at the Caulfield brothers, never live to help Dave and Al out of that jam. Goelet was coming close enough to hurl that huge rock, and Mike was ready to submerge in a final desperate effort to dodge it, when all at once the bottom seemed to drop out from under the giant's boots. Goelet gave one startled cry and disappeared, the missile flopping aimlessly from his hands as he sank swiftly into that hole in the riverbed, way over his depth.

Mike Topliff laughed, a wild crazy laugh of sheer relief, and worked his way toward shore, half-swimming, splashing into the shallows downstream from where Goelet had vanished. Cubby came up blowing blood and water, unable to swim and frantic with terror, thrown off balance by the current as he found bottom. Mike was on top of him then, hooking with both hands, slashing away at that big-nosed, fearful face, jolting Goelet's head from side to side. Goelet toppled backward with a strangled cry, sinking instantly under the surface, and this time Mike Topliff leaped onto him, clutching that bull throat, bearing down with grim fury, holding him under water, long steel fingers clawing deep into Goelet's neck.

For a moment Mike nearly relented and eased off, as Cubby's struggles became more and more feeble. Then he recalled the craven treachery of the brute, fawning on the Caulfields, double-crossing the Myatts, lusting after Sally and no doubt planting those Cross-C hides in the Topliff shed, causing the death of Michael and his wife. With these things blazing in his brain, Mike Topliff rode Goelet deeper into the

river, holding him down until the monstrous body went limp and slack, lifeless.

Letting go then, his fingers cramped and his arms aching numbly, Mike turned shoreward, stumbling and swaying, drenched and exhausted, while Goelet's hulk washed slowly downstream in the dark current of the Bittersweet. Released from the clinging pressure of the stream, weighed down by soaked clothing and water-filled boots, Mike staggered and fell forward on the sloping bank, sobbing painfully for breath, tired and sick enough to lie there and die.

Sally slid down beside him, lifting and turning him with surprising strength, heedless of his wet dirty clothes, holding him tenderly as he dragged air back into his tortured lungs. Little by little Mike's heart slowed its frenzied pounding, his lungs pumped nearer to normal, the turbulent riot ceased in his veins, and before his bleared eyes the stars stopped jittering, the shimmering circle of moons reverted to one steady glowing orb in the sky.

"Mike, Mike, darling," the girl whispered.

"You'll get—all wet—and dirty," panted Mike.

Sally laughed huskily. "What do I care? You're here, you're all right, Mike. But what about Dave and Phil?"

"They're all right too, Sal," he said, and told her what had happened in the Granadas.

Afterward, somewhat restored and rested, Mike mounted the embankment beside her, picked up his gunbelt, and turned to look at the peaceful rippled sheen of the water running musically beneath the silver moon.

"Come on, Mike," said Sally. "You've got to get out of those wet things."

Mike laughed and gathered her into his arms, kissing the cool ripe sweetness of her mouth, and Sally Myatt responded with her own arms and lips. "Ah," murmured Mike, "I won't be catchin' cold with you around, Sal!"

"Do you think I'm awful, kissing you like that?"

"Awful nice," he said. "And it's about time you kissed me."

Goelet's dun wasn't around. Apparently he had hiked over here to lie in wait for the girl. Leading her buckskin, they walked back to where Mike's mare was hitched. Then, with both horses in tow, they sauntered toward the Myatt



homestead, shoulder to shoulder, closer together than ever before.

The lighted windows of the log house seemed to shine with a new and softer golden radiance tonight, and it came to Mike Topliff that this was a real home-coming for him, after all. But it wouldn't be full and right until Jason and Wendell were put under, and Dave and Allenby were safely back here to stay.

## Nine

High in the Granadas, it was Phil Allenby who first saw the pursuit closing up, long after he had made and forgotten the silly childish wish that the Caulfields would catch them and get it done with.

Shortly after midday, Dave Myatt and Allenby were riding along a barren rocky shoulder, scattered with aspens and stunted pines, that stretched southward for miles along the base of a steep wind-eroded escarpment, girding the loftier heights on the east. To the west the shoulder slanted down, broad and open except for clumps of boulders and thin screens of brush, a drop of several hundred yards into the timbered slopes below. The horsemen appeared at the edge of this forest, far down and behind the two riders on top. Allenby pointed them out, surprised and pleased to find there was no panic in him, as there would have been a few days earlier. The next instant lead was droning up toward them, falling short, raking up streamers of dirt and stonedust. Allenby reached for his Spencer carbine, but Dave Myatt shook his head.

"Let them waste shells, Al. We'll save ours—for now."

They loped along to maintain their lead as much as possible. There was no alternative to straight-away flight. The escarpment on their left was too steep to climb, the slope on their right led to the enemy. All they could do was follow the ridge, watch for a break, and try to keep the posse from getting ahead and climbing to cut them off. They had the

advantage of position and shelter, while the Caulfields' superiority lay in numbers. It was going to be a long tedious running fight, Dave Myatt thought. If he and Al could hold them off until nightfall, they should be able to slip away in the darkness. But they had some tough trying hours to live through before sundown.

When three of the men below climbed daringly into the open, Dave Myatt and Allenby unlimbered their carbines and sent them scrambling back into cover with bursts of rapid accurate firing. Dave thought one of the horses had been hit down there, but he couldn't be sure. It was gratifying to have Allenby taking it so well, cool and easy as a veteran trooper.

There were no more open forays for a space. Dave and Al drove along the backbone of the summit, utilizing all the available cover, while the pursuit paralleled their course in the brush and timber below. The posse indulged in futile sporadic shooting, but Dave and Al were conserving their ammunition. A sort of mobile and temporary stalemate had been reached.

If Dave Myatt had been alone he could have run away from them, for Big Gray was surefooted as a mountain goat. Allenby's bay was a good stout-hearted animal but slow, lacking the nimble assurance and instinct for speed in this rough tricky going. Yet Dave was glad to have Al with him. Facing these odds by himself would have been a lonely, depressing task. Allenby had been an improved man ever since their exploration of the mine and Mike Topliff's departure. Now that the crisis had come, Al was ready to carry his share of it.

The afternoon sun beat down with blazing intensity from the cloudless blue, heat and light refracted blindingly from the rock planes. Rifle barrels, any metal or stone, were scorching to the touch. The horses labored in the glare, darkened and lathered, girths frothing whitely. Dave and Allenby rode sweat-soaked in the searing saddle-leather, eyes slitted and aching under low-pulled hatbrims, sweeping the bright slopes. The minutes dragged, an hour was almost endless, as they plodded along that sun-blasted spine.

The enemy had split up, one detail still traveling a parallel course at a lower level, trying to forge ahead enough to climb and intercept the quarry; the other detachment dropping back to mount the grade and come up behind the

two fugitives. From time to time, Dave and Allenby had to stop and fight them off, dismounting in the shelter of boulders or tree clumps, drilling their shots down-slope and back along the shoulder, slowing and repulsing the Caulfield thrusts. The engagement became more personal as the range shortened. The crash and boom of high-powered rifles was louder and bullets breathed ever closer, whining viciously, splintering aspens and pines, kicking up dust, and snarling off stone surfaces. As they triggered and levered their carbines, Dave and Al were sprayed with dirt and pine needles, pelted with splinters and rock fragments.

The afternoon was wearing away in deadly heat, the mountain breeze like a furnace draft, when Dave Myatt peered ahead and saw where the climax was likely to come. Their ridge top ran straight into another and higher shoulder, that branched at right angles from the escarpment on their left. There was a steep narrow talus slope to be surmounted, if their flight was to continue. On the right, the rock wall of the higher spur was sheer and inaccessible. The showdown would come to that point. If Dave and Al could make it to the summit of that cross-shoulder, they'd be in a position to hold off the posse indefinitely.

The men below had observed this situation, too, and were pushing forward all the harder in a desperate attempt to cut off their prey before that loftier elevation could be attained. Dave Myatt knew that Big Gray would take that shale-drifted slope fast, but he feared that Allenby's bay horse might bog down there.

"If we get up there we're all right, Al," said Dave, pointing ahead to that strategic corner.

"We'll make it," Allenby said, and then his voice went up. "Look, Dave!..." Three riders had broken out of the woods below and slightly in advance of the two on top, angling in a sharp spurting climb up the flank of the ridge. Dave Myatt stepped down with the Henry forty-four-forty in his hand, and Allenby swung off with his Spencer fifty.

"Got to stop them, Al," Dave said through his teeth. "I'll take that first one."

It was Landon, he thought as he settled his sights on the front horseman, making quick allowances for distance, wind, elevation and momentum, swerving the barrel with the motion of the rider. A long shot for the Henry. Holding his

breath, Dave Myatt squeezed the trigger, the butt jumping hard against his firm shoulder as pale fire flickered from the muzzle, the clean spanging report in his ears. Landon stiffened up, doubled like a man with stomach cramps, pitched slowly from the saddle to roll loose and sprawling down the grade, dust spiralling from his body.

Allenby had selected Eakins for his target, firing, levering and letting go again. The second shot struck Eakins' horse, and a piercing scream went up as the animal floundered kicking in the gravel. Eakins was running on foot, slipping and sliding down the decline, with Dave and Al both throwing shots after him. A puff of dust spouted from Eakins' back as a bullet drove him forward in a long head-first dive, left him stretched full length in a fringe of brush. The third rider, plunging frantically for shelter, vanished in a dust cloud among the trees.

Mounting again, Dave Myatt and Allenby made their run for the delta of that talus slope ahead. Close upon it, they put their horses full tilt at the barren incline. Bullets buzzed and ricocheted around them as they hit the shale and started to climb. Big Gray powered his way up in great reaching strides, sinking deep but ploughing onward, leaping and bounding as the dust smoked up in billowing waves. Allenby's bay gelding went bravely and strongly at first, but was soon faltering, slipping and scrabbling wildly, mired down in the soft gravel and shale.

Big Gray, striding and bounding mightily, cleared the rimrock at last, and Dave Myatt pulled him about to watch Allenby's mount struggle up the slope. The bay was beginning to panic, snorting in fear as the footing failed and sharp-edge fragments sliced at his legs. The horse's eyes rolled white and terrified, but Allenby kept him clambering on, laboring upward, frothed and blowing hard. The Caulfields were coming up fast from the rear and the flank now, firing as they rode. Hailing lead struck sparks and splinters from the talus drift, ripped up small geysers of dirt, and clipped a fine spray of pine needles from a bough above Dave Myatt's head.

Allenby was within five yards or so of the top and safety when Dave heard that slug hit the bay, and saw in freezing horror the gelding go threshing over sideways, so suddenly that Al had no chance to fling himself clear. The horse ceased

kicking and lay still, with Allenby pinned beneath that heavy body, his face white and stricken against the rocks.

Dave Myatt was out of the saddle instantly, ground-haltering Big Gray behind a barrier of boulders. A running flying jump took Dave down into the shaly wash beside the trapped rider. Allenby was shrunken and twisted with agony as Dave gripped him under the arms and strained to haul him out from under the crushing weight of the dead horse.

Bullets were beating all around them, drumming up dust, screeching off rocks, filling the air with a vibrant burring drone. The gelding's body stirred and trembled as other shots struck it, and sharp stone particles stung Dave's cheeks as he tugged at Allenby.

"No use, Dave," panted Allenby. "Busted inside me—my back and leg. Get outa here, Dave. Ride for it!"

"Like hell I will," Dave said, gripping the saddle and horn, lifting and heaving with every ounce in him, straining until it seemed as if his heart would burst inside his ribs, his brain explode within his skull. The dead bulk came up a trifle.

Allenby hitched away on the ground, reaching down with both hands to pull his leg free. That leg no longer looked as if it belonged to him. The sight of it made Allenby sick, but there wasn't much pain, only a numbness. He couldn't feel either leg, but he seemed all right from the waist up. Must have broken my back, he thought wonderingly. Crippled me for life. Well, it was going to be a very short life now. He couldn't move, or be moved any distance. He'd be staying right here. The trail had ended all of a sudden for him. Grimly he took the Spencer from its boot.

Dave Myatt fastened his hands under Al's armpits and dragged him backwards, legs trailing after him, one of them crooked and crazy-looking. Slowly, agonizingly, Dave hauled him up the grade, bullets showering them with gravel and stone dust, until they were up over the rim, momentarily safe in the shadow of twin boulders there. For a brief interval they both lay helpless and panting, sweat streaming from their grimed faces, saturating their soiled clothes, their bodies inert except for the exhausted gasping of their lungs.

Then Dave Myatt got up, reeling and groggy on his feet, to yank his rifle from the saddle-scabbard. Crouching against a slab of granite, he started pumping shots at the pursuit,

strung along the shoulder of the mountainside below. Aiming with scrupulous care, firing calmly and methodically, Dave checked their advance, scattered them, and drove them back. Reloading the hot Henry, he turned to the twin boulders behind which Allenby was lying. Al had crawled and hunched himself forward to look through the narrow cleft between the rocks.

Allenby turned his auburn head, smiling faintly. The rosy color was gone from his plump cheeks, but the dimples were there. He said, "Nice shootin', Dave. A man could hold this pass a long time. Even a boy—like me."

"Sure, Al. We'll hold them till dark, and then we'll drift. Gray can carry double."

Allenby shook his head. "Not me, Dave. I'm done for..."

"The hell you are!"

"Can't feel anythin' in my legs—and that's a lucky thing, I guess. But I sure can't travel anywhere, Dave."

"All right," Dave Myatt said agreeably. "We'll camp here then."

"I will—but you've got to ride along," Allenby said with quiet conviction.

"And leave you like this? Listen, kid—"

"I'm a dead duck," Allenby interrupted almost angrily. "Even if they weren't down there, I'd die before you, or anybody, could get me in to a doctor. I'm all busted up. But I can hold this hill."

Dave Myatt was silent, tapering up a cigarette, placing it in Allenby's dry lips, lighting it and then fashioning one for himself. Going to Big Gray's side, Dave dug the last bottle of whiskey out of the saddlebag and brought it back to Allenby. They each took a drink, but Dave merely tongued the bottle.

"Get goin', boy," said Allenby. "This bottle's all the company I need here."

"I got you into this, Al."

"I didn't see any engraved invitations floatin' around. No, I dealt myself in. It was in the book this way, that's all. Will you get outa here?"

"No hurry," Dave Myatt drawled.

"They'll circle around and cut you off," Allenby said. "Maybe they got somebody in back of us already. Don't be a

fool, Dave! Get on that gray horse and breeze." His tone was harsh and impatient.

Dave took a look down the slope and squeezed off a couple of shots. "Nice spot," he remarked. "I want to be here when they rush it."

Allenby's face twisted into unrecognizable fury. "God-damn it all, man! I'm beginnin' to feel my legs now, and I don't want you here watchin' me. I want to be alone! Can't you get that through your head?"

Dave Myatt, startled and shaken, saw that Allenby meant what he was saying, beyond any shadow of doubt. The pain, finally burning through the numbness, was reflected now in Allenby's tortured amber eyes and drained, distorted features.

"I'm a goner, Dave," panted Allenby, pleading now. "I know it—and you know it. *Get on that horse and ride!*"

"All right, Al," said Dave Myatt slowly. "If that's the way you want it."

"It's the only way there is!"

"I don't like it, though."

"The hell with what you like!" snarled Allenby. "For once I'm the boss. We'll do it my way. Start travelin', boy. You got a lot of things to do yet."

"Al," muttered Dave Myatt. "Al, I—I—" His voice broke off raggedly, and he couldn't go on. His throat was constricted and his eyeballs smarted and stung.

"Forget it." Allenby's grimy red-stubbled cheeks dimpled with his painful grin. "Like Mike says, when your number's up... No sense in your dyin' here, Dave. Me, I'm all smashed up, finished for sure. But I grew up some, at least."

"So long, Al boy."

"Get the hell outa here!" growled Phil Allenby ferociously.

Dave Myatt walked to the gray gelding, pausing for a last look down the grade. They were still pinned down there, nobody moving forward—as yet. The sun was blood-red, dipping toward the crests of the Rentanas, washing the western horizon with flaring colors. Dave stepped into the sweated leather, saluted Allenby and kneed Big Gray around and off, letting the horse set his own pace. Dave Myatt didn't look back again, because his brown eyes were suddenly and scaldingly blinded with tears of bitter grief and rage.

Phil Allenby never knew whether Dave glanced back or

not, for he was concentrating intently on the view he commanded through that aperture between the boulders.

It seemed an awfully long time before they started coming up again from that lower ridge, and waiting was hard, with the pain swelling to shrieking proportions at times, dwindling to nothing at others. When it got too bad Allenby took a drink, and when he began to feel faint and giddy he took another. There! They were coming now. Flat on his stomach, Allenby rested the barrel of his Spencer in that convenient niche, and laid his sweat-oiled cheek against the smooth wood of the stock.

The first one was on foot, a broad burly figure dodging forward in a sparse grove of aspens. Lining the sights on him, Allenby lowered the muzzle a trifle, and triggered. The carbine roared and recoiled, jarring his racked body, the spurt of flame bright in the waning light. The man clutched both hands to his middle, lurched into the bole of a tree, spun off and keeled ponderously forward to lie face down in the bleached grass. The others wheeled back and dropped into cover.

Allenby smiled and raised the bottle to his parched lips with his left hand, washing the fiery liquor down with canteen water. "There'll be more of you bastards chewin' dirt. Dave's goin' to get a whale of a good start. You'll never get in shootin' distance of that Big Gray again!"

Phil Allenby had everything arranged very neatly behind those boulders on the rimrock. He had taken off his gun-belt and canteen, placing them within easy reach, and he had stacked fifty-caliber shells in small compact bunches for fast reloading. The whiskey bottle, tobacco and cigarette papers were also handy on the dry baked turf. He took another nip, chasing it with water. It began to feel comfortable and homelike here, almost as cozy and familiar as his room in the old homestead in the Narrows. If it weren't for the grinding agony in his crushed and shattered left leg, the splintering anguish at the base of his spine. Hell, if it weren't for those things he wouldn't be lying here at all.

He thought of his lank solemn father and pious mother. It was tougher on them than anybody else; their loneliness and suffering would last through the years. They'd had no luck at all with their children. His brother had been killed by Cadnac's Comanches, his sister had died in childbirth, and



now Phil was fighting a lone rearguard action in the Granadas. At any rate, he had matured to full manhood before the end.

He saw blurred shadows slide across the landscape, and he looked upward. High overhead the vultures were flapping and wheeling, evil and ugly against the fading sky. He stared at them with loathing and revulsion.

"Not yet, buzzards," Allenby said. "Not for quite a while yet, goddamn you!"

Tilting the bottle, he took another swig of the painkiller, hoping the Caulfields would charge the talus slope before he passed out, or weakened too much from the torture. Somebody moved down there in the jack pines, and Allenby fired swiftly, forcing him back. The posse opened up and scourged his hidden position, the bullets furrowing up shale, howling off the rocks, chipping the tree trunks. Allenby hammered back at them, aiming at the muzzle flashes, until his Spencer was empty.

Reloading quickly, proud of the sure deftness of his fingers, Phil Allenby realized that something was troubling him vaguely, an elusive hope that he couldn't identify. There was nothing to hope for, as far as he could see, and nothing to fear. Death would come in a matter of time. All he had to do was fight them off as long as he could lift a gun, hold them long enough for Dave Myatt to get away, free and clear.

Then all at once it came to him, and Allenby smiled at the absurdity of what he wanted at such a moment. He had been unconsciously wishing that Mike Topliff could be there to see him now.

## Ten

After resting a night and day at the Myatts', sleeping in Dave's bed most of the time when not wolfing Mom's excellent food, Mike Topliff rode toward Freeland Fork under the cover of darkness. Cub Goelet's battered and drowned body had been discovered and fished out of Bittersweet Creek that morning, occasioning much excitement and conjecture in the

Narrows, but little mourning outside of the Goelet family. No one but the Myatts knew of Mike's return, and that was the way he wanted it. If any Caulfield crew caught up with him, he would never get to Sheriff Ackeret with the information and evidence salvaged from that mine shaft in the Granadas.

Riding the familiar road, branching off into the timber when he heard anybody coming, Mike Topliff thought of all the times he had come this way with Dave Myatt and Phil Allenby, and was saddened and troubled to think of them now, hunted and harried in the mountains. Sooner or later the Caulfields were bound to close in on them. Dave might break loose on Big Gray, but Al's chances were thin on the white-faced bay. Well, about all Mike could do was try to get Ackeret and Norman Caulfield to call in the posse, put an end to the chase. And perhaps that would be too late for Dave and Al.

Morehouse was probably out with another Cross-C detail, including Hagar, Durkett and Krage, beating the brush down Red Butte way, or ranging into the Granadas to cut the fugitives off from the south. Norman, Mike hoped and believed, would be at home on the ranch. There was no love lost between Norm and his younger half-brothers, and the evidence Mike bore on Cleve's death should bring the immediate and solid support of Norman. As Mike recalled, the easygoing Norm had worshiped his elder brother Cleve. But it was dubious if Norm and the law combined were strong enough to stand against Jason, Wendell, Pike Morehouse and their hired gunmen. In that case, Mike Topliff would either go after them himself or report to a federal marshal. With hatred a bitter unwavering flame inside him, Mike preferred the former alternative.

Mike had shaved, bathed and dressed in a clean outfit at the Myatt cabin. He felt rested, refreshed and ready for anything tonight. His blond hair was neatly brushed under his flat-crowned hat, his bronzed face fine and keen, reckless and daring, the mouth smiling and boyish, the eyes lighted cold and green, old and astringent. His two forty-four Colts were sheathed and thonged low on his lean flanks, oiled and cleaned for action. Mike had seen the cruel welts scars across Dad Myatt's back, and he wanted nothing more than to get Jason and Wendell in front of him, under those guns.

It had been pleasant and homelike for Mike Topliff at the

Myatt spread. The two families had always been close, much closer than the blood relationship warranted. Mike admired and respected Dad and Mom, was very fond of them both. The gangling yellow-haired Kenny was a great kid, and Sally. . . There just weren't any words for Sally. The feeling between them had developed as Mike had anticipated, blooming with sudden wonder and rich beauty, after that brutal brawl on the Bittersweet. As quick as that they were man and woman, kissing and embracing instead of smiling and shaking hands. He was sure lucky to have a girl like Sally Myatt.

Far luckier than her brother Dave, hopelessly in love with Alma Caulfield. Ill-fated from the beginning, that affair was certainly ended since Dave had accidentally killed Chief Caulfield. Mike knew that Alma had loved Dave, in spite of family opposition, but her love must have died when Dave's bullet felled her father. Unless she understood that it had been purely unintentional, brought on by Wendell's quirt more than anything else. But blood was strong. Alma might care little for Jason and Wendell, but she had loved the Chief, as she had Cleve. And now she was nearer to Norman than the other pair. Mike wondered about the marriage planned for her and Pike Morehouse. He doubted that Alma would ever go through with it. She was too nice a girl, too sweet and lovely, for the cold, grasping, hard-shelled Morehouse. Ambition and success meant more to Pike than any woman ever could. He was nearly as deserving of death as Jason and Wendell. Maybe it would come in time to save Alma Caulfield from the disaster of becoming Pike Morehouse's wife.

Unknowingly, Mike Topliff was following the route that Dave Myatt had taken out of town that fateful morning after the shooting of Chief Caulfield, angling through dark debris-littered backyards and lots, passing the alley Dave had fled through, pulling up behind the Wells-Fargo station and the adobe jailhouse, which stood side by side opposite the Prairie Queen Saloon and the Palace Dance Hall. Music, blaring raucously from the latter, reminded Mike of his first experience there with a pert vivacious girl called Dallas, bright and bold as brass but somehow likable, despite her profession. This time the memory brought a slight pang of guilt and remorse, and Mike knew it was because he had so recently held Sally Myatt in his arms, tasted the pure sweet fire of her mouth.

Kneeing Socks on to the far rear corner of the jail, Mike dismounted and let the reins trail to the ground, and the mare stood quietly while he eased forward to see if Ackeret was around. He was not. The sheriff's office was unlighted and nobody was in front of the building. Back in the saddle, Mike rode a roundabout back way out to the Ackeret home, but that too was dark and deserted. Retracing his course, Mike left the horse behind the jailhouse, not wanting the white-stockinged chestnut to advertise his presence in Freeland.

As inconspicuously as possible, eyes alert and hands ready, Mike Topliff drifted about from place to place of the customary handouts—the Acme Restaurant, Hufnail's Stable, the barbershop and poolroom, the Colladeen Hotel, Vermilion House, the lesser eating places and saloons. But Sheriff Ackeret was in none of them. Wherever Mike was seen and recognized, men gaped at him with an amazement that couldn't be concealed, wagging their heads and muttering after he had passed by. Everybody knew he was supposed to be on the run with Dave Myatt and Allenby, hiding out in the hills or mountains. They wondered how any man dared to show himself in this town when the Caulfields were after him. It was suicidal, insane, quite beyond their comprehension. There'd be gunplay before this night was over. Young Topliff must want to get himself shot up, or hanged like his old man.

Mike knew what they were thinking and saying, and it fed the fire inside him. The more he roved around, the wilder and harder he felt, keyed to a reckless fighting pitch. He began to hope he might meet the Caulfield brothers, back from the mountains. If he did, the hell with the sheriff and the law; he'd brace them and shoot it out with them, regardless of the odds. But Jason and Wendell were not about either. In all his wandering, Mike hadn't seen a Cross-C hand as yet.

In Pronto Pete's, Mike stood in the corner at the end of the bar, well away from the clients who were obviously startled by his appearance. Pete himself poured the whiskey and murmured under his drooping mustaches, "You sure must be trouble-hungry, kid."

"Any Cross-C in town?"

"Pike Morehouse has been around."

"Where's Ackeret?" inquired Mike Topliff.

"I don't know. You goin' to give yourself up or somethin'?"

Mike grinned. "For what, Pete?"

"For safekeepin' maybe," Pete said gloomily. "How'd you get in here, Mike? They're combin' the whole country."

"Not for me."

"They'd shoot you as quick as they'd shoot Dave Myatt, boy."

Mike Topliff sampled his drink. "You think Ack's out of town?"

"Haven't seen him all day," said the saloon-keeper.

"Mike, why don't you ride outa here?"

Mike spread his fine-shaped hands. "I haven't done a thing, Pete."

"You hear about Goelet? They'll hang that on you, Mike, as soon as they know you're back."

Mike smiled and downed the rest of his liquor. "I heard Cubby went for a moonlight swim. Well. I'll be seein' you, Pete."

"Watch yourself, kid," said Pete. "You may be good. but there's a whole lot of them."

Mike Topliff waved lightly, pushed through the batwings, and stepped out onto the slat walk of this side street. A yellow half-moon was straight up in the night-blue sky over the Rentana Range, and a profusion of stars glittered along the great Milky Way. Somewhere a shrill-voiced mother was calling her children, and soon small running feet pattered on the planks. Drunken laughter rolled out of Pronto's and echoed foolishly in the shadows. Mike stared for some time at the towering mass of the Granadas in the eastern starlight, wondering where Dave and Al were bedding down tonight, wishing he were back up there with them.

Twirling up and lighting a cigarette, Mike Topliff moved toward the main street, walking with that lazy effortless grace, leisurely and relaxed but ever ready to spring instantly into action. He was smoldering and disgusted now, craving the exultant flaring release of combat, excitement, yearning to pit his strength and speed and skill against another's. He would try the Prairie Queen. If there were any Cross-C men in town he'd find them there. The wildness in Mike Topliff was on the hair-trigger edge of breaking loose, and the hell with the consequences.

Mike parted the swing-doors of Freeland's first saloon,

and strode to the bar with his slight natural swagger. Neither Ackeret nor any Caulfield hands were in sight, but there were stunned expressions and astonished stares on all sides as Mike made his entrance. The eyes of other men were averted hastily when Mike's narrowed green gaze flickered their way. A few spoke or nodded, and Mike inclined his bronze head in response, taking his place at the end of the elaborate bar, feeling the instinctive withdrawal of the nearest patrons.

Mike Topliff's grin became as ironical and mocking as his green glance. They were afraid to be seen too close to an outright enemy of the Caulfields. Their sympathies might in reality be with Mike and Dave Myatt, but they were not going to reveal them in public. A bartender set a bottle and glass in front of Mike and moved away at once, discreetly and uncomfortably, perturbed by the look in Mike's face and eyes, the sudden tension of the atmosphere. There was hellfire, lightning and dynamite in this blond boy, he thought, and tonight it was dangerously near the surface. Mike was like a cocked gun in that barroom.

Nursing his drink, Mike Topliff watched both sets of doors, hoping to see Sheriff Ackeret come in, wanting to be ready in case any of the Caulfields showed. But nobody he was looking for arrived, and after a while he lost interest in the batwings, devoting his brooding attention more to the bottle and glass. He was jarred out of his melancholy reverie by a low gruff voice calling his name, "Topliff!" Mike turned deliberately, his backbone a column of ice, and saw Pike Morehouse standing there, booted feet planted widely, huge hands on his thick solid hips.

The Cross-C foreman generally had a sedate manner, a cold heavy dignity about him, but it was not with him tonight. His square rugged face was beard-stubbed, hard-bitten, the eyes almost bulging, stormy and savage-looking. Morehouse's broad stolid form seemed charged with pent-up emotion this evening. Other men began to sidle warily out of line, as the stocky dark man and the slim blond boy faced one another in the smoke-layered lamplight.

"What is it?" Mike drawled with flat indifference. He didn't like Morehouse, on principle, but he had nothing in particular against him, except that he was a Caulfield man and wanted to marry Alma.

Pike Morehouse came slightly forward on heavy stilted

legs, eyes fastened with almost fanatical fury on Mike's lean brown face. As far as Morehouse was concerned those two were alone in the saloon: nobody else existed there. "Where is she?" Morehouse demanded hoarsely. "Where's Alma?"

"Who?" Mike asked in genuine surprise, thinking perhaps this ramrod had gone crazy.

"Alma Caulfield. Where is she. Topliff?"

Mike laughed softly. "How would I know?"

"You've been with Dave Myatt." Morehouse accused him.

"Supposin' I have." Mike said. "We didn't have any women along with us."

Morehouse's voice went dull. "She's gone—nobody knows where. Myatt must have taken her someplace."

"Find Myatt then."

Morehouse's head jerked. "Don't you know? Myatt's dead and so's Allenby. They got both of 'em in the Granadas."

Mike Topliff straightened away from the bar, rigid. "That's a goddamn lie!"

"You're callin' me a liar?" said Pike Morehouse. "Maybe you forgot what happened to your father, Topliff?"

"Not hardly," Mike said, his lips thinning straight and taut. "Now get off my neck, Morehouse—or make your play."

"Why, you nogood nester dog!" It came from Morehouse in a choking snarl as he lunged forward and lashed out, his powerful left glancing off the side of Mike's dipping head, scaling his hat along the bar. Morehouse's right hand grappled at Mike's throat, clutching and spinning him violently against the counter. Half the whiskey slopped from Mike's glass. Wrenching away from that heavy hand, Mike splashed the rest of the liquor into Morehouse's snarling face.

Morehouse gasped and swore as the stinging alcohol blinded him momentarily. He swung mightily, grunting with the force of it. Mike Topliff ducked, glided in under the blow and ripped his own right fist squarely to Morehouse's jaw. It was like slugging a granite block padded thinly with rubber. Mike's fist bounced off, feeling numb and broken to the wrist. Morehouse's head swayed ever so little, his hat rolled off, but the man was solid as iron. Before Mike could recover, Morehouse was sledging wickedly at his face and head, shocking smashes that crashed and stunned, brought the blood pouring out.

Mike's blond head flew far back and filled with rocketing white flashes, his neck stretched to the breaking point, and the bar slammed him across the shoulder blades. The breath swished from his lungs in a long-drawn gasp, and his legs melted beneath him. Mike rebounded from the wood into an erratic sidewise stagger, whirling dizzily, tipping over tables and chairs, bringing up at last with his back against the wall. His jaw felt broken, and blood overflowed from his numbed mouth. Sobbing for air, Mike lay back on the wall, dazed and ill and half-conscious. He'd been hit plenty before, but never this hard. Through a steaming haze, he saw Morehouse coming in to finish the job.

Thrusting himself forward in desperation, Mike Toppliff reached by instinct and drew his right-hand Colt. Before he could use it, Morehouse bulled into him like a rampaging moose, riding him back onto the wall, hurling the gun-hand high over Mike's head. Grinding that gun-hand into the overhead timbers with a viselike grip, Morehouse got set to batter Mike once more with his big free fist.

In a flare of fury that ignited the last strength in him, Mike Toppliff writhed and twisted off the wall, lifting a sharp knee into Morehouse's abdomen, tearing his right hand free and clubbing the gun barrel down across the man's skull. Morehouse bowed low under the steel, knees spraddled and sagging, but he stayed on his feet somehow, ramming in doggedly, his left hand clamping Mike's right wrist again, heaving it high into the air before Mike could press the trigger. The forty-four went off finally, splintering the ceiling.

Pinning Mike there, his gun arm flung straight upward, Pike Morehouse let his free hand drop darting to his holster. But Mike Toppliff was faster with his left hand, faster than anything Freeland had seen for some time. Mike's left hand flashed and the Colt came up in it, blazing and roaring, the muzzle stabbing into Morehouse's broad bulk, lifting him back, back, his own gun never getting out of the leather. Three lightning explosions blended into one thunderous blast, and Morehouse was jolted fifteen feet away, still tottering brokenly backward, tugging helplessly at his gunhandle. Then he stopped back-tracking and stood there shaking his head, the blood from his cut scalp running into his eyes, his knees buckling, spreading wide and loose, his great body toppling



slowly, crashing into the sawdust, shuddering into stillness on the floor.

Mike Topliff walked unsteadily forward, crimson staining his face and throat, a gun in each hand now, his eyes slits of green fire. He went past Morehouse, hunched in that spreading dark pool, and on toward the nearest swing-doors. Every eye in the smoky powder-reeking room was on him, but nobody spoke, no one moved except to clear out of his way. At the doorway, Mike turned and spoke gently, to the crowd at large, "That was self-defense, I reckon. . . . I'll remember who saw it, too."

Mike went on outside, the big guns still in his graceful hands, lamp-light touching his fair head with golden gleams, his hat forgotten on the bar in the Prairie Queen. At the edge of the duckboards he came face to face with Sheriff Ackeret and two deputies. Ackeret eyed the two guns, the left-hand one still smoking faintly.

"Who was it, Mike?" asked the sheriff.

"Morehouse."

"You'd better come with us, son."

Mike Topliff spat a stream of blood into the street. "He started the fight, Ack. He came lookin' for it. It was him or me."

"That's all right, Mike, I know," Ackeret said. "Pike's been out of his mind some, ever since Alma disappeared."

"They didn't get Dave and Allenby, did they?"

"Not that I know of."

"I knew he was lyin'," Mike said, but there was relief in his tone.

"Come on with us, Mike," said Ackeret. "You'll be a whole lot safer in jail."

"You can't hold me, Ack. Everybody inside there saw it was self-defense, for chrissake."

"Sure, Mike. I just don't want the Caulfields tryin' to string you up. Come on, boy."

"All right, Ack, I've been lookin' all over for you anyway," Mike Topliff said. "I've got somethin' to show you, and I want Norm Caulfield to see it, too."

## Eleven

Dave Myatt had dropped from the upper ramparts of the Granadas and was circling into the southwest to cut the stage line somewhere when Big Gray went lame in the foothills, his right foreleg severely strained. Fortunately there was no further necessity for speed. Thanks to Phil Allenby's last-ditch dying stand, Dave had far outrun the posse, riding all through that first night after parting with Al. There had been no signs of pursuit since. But leaving Allenby was the hardest thing Dave Myatt ever had been forced to do. It still haunted him. Dave knew it was going to be with him the rest of his life. Yet it had been the sane and sensible course to follow, as Allenby had insisted repeatedly. The only way out.

Phil Allenby had been done for, beyond a doubt. That leg was crushed and mangled beyond repair. It would have had to come off, if Al was to live. For Dave Myatt to have thrown his life away there, too, would have been pointless and futile, any way you looked at it. And still he felt guilty because he had run away, leaving Allenby to die alone on the rimrock. Dave realized that the tarnishing corroding sense of guilt would never leave him, even though all logic and good judgment justified his act. That chapter left him with a fierce pride in Phil Allenby, a desolate shame for himself.

With the gray gelding limping badly, Dave Myatt decided to head into Red Butte. The Caulfield crew, undoubtedly dispatched there on Goelet's tip, must have pulled out before now. They might have left a couple of men at the Butte, but Dave was willing to take a chance on that. If Mike Topliff had got to Sheriff Ackeret all right, the manhunt might be terminated by this time, but regardless of that Dave was going to Red Butte. Old Doc Vardon was the best horse doctor in the Colladeen, and Big Gray needed treatment. Trechock had overnight stops in the Butte every so often, and Dave had to see if Trey was carrying any message from Mike. If not, Trey

would certainly have news from the north, and Dave was worried about his family in the Narrows. For all he knew the Myatt homestead might be lying in blackened ruin, and his folks dead, murdered by the Caulfields.

Late in the afternoon, Dave Myatt dropped from the southwestern hills to the prairies near Red Butte. The Colladeen Valley narrowed sharply here at the southern end, hemmed in between the Rentana Range and the Granadas. Midway of the plain, the town sprawled along the Colladeen River, over-shadowed by the gaunt redstone butte from which the name of the settlement derived. Red Butte had the reputation of being wild and lawless, a hideout for outlaws, the rendezvous of cowhands, miners, woodsmen and drifters on a spree. A community of saloons, gambling houses, dance halls and hotels of ill repute.

The sun sank in a fiery sea of colors behind the Rentana peaks, the lurid reds and purples dissolving slowly to frail pink and lavender banners along the western skyline. Twilight silvered the sage and bunchgrass as Dave Myatt crossed the lowlands, letting Big Gray walk slowly at his own limping pace. The bleak outline of the great mesa loomed ahead, and at its base the lamps of the town began to glimmer in the hazy dusk. Dave swung off to walk for stretches, resting the horse as much as possible, wanting full darkness to come before he entered Red Butte.

Crooked slanting streets formed a confused jigsaw pattern between the shelving base of the bluff and the lower flats of the riverside. Front Street, a double row of saloons, gambling dens, hotels and whorehouses, bisected the jumble of houses and stores from north to south, halfway between the butte and the stream. Doc Vardon lived on the outskirts near the riverbank, and Dave Myatt wound through dim back streets in that direction, aware for the first time how saddle-cramped and trail-weary he was, filthy, bearded, burned to a crisp hollow shell, weak from hunger and exhaustion but too dry and tired to have an appetite.

The house was dark and untenanted, but lantern-light glowed in the stable where old Doc spent most of his time. Dave stepped down and led Big Gray toward the wide, half-opened door. Doc Vardon was puttering around over a work-bench, the light gleaming on his bald head and spectacles. He looked up and smiled in slow surprise.

"Howdy, Dave," said Doc Vardon. "Long time no see. How are you, boy? And how's this big gray devil?"

"I'm all right but Gray's pretty lame, Doc," said Dave, as they shook hands warmly. "Right foreleg. Want you to look him over."

Vardon was already stooping over the horse's leg, peering and probing with expert fingers. "Thought this one was too tough to go lame on you, Dave."

Dave Myatt turned from sliding the broad door shut. "We hit some rough country, Doc."

"Heard you had a little ruckus up north, son. Cross-C had a crew down here, but I reckon they're gone now. Maybe a few of them still hangin' around though. This big fellah needs a rest, Dave."

Dave nodded, licking cigarette paper into a neat cylinder and applying a match. "Maybe I can catch the Freeland stage."

"You goin' back *there*?" Doc demanded.

"Don't know—yet. I've got to see the driver first."

Doc Vardon gestured at a bottle on the shelf. "Help yourself, boy. You look like you need a drink or two."

Grinning appreciatively, Dave Myatt uncorked the bottle and tipped it, mellowing the burn of whiskey with a drag on his cigarette. The barn smelled rather pleasantly of liniment, medicines, leather and horses. Dave Myatt swallowed another stiff drink, welcoming the spread of warmth and life within him, and put the bottle back. Vardon was still examining Big Gray's foreleg, and Dave set about unsaddling and unbridling the horse.

"I'll leave Gray here, Doc. I can hire a horse—if I need one. Don't the stage lay overnight here?"

Vardon straightened up and thought for a moment. "Yes, and this is the night, I think. But somebody was tellin' me they were goin' through tonight, as far as Watertown most likely. Cadnac's Comanches are up again, they say. Rumors about them hittin' Hillsboro and headin' over this way. Don't put much stock in it myself."

Dave Myatt drew the Henry rifle out of its boot and removed the saddlebags, pegging the remainder of the gear on the wall. Lifting his Colt forty-four out of its sheath, he checked and replaced it. The gun he had taken from Cub Goelet was in the saddlebags, along with the extra shells and clothing.

"Fix Gray up and keep him here, Doc. I may be back in

the mornin', or I may ride out somewhere and come back later. It all depends.

Doc Vardon took a drink and smiled. "You're sure enough a hard-lookin' hombre, son."

Dave grinned and rubbed his unshaven, dirt-streaked jaws. "Hope I can get a shave and a bath, change my clothes. Thanks, Doc, and I'll be seein' you."

"Have another, Dave," invited Vardon, extending the bottle. "You need money or anythin'?"

Dave drank and shook his brown head. "Thanks just the same, Doc." He stroked Big Gray's white-maned neck, picked up his carbine and saddlebags, and went to the door. "Take care of him, Doc."

"Don't you worry none about Big Gray," said Vardon. "You take care of yourself, son."

Outside in the night, Dave Myatt walked toward the center of town, feeling better with the whiskey in him, enjoying the opportunity to stretch his saddle-stiffened limbs and body. Carrying the rifle and saddlebags under his left arm, his right hand swinging free near the holstered gun on his thigh, Dave turned into the blazing length of Front Street. The plank sidewalks swarmed with people, the tie-rails were lined with horses and mounted men thronged the dusty thoroughfare. Music shrilled and beat through light and shadows, half-drowned at times by the roaring din of the saloons. Snatches of song, laughter and vicious cursing came to Dave as he walked through the gay jostling ranks, his brown eyes constantly on the lookout for Cross-C riders. This street always had the brawling hilarious carnival atmosphere of a raw wild boomtown. Men said that every night was Saturday night in Red Butte.

The stagecoach was still in town, he observed. In the station restaurant, Dave ate a good supper and learned that the stage would be rolling north in about an hour. Trechock was the driver. Hank Kurner the guard, but their whereabouts at the instant were unknown. Everybody was talking about the Indian uprising to the west, and all kinds of rumors were circulating. Cadnac had destroyed a wagon-train, wiped out two whole towns, massacred a company of cavalry, butchered and burned out all the ranchers near the foothills of the Rentanas. The Comanches were coming east to strike at Freeland and the Narrows, Selbro's Ford, Watertown and

Red Butte, right down the line. Cadnac had vowed to lay waste to the entire Colladeen.

Depositing his carbine and saddlebags in the depot, Dave Myatt walked the street looking for Trechock, digesting his supper and exercising his cramped muscles. Returning to the station, he took clean clothing from the bags and went to buy a bath and a shave. By special request and for an additional fee, a barber shaved Dave as he sat soaking luxuriously in a large tub of warm soapy water in the back room, his gun-belt hanging close by on the wall.

When the barber withdrew to the front, Dave finished bathing behind the curtains that separated the two rooms, toweled briskly and dressed in the fresh outfit, throwing the ragged dirty clothes away. Feeling wonderfully clean and rejuvenated, like a new man altogether, Dave buckled on his gun-belt, set his flat-crowned hat on his damp tawny head, and was ready to step out around the curtain when a familiar jeering voice rasped from the front of the shop, "Maybe we ain't got young Myatt yet, but we'll run him down and don't forget it! His old man got one taste of the whip, and next time I'll flog the life right outa him! I woulda cut him right in two before, if Ackeret hadn't come hornin' in with Norm Caulfield and a bunch of deputies. But I'll bet old man Myatt ain't had a night's sleep since I laid him open with this quirt!"

Dave peered past the edge of the blanket, draped as a partition. It was Monte Hagar, as he had guessed from the voice, the strong-arm man of Cross-C. He was lounging against the barber's chair, a massive brawny man with a brutal face and small malevolent eyes, two guns belted on his heavy hips, the quirt dangling from his left wrist, a cigar in his ugly protruding teeth.

Dave Myatt eased the Colt in its leather and slipped lithely out past the curtain into the front room. "So you whip old men and go around braggin' about it, Monte?" he said with icy restraint.

Monte Hagar whirled away from the chair to face him, broad coarse face stupid with surprise, elbows out, huge hands spread-fingered and quivering. "You're a dead man, Myatt," he said hoarsely.

Dave Myatt smiled solemnly. "You're alone here, Monte. You haven't got the whole Cross-C at your back tonight. Go ahead, reach!"

The barber had backed into the corner, his eyes popping and his mouth gaping as he shrunk there. The small shop was empty except for those three. Hagar stood tense and stark, a great crude statue. Dave Myatt was a tall limber figure before him, loose and easy, his plain tanned face sober and smooth, the mouth a straight line, the brown eyes darkly afire under lowered lids.

Monte Hagar's immense bulk heaved with the abrupt motion of his right arm, but Dave Myatt's supple sinuous speed made the big man look slow and awkward. Dave cocked his Colt as it came up in a sharp flashing arc, thumbing the hammer forward as the barrel leveled off. Blasting flame filled the narrow room with its roar, the gun kicking up in Dave's hand. Hagar turned with the shocking smash of the forty-four slug, his own half-drawn weapon clattering to the floor, his heavy-muscled right arm hanging useless from the shattered shoulder. The wall caught Hagar's broad shoulders as he jogged backward and hung there, panting and turning his head from side to side. Bottles fell with a splintering crash, and the strong sweet odor of bay rum rose through the powder-reek.

"Try your other hand, Hagar," said Dave Myatt.

The movement of Hagar's head became more violent. "Broke my shoulder—bad." The cigar dropped unnoticed from his mouth.

"Have to learn to whip left-handed—if you live."

Monte Hagar moaned. "You ain't goin' to kill me—like this, Dave?"

Dave Myatt paced toward him. "Hold out your left hand." When the man obeyed, Dave ripped the quirt from his wrist. "Maybe I'll use this—instead of a gun."

The little eyes in that brute face went frenzied with fear. "No, *no!* For God's sake, Dave! Not *that!*"

"My father didn't beg, Monte," said Dave Myatt evenly.

As Dave flipped the gun from the holster on Hagar's left leg, the big man made a frantic left-armed grab for him, but Dave swiveled clear of that sweeping arm, stepped back in and slashed his gun barrel down on Hagar's head, beating him into a stunned spraddle-kneed crouch against the wall. Transferring the gun to his left hand, taking the thick quirt in his right, Dave Myatt stood rangy and balanced over that cowering hulk.

"Get up on your hind legs like a man," Dave said, his teeth on edge.

Ordinarily there was no cruel streak in Dave Myatt, but the idea of this giant flogging his father, under all those Cross-C guns and with the rest of the Myatt family probably forced to look on, flooded Dave with such a rage that he was capable of almost anything. When Monte Hagar squirmed erect on the wall, Dave Myatt swung that whiplash with all his strength, cutting through Hagar's green shirt into the flesh.

Hagar screamed out in protest, and Dave gave him another savage stroke, a white-hot blaze of madness swelling in his brain. Hagar howled, lurched off the wall and sprawled across the barber's chair. A crowd had gathered outside the door and windows, but nobody attempted to enter, and Dave Myatt didn't even know they were there as he lashed away at Hagar's enormous shuddering back. That wicked quirt sliced the green shirt to ribbons, leaving scarlet gashes and purple weals across the trembling flesh, raising fine sprays of blood, as Dave Myatt laid it on with grim fury and hatred . . . until he was panting, arm-weary, and Monte Hagar was writhing in mortal agony on the floor, his back slashed into crimson shreds. With a final gasping groan, Hagar slumped into unconsciousness.

Flinging the whip aside, sick and revolted now that his rage was spent, shivering all over with the disgusted reaction, Dave Myatt sheathed his gun and turned to the door, aware of the close-packed spectators then as he opened it and stepped outside, gulping the night air. The crowd opened to let him through, and Dave was on the outer rim of it when he raised his bent head and saw two men blocking his path with their guns trained on him. Long hatchet-faced Ed Durkett and short squat Frog Krage of the Cross-C.

"Did you kill Hagar, kid?" drawled Durkett. "Well, it don't matter. Your string's run out anyway. Put 'em up high and don't try nothin', unless you wanta die right here. Get his belt, Froggy."

"A pleasure, I'm sure," smirked the froglike one, "to take such a desprit character into custody. We'll get a raise and vacation with pay for this, Ed."

Dave Myatt studied his chances, saw that they were less than nothing, and lifted his hands shoulder-high. So this is the way it ends, he thought. I should have stayed with Allenby, after all. I ought to reach and die here. It'd be a lot



easier than the way they'll do it later on, with Jason and Wendell in charge of ceremonies. But he made no move, just stood quietly with his hands up, waiting dully and wearily.

Another voice cut in, "Hold on there, Frogface! Don't get any notions, Durkett! Just drop them guns before I let go both barrels." It was Trechock, standing wide and solid, munching his tobacco calmly, a double-barreled shotgun held steadily at his waist, lined fully on Krage and Durkett. They turned carefully and looked into those twin muzzles, and let their six-guns thud into the dirt. Dave Myatt drew his Colt, motioned the two men to turn around, and relieved them of their left-hand guns.

"Wanta kill 'em, Dave?" asked Trechock casually. "Or turn 'em loose?"

Dave Myatt regarded them judiciously. "Get out," he said finally. "And stay away from me, if you want to stay alive."

"Mistake to let 'em go, Dave," said Trechock.

"I suppose so, Trey, but what the hell . . ."

"Beat it," said Trechock, spitting contemptuously toward them, "before Dave changes his mind. This scatter-gun goes off mighty easy, and my finger's sure itchin' tonight."

Durkett and Krage slouched away rapidly. Dave picked up their other two guns and stood with Trechock, watching them out of view in the busy street. Trechock chuckled as Dave handed him a pair of revolvers. "Could be needin' this artillery tomorrow, if Cadnac's bucks come bustin' our way."

"Are they really up?"

Trechock nodded morbidly. "Slaughtered a wagon-train in the Needles, and rubbed Hillsboro right off the map."

Dave Myatt's face tightened. Hillsboro was a scattered settlement of small ranches and farms, similar to the Narrows. If the Comanches came eastward, the Strip would be one of their primary objectives.

"Headin' over here, Trey?"

"So they say, Dave. Reported strikin' up Freeland way. There's a troop of cavalry comin' out of Fort Stilwell. I figure if we make Watertown tonight, we can get through tomorrow."

They walked to the stage station and went in, sitting down on a bench against the wall, where they could watch all entrances and windows. Trechock produced a couple of cigars, and they lighted up, their eyes ever watchful. Dave sat

with a six-gun in his lap, and Trechock had the shotgun across his knees.

"Any news from home?" inquired Dave Myatt.

"Your family's all right, Dave," said Trechock. "But I don't know how long for. The Caulfields may go in there when they get back. Cub Goelet's dead. Found him in the Bittersweet one mornin', beat up and drowned. Mike Topliff's in jail in Freeland. Pike Morehouse jumped him in the Prairie Queen, and Mike killed him."

"Any word from Mike?"

"He wants you to come up there, Dave. Said to tell you that Ackeret and Norm sided with you, but he doubted if any jury'd ever convict Jason and Wendell, no matter how guilty. Said you and him would handle them, if the law couldn't."

"But Mike's in jail."

Trechock grinned. "That's to keep him safe from the Caulfields more than anythin' else. It was self-defense against Morehouse—half the town saw it. But Ackeret figured jailin' Mike was the best way to keep him alive."

"I see," Dave said. "Anythin' else, Trey?"

"Mike said for you to come up on the stage, nobody'd be lookin' for you that way."

"Any room in the coach tonight?"

Trechock laughed. "All kinds of room, boy. Had a full load but they're all scared of losin' their hair. Stoppin' off here until the Comanches are put down. Only got one passenger goin' through."

"You got two now, Trey," said Dave Myatt.

"That's fine, Dave. We can sure use you if them Comanches hit us. Now it almost seems like you owe me a drink, after all this talkin' I done." Trechock smiled and prodded Dave's shoulder. "Or else I'll buy, in case you're short. Come on next door, pardner."

They took their drinks with eyes narrowed on the swing-doors, and over the second one Trechock said, "You lose Allenby, Dave?"

Dave Myatt nodded and told him what had happened up in the Granadas.

They were silent over the third round, until Trechock broke it. "There'll be a mob around when we pull out tonight. Durkett and Krage might try some snipin' from the

crowd. You better walk out on the north side and climb aboard there, Dave."

"Good idea, Trey," assented Dave. "But you put my bags and rifle on, and these extra guns. Two's enough for me to pack."

"Let's go," Trechock said. "It's almost time to roll."

## Twelve

The back door of the stage depot opened into the stable yard. Dave Myatt slipped through it, slid sideways and flattened himself against the 'dobe wall. They were getting the six horses ready for the coach, but there was no other activity in this rear area. The roar of Front Street, steady and incessant as a great waterfall, rose to the night sky, punctuated here and there by bursts of music, hoarse shouts and maudlin laughter, occasional gunshots. When the hostlers came out with the stage horses, Dave Myatt crossed the yard, scaled the back wall and dropped into a rubbish-strewn alley.

Emerging from that, he scanned the street briefly, and started walking toward the northern outskirts. The scent of bay rum still lingered in his head, and with it the sickening memory of Monte Hagar under that whip. He should have finished Hagar instead of quirting him, just as he should have killed Krage and Durkett. It was folly to show any weakness or mercy in a business like this.

Hagar wouldn't bother anyone for quite a spell, but those other two would be coming after him again. Dave Myatt had the feeling of being followed now. He stopped and waited in the shelter of a juniper tree, gun in hand, but he couldn't see or hear anybody coming. Yet when he started on, the sensation of being trailed persisted. He weaved through a maze of side and cross streets, carrying his right-hand Colt openly, eyes roving to all sides. Nobody showed behind, except a few stray pedestrians and horsemen, going their own various ways, but Dave's instincts remained sharpened against that feeling of menace.

Stars swam sparkling overhead, a brilliant galaxy across the velvet heavens, and the moon was like an exact half-orange, suspended above the incredible spires and domes of the Rentanas. A night breeze cooled Dave's face and body, bringing the smell of sage and earth from the prairie. He inhaled deeply, but the odor of bay rum refused to go, and the long scar Wendell's whip had left on his cheek was burning like a brand. Lamplit windows along the way disclosed peaceful domestic scenes, incongruously tranquil after the riot of Front Street, making Dave Myatt lonesome for his own home and family, for Alma Caulfield who was lost to him forever.

He was nearing the northern limits of town now, the street slanting gently down toward the valley floor, and knew the stagecoach should be coming along, unless something had happened behind him, when he heard the drumming hoof-beats and rumbling clatter of the coach. The highway here was lined darkly on both sides by cedars and live oaks, the moonlight filtering through to lay intricate designs of silver and ebony on the gravel.

Dave Myatt halted in mid-road and glanced back to where the luminous glare of Front Street was thrown up against the overhanging pile of that monstrous redstone butte. A new sound rose above the racket of the oncoming stage, a quickening cllop of nearer hoofs that sent chilling prickles up Dave's spine, made his scalp bristle and creep tautly. It might be almost anything—outriders recruited because of the Indian threat, drunken volunteers escorting the coach out of town, or merely wayfarers heading north. And it might be Durkett and Krage making another try.

The horsemen were coming now in a sudden headlong rush. Dave Myatt drew and dodged for the trees along the embankment, but the foremost rider was already closing in with a reckless charge. Lead hummed hot and near as a saddle-gun crashed, lighting the roadway. Dave fired quickly at the flash, and then the hurtling rider was on top of him, the horse rearing, the man swinging his carbine in one expert hand. Dave flung himself down and rolled into the ditch, flame spearing after him, hoofs hammering close in the smoking dust.

Dave Myatt cleared his right-hand Colt and cut loose another shot from his prone position. The horse shrieked frightfully, rearing and pawing the air, toppling over back-

ward, kicking and thrashing in the dirt. The rifle roared again and Dave saw the rider in the muzzle-flare, thrown clear and sitting dazed and awkward in the middle of the road, his grotesquely froglike face peering blindly. Dave lined his gun from the ditch and let go once more. Lightning leaped across the dying horse and rocked Frog Krage over onto his wide back. He rolled to his belly, legs and arms jerking convulsively, and stiffened out with his face in the gravel.

The second rider, Ed Durkett, was galloping in now with his gun ablaze, the coach careening along at full speed behind him. Flattening out in his shallow trench, Dave Myatt was opening fire on him when the tremendous bellowing *boom* of old Hank Kurner's buffalo gun blasted from the top of the stage. A blinding sheet of fire illuminated the highway, and the wallop of that Sharps fifty-eight lifted Durkett from the saddle, hurled him flying and spread-eagled to the opposite bank. He bounced wildly there, cartwheeling finally into an oak trunk, wrapped brokenly and disjointed about the foot of the tree.

Dave Myatt climbed out of the ditch, dragged Krage's body on the edge of the road beside his dead horse, and stood there brushing dirt from his clothes as the stagecoach came alongside of him, with Trechock calling anxiously, "You all right, Dave?"

"Sure," Dave said. "But I might not be if old Hank wasn't so handy with that cannon of his."

Hank Kurner chortled in his gray beard with satisfaction. "Hop in, sonny. Let the dead bury the dead here."

"It never pays, Dave," said Trechock, "to give mad dogs another chance to bite you."

"I reckon not, Trey," agreed Dave Myatt. "I'll learn—in time."

He opened the door, mounted into the coach, and sank back onto the rear seat. The other passenger was silent and vague in the far corner, wearing some kind of white duster or cloak. Trechock set the six horses in motion again, bucking into their collars, the Concord swaying forward on its bullhide thoroughbraces, the wheels spinning and rattling. As they gained momentum, the floorboards crashed down on the reach-and-holster, and underneath gravel spattered and the sandboxes chuckled. With a sigh, Dave settled back on the horsehair cushions, reloaded his Colt, then relaxed completely,

bone-tired and nerve-fagged, wanting to forget all the fighting and running and killing.

His nostril twitched at a perfumed scent. He thought at first it was a hangover from the barbershop, and then he noticed that it was a finer, more subtle fragrance, far daintier and more pleasant than the blatant reek of bay rum. Dave Myatt glanced covertly at his fellow passenger. He had taken it for granted it was a man, but his mistake was obvious now. It was a woman in a long white traveling cloak, an empress plume curling bravely from the tight marrio that crowned her head. The new perfume emanated from her, faintly and disturbingly familiar. They left the tree-flanked aisle, rolling onto the open prairie, and moonlight slanted into the windows. Dave Myatt stared at his companion in total incredulous bewilderment, his dry lips framing her name, awed and breathless, "Alma!"

She turned, startled and aware of him for the first time, her great dark eyes widening even more, disbelief gradually turning to delight in her delicately-chiseled face. "Dave!" she cried softly. "Oh, Dave, I didn't know. I came down here to find you, but I had given up hope. Thank heaven you're all right, Dave, and you're here!"

They came together in the middle of the seat, their arms and mouths reaching hungrily for one another, holding and clinging with fierce tender strength, the wondrous surprise and rapture of it swelling and shimmering, gilding the night with magic and beauty, flooding them with pure ecstatic fire. He had swept off his hat, and her plumed bonnet fell unheeded to the floor. Between kisses they murmured meaningless timeless words, all-important to them, but better yet was the sweet crush of lips and clasp of arms, the fiery racing of blood that set the flesh vibrantly aglow and tingling.

At last, breathless and cramped, they eased the pressure of their embrace, resting comfortably and happily, as the coach rocketed on toward Watertown, under a golden half-moon and the myriad stars.

"I still can't believe it, Alma," murmured Dave. "I was afraid—I thought you'd never forgive me."

"I knew it wasn't your fault, Dave," she told him. "I knew you didn't mean to do it. Wendell was to blame. He and Jason are always to blame. Who were those men back there, Dave?"

"Krage and Durkett."

"I didn't know what was going on. I never suspected it was you, boarding the stage. I didn't even look, until you spoke. I was sunk awfully low, Dave. But you lifted me up, way up there, higher than the highest star, right on the roof of the world!" Her laugh was low lilting music.

"It's a wonder Trechock would let you come tonight, though," Dave said.

"He couldn't help it—without throwing me out bodily. I had a man buy my ticket. When the driver came out I was already in here, and I insisted on staying and riding. Aren't you glad?"

"Yes, of course. But it's dangerous, with the Comanches out."

"I can shoot, Dave. You know how well I shoot."

Dave Myatt shook his head. "You'd better stop in Watertown, Alma."

"Why, yes, if you'll stop with me," the girl said. "It doesn't matter where I am, as long as you are there too."

"I've got to get to Freeland."

"And more fighting, Dave?"

"I suppose so," he said.

Alma Caulfield was very grave. "It'll never end, will it? Not while Jason and Wendell are alive."

"Afraid not, Alma. How do you really feel about them?"

"Well, they are half-brothers of mine," she said. "But you know I never liked them, or felt any kinship with them. They're so different from Norman and Cleve. Evil somehow—I don't know."

"Worse than you think," Dave Myatt said, and told her what they had come upon in that mine tunnel in the mountains.

The girl listened intently, her eyes fixed and her face frozen with the horror that his words conveyed. "I wonder if the Chief knew—or suspected something like that?" she mused. "He was never the same after losing Cleve, never happy. He brooded a lot, and sometimes I'd catch him looking at Jason and Wendell as if they were strangers, almost enemies. As if they didn't belong there, and he didn't really want them there."

"Maybe he knew—or guessed. Maybe that's one reason he made them leave us alone in the Narrows."

"Jason and Wendell," said Alma with slow distaste. "You're going to kill them, Dave—you and Mike?"

"Got to, Alma—or they'll kill us," Dave Myatt said somberly. "There'll be no livin' in the Strip until they're dead."

Alma Caulfield shuddered slightly, her voice so low it was barely audible. "Yes, I guess it has to be that way, Dave. It'll be better for everyone. What about Pike Morehouse?"

"Does he mean anythin' to you?"

"No—not a thing, Dave."

"He's dead," Dave Myatt said. "Trey just told me to-night. Morehouse forced a fight onto Mike, and Mike killed him—in the Prairie Queen."

The girl took this quite calmly and without comment. Then she inquired, as if the question suddenly occurred to her, "Wasn't Phil Allenby with you, too?"

"He died, Alma, up in the Granadas."

She sighed and frowned, white teeth biting her full lower lip, pain and fear contracting her dark eyes. "All this killing, Dave. The whole Colladeen torn apart, bloodied and dirtied. What's the sense of it anyway?"

He lifted his shoulders and turned his head, the straight planes of his face sorrowful. "I don't know, Alma. But it won't last much longer."

There was a slight but tangible barrier between them now, a tacit withdrawal on either side, in the face of the strife and turbulence that involved them so deeply. It would remain there until the war was over, the hateful conflict settled at last. They kissed, as if to deny the separation, but it was still there, a cold slender double-edged blade between them.

"Let me lie on your shoulder, Dave," said Alma.

He shifted back into his corner of the seat, extending his arm, and the girl nestled inside it, her black head pillowed on his shoulder, her fragrance in his senses. Absently she stroked his face, tracing the scar on his lean left cheek, until she realized the significance of that crescent-shaped mark and her slim fingers dropped away.

Close and comfortable as they were, that invisible wall was there to set them apart, and the peace they found together was a troubled insecure one, for all its shining warmth and bliss. But Alma's lovely head still rested there



hours later, when the first faint rays of lamplight showed Watertown ahead on the plain.

Dave Myatt had forgotten the miracle that brought Alma Caulfield to him in the night outside of Red Butte. He was looking forward to Freeland Fork and the final showdown with Jason and Wendell. He hoped the Comanches would not interfere and delay them on the homeward route tomorrow. He wanted to get it over and done with.

## Thirteen

In the morning the entire town, alerted against the menace from the southwest, was up to see the stagecoach off. They had snatched a few hours of sleep in Watertown, breakfasted while the axles were being checked and greased and six fresh horses harnessed in, and were ready to roll at sunrise. Alma Caulfield, determined to go through with them, was in the Concord with Dave Myatt, her white cloak and smart dress wisely replaced by more practical riding breeches and shirt.

On top, Trechock stood nonchalantly balanced in the boot, the ribbons in one great hand, whip in the other, tobacco lumping one square jaw. Beside him on the seat was old Hank Kurner, gray-haired and bearded, placidly chewing his kinikinick, the buffalo gun across his stiff bowed legs. With a rousing shout and whipcrack, the coach lurched ahead, trace chains jingling, iron tires grinding the dirt, wood and leather creaking a mournful protest into the wan misty morning air. The people of Watertown watched in morose silence, an apathetic hand raised here and there, their ominous attitude consigning the four on the stage to an early tortured death at Comanche hands before sundown.

From this cheerless start, the stagecoach hauled out and unreeled its dust cloud northward across the undulating prairie land, a brown and yellow terrain, marked with frosty green sage, bleached bunch-grass and reddish upthrusts of rock, the Colladeen winding fog-shrouded below the road-bed, screened at intervals by willows and cottonwoods.

Graphic accounts of Indian atrocities to the west had been rife in Watertown, and everybody said Cadnac was moving toward Selbro's and the Narrows next. Nester communities, scattered and unorganized, were ideal objectives for the Comanches.

The sun ascended over the Granadas in the east, its redness paling to gold, and the mists thinned and dissipated above the river as the morning grew bright and hot. Trechock kept the horses at a good steady gait, manipulating the six reins with a touch of genius, and old Hank Kurner's deep-sunken eyes scoured the landscape with eternal vigilance.

"Do you think they'll come, Dave?" asked Alma Caulfield.

"No tellin', Alma. If we get across the Broadlands to Selbro's, we ought to be safe. The cavalry's supposed to be comin' out of Stilwell to protect Freeland and vicinity."

"What if the Indians get to us first?"

"We'll fight 'em off," Dave Myatt said simply. "On a good road like this, a stage can outrun horses, or so they claim. With Trey on the ribbons, I'm sure we can run away from any Comanches that come up."

"I'm not afraid—with you here," Alma said, and pointed to the revolvers that had belonged to Krage and Durkett. "I can handle some of those."

"Six-guns aren't much good—unless they get up real close."

"Well, you and Hank have rifles."

"That's right," Dave said. "They won't be gettin' up close."

When they stopped for water and a breathing spell, Dave asked Trechock why he was so hell-bent on going through to Freeland, and Trey smiled soberly. "Got to keep my schedule, that's all."

"You're way ahead on this run," Dave pointed out.

"All the better, boy."

"There's somethin' else, Trey. Or is it a company secret?"

Trechock laughed huskily. "Maybe I promised to deliver you to a young buckaroo in the Freeland jail, Dave. Maybe I wanted your guns along in case Cadnac catches up with us. Maybe I'm just hungry for excitement. I got all kinds of answers, kid. You got any more questions?"

"Go to hell," Dave Myatt said with a grin.

They were on the Broadlands then, and they looked

smooth and level, stretching mile on barren mile like a vast amber-brown blanket. But in the coach, at the rate Trechock was going, those slight waving undulations felt anything but easy and gentle.

Dave took Cub Goelet's gun and the extra ammunition out of his saddlebags, tucking the revolver under his waistband. Cubby was dead, and Dave had an idea that Mike Topliff had put him under. He thought of all the others who had died, directly or indirectly, on account of Jason and Wendell. There was Cleve, first of all, followed by Michael and Eileen Topliff. Then more recently the Chief himself, Allenby and those Cross-C riders in the Granadas, Pike Morehouse in Freeland, Durkett and Krage in Red Butte. And in the past, many more lives could be charged against Jason and Wendell Caulfield. Those two would have to die before the killing ceased, the two who merited death more than anybody else in the valley. He and Mike were going to attend to that.

As the forenoon burned away in the rising heat, Dave Myatt realized that some insistent worry he couldn't quite identify was nagging relentlessly at him, irritating his mind and fretting his nerves. It was not the Indians, although he had a premonition of their coming. It had something to do with Mike Topliff. Jason, Wendell and their gunmen might have turned back to Freeland after they got Allenby, knowing that Dave had far outdistanced them. All at once the full impact struck him with chilling numbing force. From that point on the rapid progress of the stage seemed deathly slow to Dave Myatt.

Delgado's station was deserted in the center of the Broadlands, they found, rolling in under the towering noon-tide sun. The people, horses and livestock were all gone before the threat of Cadnac's advance. It was an ill omen, for Delgado was not a man who fled easily and without reason. Fortunately they had packed some lunch from Watertown, and they ate under the ramada of the adobe depot, while the horses fed and rested in the stable shade.

When they were ready to travel on, Dave Myatt drifted aside with Trechock, and asked, "Did you hear anythin' about the Caulfield posse comin' back to the Fork?"

Trechock nodded glumly. "I heard they was headin' home, Dave."

"That jail won't hold Mike long, with Jay and Wendell in town."

"That's what I figured," Trechock said. "That's why I'm killin' these horses."

"They'll tear that jailhouse down to get Mike. They'll rip the whole town apart, if they have to," Dave said miserably.

"I didn't want to worry you any more'n I had to, Dave," said Trechock. "But now you know. With any luck we'll get in ahead of 'em though. And maybe the army's there now. Most likely Ackeret and Norm'll hide Mike somewhere else anyway."

"We can't depend on that, Trey. We've got to do it ourselves."

"We'll get there," Trechock promised grimly, "as fast as anythin' on four wheels ever could. I don't abuse horses, as a rule, but I'm rawhidin' 'em today, Dave."

"Pour it on, Trey," said Dave Myatt, with a wry solemn smile. "The horses wouldn't mind if they knew you was doin' it for a boy like Mike Topliff."

Along toward mid-afternoon, it looked as if they were going to make Selbro's Ford without any difficulty, and then a hoarse shout from on top brought Dave Myatt forward in the seat. Off in the southwest a dust cloud unfurled in their direction. Alma Caulfield leaned forward beside him, her dark eyes following his squinting brown gaze, her hand on his forearm, feeling the muscles tense rigidly beneath her fingers.

"Comanches, Dave?" she breathed.

"Could be, Alma. I don't know." About thirty of them, he was thinking. Still pretty well back, but it's a long stretch yet to Selbro's. They would have to come up now, when all we want to do is get into Freeland in time to save Mike. He was simply annoyed and exasperated, until he recalled Alma's presence and certain ways Cadnac's braves had with white women. Then he was furious at himself and Trechock for permitting the girl to come with them at all. Estimating angles and distances, he calculated that the Indians would have to come in behind the coach, and that way they should be able to beat them off, stay out in front of the Comanches—unless a stage horse went down, or a wheel came off, or something.

The splitting report of Trechock's bullwhip came cutting back through the racing hammer of hoofs, the mournful creak

of wooden joints and leather braces, the retching groan of axles and the whirring clatter of wheels. The Concord hurtled on with increased speed, the dust storming up around it and swirling into the sunshine. Back on their left rear flank that saffron cloud was growing constantly, spiralling closer to the dazzling sheen of the river, the smoking ribbon of the road.

The Mulqueen homestead, reduced to charred wreckage and smoldering ashes beside the highway, indicated that another party of Cadnac's warriors had passed this way. With a hollow sinking sensation, Dave Myatt acknowledged reluctantly that Selbro's could be destroyed too, the redskins rampaging on into the northeast to make a shambles of the Narrows. Glimpsing blackened distorted figures sprawled in the Mulqueen yard, the scalpless heads raw and bloody, Dave leaned forward to block Alma's view. But the girl had already seen them, and covered her drawn face with tense quivering hands.

Dave Myatt thought quickly, If we run into that bunch ahead, we'll end up the same way. If they hit us front and back both, we'll last about as long as snowflakes in the burning pit. He was adjusting the lanyard of his hat firmly under the strong clean line of his chin, checking the Henry and the two Colts, placing the other six-guns on the seat beside Alma Caulfield. He leaned out the righthand door, craning his neck to see Trechock on the box, and Trey yelled down into the rushing, dirt-laden air, "Get up on deck before it starts, Dave!"

Dave Myatt nodded and signaled agreement. He would have to be on top to make his firing most effective. He'd have to leave Alma alone down here. It was the only way. Stumbling back into the seat, he explained the necessity to her. Alma nodded calmly.

"I'll be all right, Dave."

"Keep down low and watch the sides," he told her. "Don't try to hang out and fire back at them. We'll take care of the rear from on top."

"I'm not afraid. Not too afraid to fight anyway."

"You're a fine brave girl." Dave Myatt spilled a handful of extra shells into the pocket of her soft gray shirt. "Probably won't need them, but...be sure and save one of them, Alma."

"I will, Dave, I know," she said, and her clear lovely face

had the calm rapt look of a young bride whispering the wedding vows. The bullets hung cold, heavy, deadly, against the firm rise of her breast, but Alma Caulfield smiled serenely at the solemn lean-faced boy by her side. "We aren't going to lie here, Dave. We have too much to live for."

He crouched forward to peer into the southwest. That yellow dust pall was appreciably nearer now, almost due west on the far bank of the Colladeen. Close enough to pick out individual ponies and riders in the front ranks, to send that freezing flicker up his backbone and contract his brown scalp with a tight crawling sensation.

They were fording the stream, splashing brightly through the mirrored sunlight of the shallows, the spray curving up in thin brilliant sheets. They were fleeting through the willows into the open, bearing down on the red-dirt road, screaming savagely as they came. The Comanches were naked to the loins, hideously daubed with colored clay, bare-backed on their swift wiry ponies. They had killed and tortured and burned, pillaged and plundered the western Colladeen, and they were mad with the lust for more of it. They would attack with total disregard for their own safety, with the fearless reckless fury of men drunk on blood, and no matter how many dropped the rest would come howling on. They had rifles, and Dave hoped they were old single-shots but feared otherwise. At one time it had been rumored that Jason and Wendell Caulfield were selling Henry repeaters to Cadnac's tribe. They had bows and lances, and if they got in close enough there would be knives and hatchets.

It was time to get aloft. Dave Myatt placed his hands on the girl's firmly rounded shoulders and drew her close. Her arms slid around him and locked hard, as their mouths met for a moment, and her dark eyes stayed open, wide and deep-lighted.

"We'll beat them, Alma," he said.

Dave went to the left door and hollered up into the breeze, reaching his Henry and the extra shell belt up to Hank Kurner. Climbing outside then, he caught hold of the iron rail that rimmed the deck, hauling and swinging his lithe limber body up onto the lurching topside. Old Hank crouched sidewise on the seat, his gray beard blowing as he handed the carbine and belt back, and took up his own big-bored Sharps fifty-eight.

"Give 'em hell!" growled Hank Kurner.

Dave Myatt grinned at him and turned to stretch out on the jouncing roof of the coach. There were Wells-Fargo express shipments lashed to the top, and luggage in the rear boot. Stretched on his stomach, spreading his legs to hook his toes into the baggage straps, Dave knew that he was bound to take a beating on that deck, the way Trechock was rawhiding those horses. He suddenly realized how thankful he was, how lucky, to have caught the stage in Red Butte. With only old Hank and the girl as defenders, the coach wouldn't have had a single solitary chance in the world of getting through, in spite of Trechock's incomparable driving skill.

The dust cloud was due south now, in the roadway directly behind the Concord, coming up fast as a summer storm. Dave could see muscled coppery torsos low on the galloping ponies, and fiendish painted faces snarling into the haze. The dry splintering sound of shots came to him, with the hot searing breath of bullets along the deck. If they thought the coach was empty below, they'd concentrate on the topside, and Alma'd have a good chance of escaping unhit. The thunder of Hank Kurner's buffalo gun deafened Dave, and he smiled thinly as a pinto horse and red-skinned rider went cart-wheeling crazily, end over end, in the flying sand. The old man could still knock them down with that cannon, as he had proved last evening on the road out of Red Butte.

Dave Myatt drew a careful bead on the foremost horseman and squeezed off, the butt slamming his shoulder and driving his elbows into the wood. That brave went over backward and hung head down, his pony veering off at a tangent across the sun-scorched plain. The others came on all the harder, yelping and baying like a wolf pack, and the heat-shimmering air was filled with burning lead and zinging feathered shafts. Behind Dave, old Hank's fifty-eight bellowed and boomed with its deep-throated roar.

Dave was firing swiftly and steadily now, triggering and levering with practiced ease and precision. Now and then, a Comanches went down, plunging, bouncing, sliding in the stormy dust. Silver streaks appeared on the iron rail and wood-splinters flew, stinging Dave's sweaty face and piercing his hat. An arrowhead nailed his left shirt sleeve to the timbered top. Wrenching his arm free, leaving half the sleeve

imbedded under the flint, Dave threw his last shot back at them, cursing as he missed. Reloading, Dave wondered why old Hank had ceased firing for the last few minutes. When the chamber was full, he squirmed around to look.

Hank Kurner was sitting twisted on the box, head bowed and hat hanging by its greasy thong, long gray hair and beard streaming in the wind, staring down at the wooden shaft protruding from his chest, clutching it with coarse-veined hands that turned instantly crimson. As the old man writhed around to the front, Dave saw the head of the arrow sticking out between his shoulder blades. With an angry disgusted mutter, a final convulsive shudder, Hank Kurner reared up and toppled over the side, still clasping that feathered shaft.

Dave Myatt hoped he was dead when he hit the ground, dead before those murderous madmen stopped briefly to mutilate him and tear off that long-haired gray scalp. Firing with rage and hate then, Dave dropped one buck across the old man's body, and sent another crawling away like a broken-backed, red-skinned animal. Dry lips snarled back on his teeth. Dave went on hammering lead into that horde, exulting over every body that struck the earth, firing until the Henry barrel was red-hot, and the Comanches were breaking back a bit, scattering and lagging as their numbers diminished.

Trechock, standing wide and crouched in the boot, was pouring his silver-ferruled whip over the red-mouthed, white-lathered straining horses, and the coach was rocketing wildly along the sun-blistered prairie, bouncing and swaying on the leather thoroughbraces, jolting as the floorboards crashed the bolster, the wheels smashed down into the bar-pits, and the smoking-hot axles screeched in tortured lament. The baggage by Dave Myatt's cheek was a giant pin-cushion now, studded with long arrow shafts, and the rear end of the coach must have been decorated in similar fashion. There were deep furrows raked in the wood, jagged splinters torn up and scattered about him, and Dave marveled that he had not been hit—yet.

Reloading again, Dave ached from collarbone to toes. His legs were cramped agonizingly, the kneecaps were raw and numb like his elbows, his ribs and hips were bruised and sore. That deck was a griddle on which the sun cooked him. Sweat varnished his bronze face, smarting in his slitted brown eyes, salting his dry mouth, coursing down throat and chest,



soaking his clothes. The stench of powder was strong and bitter in his nostrils, and weariness was a deep stabbing pain between his shoulders, in the small of his back. The violent motion of the coach was breaking him slowly to pieces.

The Comanches were coming up again, and Dave knew with dismal certainty that the stage horses were too tired to outrun the fleet Indian ponies for any length of time. Where the hell is Selbro's? he thought. We should be getting in there soon. But maybe there's nothing left of the Ford, except burnt houses and scalped corpses. Perhaps the Indians are drinking John Selbro's whiskey and waiting for us there. Dave set his teeth and started shooting once more, blasting grimly away at them, knocking down a horse here, blowing off a shrieking rider there, while Comanche bullets and arrows searched the deck for his roasted, battered flesh, and the wood flailed him without mercy.

Alma Caulfield was firing from below now, and he did not like that, for it meant the enemy would begin drilling their shots into the body of the coach. Still, the unexpected fire from the carriage seemed to disconcert and discourage the attackers; they were faltering, falling behind a bit.

Except for one big buck on a mottled gray mustang, who hurtled out in front of the others, and bore down single-handed and screaming insanely on the Concord. Dave Myatt leveled at him and missed, tried again and failed. This warrior must make powerful medicine, for his life appeared to be a charmed one; he was unhittable, impervious to bullets. Dave triggered once more, the hammer clicked on an empty cartridge case, and the big painted brave came swooping in with hurricane speed and ferocity.

Panic winged up in Dave Myatt, fluttering coldly through him as he twisted onto his left side and reached down for the Colt forty-four on his right thigh. But there was another six-gun blast from below, and Dave could visualize that slim golden-brown hand holding one of the heavy guns taken from Krage and Durkett. And Alma's aim was true. The huge Comanche pitched from the horse's back headlong and fell howling into the weltering red dirt.

The rest had dropped well back and out of range, their dead and wounded scattered for miles along the trail.

Dave Myatt sat up on the deck with a great panting sigh, working his numbed aching limbs and joints, loading the

carbine—for the last time, he hoped. The Comanches were fading into the background, the stage pulling steadily away from them. Dave crawled to the box and clambered stiffly onto the seat at Trechock's side.

"Selbro's ahead," Trechock said quietly. "We oughta be all right now, boy." His rough craggy face was dirt-plastered and dripping, his grin crooked from the chew that bulged one leathery cheek.

"You sure teamed them horses, Trey," said Dave Myatt, his own features powder-blackened and shining with sweat.

"That was pretty fair shootin' you done, Dave," said Trechock. "Real soldier shootin', my old man used to say."

Dave leaned out and looked down, relieved to see Alma's dark head at the window, her lovely face upturned, flushed and smiling, streaked with grime. He saluted her gravely, and the girl waved back at him.

Selbro's Ford was before them at the junction of the Shoshone with the Colladeen, the two streams glittering beyond the old crumbling stockade of the outpost, and blue-uniformed troopers were riding out to meet the stagecoach.

"The army never looked any better," Trechock said, reining up as a boyish-faced lieutenant came abreast of them and halted the column.

"You got through all right?" inquired the young officer.

"Lost one man—a good man," Trechock told him. "There's some Comanches back there. We left a few of 'em for you."

"Did you see another bunch?" asked Dave Myatt.

The lieutenant nodded crisply. "They were striking for the Narrows when we engaged them. They'll never strike anywhere again."

"Things peaceful in Freeland?" asked Trechock casually.

"Seemed to be yesterday." He saluted smartly, raised a gauntleted hand, and the blue column cantered on past the coach, the cavalymen lean-jawed and grim-mouthed, erect in their sweated saddles, lifting large brown hands in greeting as they filed by, showing a quick sharpened interest and flashing a few smiles when they saw the girl in the Concord, and observed the bristling shafts at the rear end, the starred bulletholes.

Trechock drove on through the gate and pulled up in front of John Selbro's store, the frothed and beaten horses sagging exhausted in the traces. Barefooted Mexican boys ran

out to slake the hot axles with grease, while the hostlers and freight-handlers, the settlers of the Ford, all swarmed around the bullet-riddled, arrow-scarred coach, exclaiming and gesticulating.

Dave Myatt jumped down to open the door and lift Alma out in his arms, while Trechock descended with more dignity. John Selbro, tall and distinguished with his high silvery head and white mustache, stood in his doorway smoking a clay pipe.

"Good God, a woman!" he said softly. "Why, it's Alma Caulfield. Bring the young lady inside, boys."

Dave and Alma walked into the cool dimness of the trading post, and Selbro looked from Trechock to the drooping team. "You pretty near killed them horses, Trey."

"Had to, John," said Trechock. "And we've got to go on, as soon as they hitch up a new team."

"They get old Hank?"

Trechock nodded slowly. "His arrow finally caught up with him, John."

"Isn't that Dave Myatt with you?" inquired Selbro.

"That's him, and he just shot the shit outa thirty or more Comanches back there. Dave's got a job for life—if he wants it."

Selbro wagged his white head. "The way they're talkin' in Freeland, the boy hasn't got long to live."

"He'll live," Trechock said with soft conviction. "But there's some others that'll be cashin' in their chips right soon, I reckon. Scum that deserve to die."

John Selbro smiled. "Well, I hope it's the ones I've got in mind, Trey."

## Fourteen

The Caulfield posse, on its way back from the Granadas to Freeland, stopped to scour the Narrows, both Jason and Wendell in a terrible towering rage, which increased when they learned that Pike Morehouse had been shot to death by

Mike Topliff. The Goelets claimed that Mike had also killed their son Cub, and was being held prisoner in the Freeland jailhouse.

The Caulfields promptly gave the homesteaders twenty-four hours to clear out of the Strip. Jason brutally informed the Allenbys that their boy was dead and buried in the mountains. Wendell, his brilliant blue eyes playing lecherously over the figure of Sally, told the Myatts that Dave was dead, too. Some of the nesters protested that there was nowhere to go, with Cadnac's Comanches terrorizing the countryside. Wendell Caulfield threw back his curly head and laughed merrily at that.

"Take your choice then," he said. "Stay here and face us, or move out and meet the Indians. It's entirely up to you folks."

The Caulfields rode on toward the Fork, punishing their jaded mounts in a vengeful eagerness to get to Mike Topliff. They were an even dozen now. Hagar, Durkett and Krage had been dispatched to Red Butte, and five men had been killed on the trail. They were the losers thus far, having accounted for only Allenby, but Topliff and Dave Myatt were going to die soon, to even the score somewhat.

In Freeland, quenching a long thirst at the Prairie Queen bar, they began to believe that the Comanche uprising was factual and serious, but it failed to deter them in any way from their first objective. After several quick drinks they swaggered directly across the street and into the jailhouse, ignoring the deputies in the outer room, finding Sheriff Ackeret with Norman Caulfield in the office. Bearded, whipped thin and tough, ragged and filthy from the trail, each man packing two guns, they were a vicious-looking outfit.

"You're back in time to fight the Indians, boys," Norm said with an attempt at joviality.

They neither noticed nor answered their big half-brother. Jason stood lanky and spare, sour-faced and remorseless, his pale eyes staring and cold on the sheriff. "You know what we want, Ackeret." The lawman sat silent and expressionless behind his desk.

With an impatient oath, Wendell strode over and ripped open the door leading into the cell-blocks at the rear. They were empty. Whirling back into the office, Wendell stood

over the sheriff, thumbs in belt, elbows extended wide and arrogant. "Where is he, Ackeret?"

"You mean Mike Topliff?"

"You know goddamn well we do!"

"He broke out," Ackeret said coolly.

Wendell pounded a hard clenched hand on the desk. "Broke out, nothing! You turned him loose, Ackeret!"

"All right, then—I turned him loose. There was nothin' to hold him on. Fifty men saw Morehouse force the fight."

Wendell moved tigerlike toward the sheriff, but Jason shouldered into him, elbowed him back. "Never mind, Wendell, never mind. We won't have much trouble gettin' Topliff now." He turned to the two men at the desk. "I don't know what kind of a game you're playin'—yet, Ack. But you'd better be careful, you and Norm both. You'd better tread awful easy."

"There's a marshal comin' here," Ackeret said. "I advise you to leave Topliff alone—and Myatt likewise."

"What the hell you go cryin' for a marshal for?" demanded Wendell.

"I didn't."

Norm Caulfield straightened in his chair. "I sent for him, boys."

"Any particular reason?" asked Jason.

"Yes—to stop all this fightin' and killin', Jay."

Wendell laughed mockingly. "It'll take more than one marshal to do that, brother!"

"All right, Wendell, let's get out of here," Jason said. "A lot can happen while they sit here waitin' for their marshal."

The two brothers headed for the door, the Cross-C gunhands filing after them. They paused outside in the waning afternoon light, rolling smokes, kicking at the boardwalk and watching the shadows lengthen in the familiar street. It was cool there under the alders.

"What do we do now?" asked Wendell impatiently.

"There's plenty of time," Jason said patiently. "We all need to get shaved and cleaned up, change our clothes, get a few more drinks and a good square meal." He gestured to the others. "You boys take a break and a rest, but be around here and keep your eyes and ears open. Somebody'll spill where Topliff is, and maybe Myatt's with him this time. We'll put up at the Vermilion House. If you need any money, see me in the hotel in half an hour. I'm goin' to the bank now."

Jason departed at once, the other riders split into smaller groups and straggled off toward the saloons, and Wendell drifted down the arcade toward a barbershop. The street was unduly crowded, tension and excitement prevailing everywhere, talk of the Indian outbreak filling the air, fantastic rumors spreading like wildfire. Wendell Caulfield smiled with superior scorn as fragments of the gossip floated to his ears.

Cadnac had swept the western border of the Colladeen, leveled it to the ground. He had slaughtered a wagon-train in the Needles, massacred everybody in Hillsboro and Watertown, whipped a full company of regulars from Fort Stilwell. The Comanches had burned Selbro's Ford, and were riding on toward the Narrows and Freeland. They had captured the stagecoach and tortured to death all occupants. The army and the Indians were fighting a great pitched battle out beyond the Shoshone. These and a hundred other stories, with all the gruesome harrowing details, were flying from tongue to tongue as Wendell strolled the plank walk, a striking rakish figure even in his present unshaven and trailworn state.

These people had a changed attitude toward the Caulfields, Wendell discerned, a certain coolness, indifference, almost open dislike and disdain. The servility that once had amused him was gone. There was no more bowing and scraping. Perhaps they were too much engrossed in the Indian troubles, but Wendell thought it went deeper than that. The tide was turning against Jason and himself, the power of the Caulfields lessening with the loss of the Chief, Pike Morehouse, Landon, Eakins and the others. The house of Caulfield was in decline.

Dave Myatt and Mike Topliff were responsible for this, he thought, hatred welling up as acrid as lye in him, and only their lives would pay for it. Wendell was filled with a terrible craving to get at them, bring those two to bay under his guns, blast them to pieces.

The whole manhunt had been a fiasco, a boring, galling waste of time to Wendell. They had chased three kids into the mountains, whipped an old man, threatened a group of scared nester families and that was about all. Phil Allenby had been practically dead when they finally took him. There wasn't much satisfaction in finishing a man that far gone, but

in his baffled rage Wendell had emptied a six-gun into the crippled, helpless boy, behind those two boulders on the rimrock over that talus slope in the Granadas. It was one of the things Wendell wasn't too proud of, he decided.

Angered now as people turned away from him, or pretended not to see him, Wendell swaggered with even more arrogance, keeping to the center of the slatted walk and making other men turn out, thrusting at them with strong shoulders and elbows when they were slow about it. Sullenness grew and smoldered in his wake. Wendell strutted on, heedless and overbearing and contemptuous, hoping to meet somebody with guts enough to stand up and fight him.

The lust for violent action and excitement boiled in his blood, and Wendell Caulfield knew he must find some outlet for it tonight, either in a fight or a woman. Desire mounted in him as his mind went back to that nester girl, Sally Myatt, with her rich gleaming chestnut hair and starry blue eyes, the wistful sweetness of her face, the full blooming curves of her splendid young body. He had to have her—or some female. Perhaps he'd ride back to the Narrows tonight. Mike Topliff might be hanging around there—Mike was attentive to Sally—and Wendell's visit might serve a double purpose. He had to do either that or start some kind of a brawl in town, or get drunk and go to the Palace Dance Hall as a last resort. That perky brazen Dallas girl wasn't too bad, in her own category and class.

After a shave and haircut, Wendell went on to the Vermilion House, where he and Jason maintained a room the year around. When he was almost there, a stocky drunken cowhand in a purple shirt blundered into him, staggering off as Wendell gave him hip, shoulder and elbow. The man came around in a weaving turn and cursed thickly, his two companions striving to drag him away.

Smiling with sheer cruel joy, Wendell Caulfield strode and swung, smashing the drunk squarely in the face, knocking him loose from the other two, back against the wall of the Acme Restaurant. Purple Shirt bounded forward on splayed wobbling legs, spitting blood and curses. Wendell's left hand caught his throat, the right whipping wickedly into that stunned drunken face. Blood spattered and the man went limp. Laughing, Wendell flung him headfirst into the alley. Purple Shirt rolled slackly and lay still, bleeding and sobbing against

the adobe. Hands poised on hips, Wendell eyed the other two cowhands.

"You boys want to get into this and play some?" he drawled.

Well aware of Wendell's reputation with his guns, they shook their heads sullenly and went to revive their fallen comrade. Wendell laughed and walked on, a slender whip-lash figure splitting the crowd, smiling insolently as men turned away, grumbling and shaking their heads. Once a scene like that would have brought approval and adulation in Freeland. Now it aroused resentment, anger and disgust. But the frigging sheep don't dare to show it too plain, or make any move, Wendell thought. And they never will as long as I'm on my feet with these two guns at my sides.

In the Vermilion he bought a bottle of whiskey, a handful of cigars, and ordered a tub of hot water sent up to the room. It would be a relief to get out of these soiled tattered clothes and into that tub. Wendell felt somewhat better since slugging that drunken fool, but he required something more satisfying than that. A girl like Sally, or a battle against real opponents like her brother Dave and Mike. . . .

Shaved, scrubbed clean, immaculate in new outfits, the Caulfield brothers dined bountifully in the hotel, and afterward sat at ease in the lobby, smoking their long expensive cigars. Jason's garb was dark and somber as usual, in marked contrast to Wendell's scarlet shirt, yellow scarf, handsome cord jacket of dark wine color and fine California trousers of tan plaid.

"Any plans for tonight, Wendell?" inquired Jason.

"Nothin' definite, Jay. Thought I'd look for a little fun later."

"Better stick around here. I'm expectin' a message from Red Butte." Jason rose to leave, a tall gloomy impassive figure in black broadcloth.

"I'll be around," Wendell said carelessly.

"Don't go lookin' for trouble, until the two bastards we want show up."

"You know me, Jay."

"That's just it," Jason said grimly. "And I know you feel like tearin' this town down tonight. But don't do it, Wendell."

"All right, I'll save my powder for Myatt and Topliff."



"Don't drink too much either. The other boys are already drunker than goats."

"Damn it all, I'm not a kid!" Wendell said with a touch of temper.

"We were in the mountains quite a while," Jason said mildly. "It's liable to throw a man off balance a little. I'll be back pretty soon."

An hour later Jason was still absent, and Wendell was too restless and full of sap to loaf about any longer. He resolved to get a horse from Hufnail's, ride out to the Narrows and see what he could do about Sally Myatt. From the gallery of the hotel, he saw that the night sky was blackly overcast. The look and feel of a coming storm was in the air. Main Street was still swarming, the saloons and gambling joints were packed and dance music was rising with a thin false pretense of gayety from the Palace. He wondered absently about Sheriff Ackeret and Norman. They acted like men playing a strong pat hand, holding all the cards they needed. They had never been like that before.

Jason Caulfield climbed the steps to the veranda, his gaunt face bleak as bone. "I got word through from Red Butte," he said. "Krage and Durkett are dead down there. Monte Hagar was shot in the shoulder and whipped half to death with his own quirt—*by Dave Myatt!*"

"Hellfire!" said Wendell. "Those two goddamn nester kids are shootin' Cross-C to pieces, Jay, ruinin' the whole outfit."

"Our turn's comin'," Jason said. "This rider just got in from Selbro's Ford. The stage is comin' through tonight. Alma's on it—and Dave Myatt is with her."

"That's good!" Wendell said, his face lighting with that satanic smile. "Just what we want, just perfect, cut to order."

"One thing more," Jason went on with icy calm. "Ackeret and Norm know that we killed Cleve. Topliff found his skeleton in that mine."

"All right, they know it," Wendell said, his blue eyes flaming. "So they have to die, too."

Mike Topliff, hidden in a front room in the Colladeen Hotel, had seen the Caulfield crew when it came in that afternoon, only twelve of them left together. Dave and Al must have downed five of them, he thought. They don't look as if the

hunt had been much of a success. Between midnight and morning, Ackeret had smuggled Mike unseen into this room, registered under a fictitious name. Nobody but the sheriff knew he was there.

From the window he had watched the Cross-C riders leave their horses at Huffnail's, stop in the Queen for drinks, cross to the jailhouse, emerge shortly and scatter into the crowd. Mike had observed Jason going to the bank, Wendell to the barber's, and his eyes had blazed green and narrow when Wendell smashed that drunken purple-shirted cowpoke. Now, in the night with a storm coming up, Mike saw the Caulfield brothers on the porch of the Vermilion House, directly opposite his window. It was too bad the code forbade shooting them down from here, he mused, and then he scoffed at the notion, aware that he could never have done it that way, regardless of any code. Even though they fully deserved such a fate, and nothing better.

The Caulfields went back into the Vermilion lobby, and Mike Topliff settled back in his chair to fashion a cigarette. He hoped Trechock had relayed his message to Dave Myatt, and would be bringing Dave back on his return trip north. Of course, with the Comanches on the loose, it wasn't likely that the stage would come through for some time. Still, you never could tell. Trechock would put a six-horse team through the bottom-most pit of hell, and Dave would risk anything in his anxiety to get back and settle with the Caulfields, before they could put the Narrows to the torch.

Mike hoped the climax would come before that U. S. marshal arrived. An issue like this, with hate, bloodshed and death on both sides, was too strong and deep to determine with anything but guns. Jason and Wendell had murdered Mike's father and mother, in the final analysis, and Mike Topliff would never rest until they were dead—or he died himself in the effort to kill them. It was as simple and exclusive as that, and Mike meant to close the book on it this night or on the morrow.

Thunder muttered and rumbled in the distant mountains, and a gusty wind raised dust in the street, swaying and shredding the fretwork of lamplight-and-shadow, rattling windows and doors, swinging signs and shutters, sending men inside or running to mount their horses and wagons. A wind-blown shout floated up to the dark open sill behind

which Mike was seated, "The stage is comin' in tonight, Homer!"

And Homer's yelling response, "I ain't waitin', Johnny. My wife's tarnal scared of thunderstorms. I'm gettin' on home."

Lightning shattered the black sky with long forked flashes, greenish-white and blue-white, traced jaggedly from the Rentana Range to the Granadas. Thunder toppled and crashed from the heights, booming and reverberating over the wind-swept prairies, volleying and echoing in the far-flung mountain ram-parts. The rain came in a sudden torrential downpour, wind-whipped and savage in its drenching onslaught. Mike pulled back from the harsh spatter of it, standing up and watching the street below turn into a flooded expanse of mud and water, cleared almost instantly of people and the majority of horses and buckboards.

The lightning went on flashing, splintering the heavens with vivid violet-hued flares, illuminating the rain-washed street with intense blinding light, while thunder tumbled and rolled among the peaks, its deafening staggered roar seeming to rock the entire earth. The rain continued with unabated fury and density, slanting down in gust-torn sheets, lashing and scourging the land and buildings, a raging vicious rain in the storm-sundered night. It went on and on, awesome in its tremendous wrath and might, as if all the elements conspired and joined forces toward the destruction of mankind and the man-made world.

It took perhaps half an hour for the first terrific assault to wear itself out and diminish gradually, the lightning fading into more normal outbreaks, the thunder no longer shaking the universe, the rain slowing to an even downpour, the wind subsiding to a moderate gale. Still a rough evening out, but it seemed calm and peaceful after that initial tumult.

Mike Topliff curled up another cigarette and poured himself a drink of whiskey. He had been idle a long while, and inactivity was beginning to irk and wear on him. He had been more patient in the past few days than he ever thought it was possible for him to be, but his patience was fretted thin and taut at last. He paced the unlighted room, keeping an eye on the Vermilion House across the rain-soaked street.

It was late and still storming when the Caulfield brothers finally appeared, wearing slickers, loitering on the porch for a

space. The drenched and dripping street was empty, except for the forlorn wet horses left at the hitch-racks by drunken owners, but the drinking and gambling places roared with gaudy life, and music and laughter dinned stridently from the Palace. Excited by the threat of an Indian attack, men were in the mood for whiskey, games of chance or dancing. The nervous tension, heightened by the primitive fury of the storm, vented itself in the gay hilarity and riotous revelry, so often prevalent in times of duress, on the eve of disaster.

When Jason and Wendell left the Vermilion veranda, Mike Topliff strapped on his gun-belt and tied the holster-bottoms to his lean muscled legs. It was time for him to move, and he was exceedingly grateful.

He saw the Caulfield brothers separate, Jason crossing toward the Prairie Queen, Wendell going along the opposite side and fading into the shadows of the darkened Wells-Fargo station, next to the jailhouse. Mike Topliff, having no slicker here, slipped into his buckskin jacket, slanted the hat on his blond head, and left the room.

Mike went down the back stairs, through the kitchen and out the back door into the slow rain. Making a wide careful circuit, he crossed far up the street in utter darkness, and ranged back to the rear of the jail, crept forward on the side farthest from the Wells-Fargo office, and took his stand at that front corner of the adobe.

If the stage was coming in, Dave Myatt might be on it—and somehow the Caulfields seemed to know this as well as Mike did. Unless they were just playing a hunch, or up to something else. They had agents all over the Colladeen, and one of them might have spotted Dave in the coach and reported it to the brothers. At any rate, Mike was going to watch those two, and if Dave didn't come in, he would call them himself, get this long-drawn war over, one way or another.

The idea brought a keen exultation to Mike Topliff, the reckless wildness in his nature brimming high, bright and shining as a drawn blade of the rarest steel. He had taken Pike Morehouse—and Cub Goelet in a different manner. He would take Wendell and Jason, alone if he had to. They'll go down, he thought with teeth on edge. Maybe I will too, but I'll take them with me. Even shot through and through, I'll live long enough to get these two Caulfields.

The jailhouse was set back from the street, shaded with alders, and from his corner Mike Topliff could watch both the stage depot next door and the cross-street area of the Palace and Prairie Queen. Wendell, he thought, was hidden in the jumble of baggage, stacked bales and boxes on the Wells-Fargo porch. Jason was on the opposite side, probably in the dark alley next to the saloon. They figured on catching Dave Myatt between them, but they didn't figure on Mike Topliff's presence. Their surprise attack was liable to backfire on them; at least it would be two against two—if Dave arrived.

The three men, keeping their separate vigils, had the street pretty much to themselves. Nobody else was stupid enough to be out in this drizzling cold dampness, Mike thought with a rueful smile. It was lonely, desolate and chilling there in the night, water spilling from his hat brim, wetting the buckskin jacket, his hands on his guns to keep them dry, the rain making melancholy music on stone, wood and gravel.

But there was enough fire inside Mike Topliff to keep him warm.

## Fifteen

That night storm caught the stagecoach on the open prairie between Selbro's and Freeland Fork, the wind and rain lashing it in a turbulent frenzy, lightning splitting the sky wide open, thunder cannonading mightily in the mountain ranges that rimmed the vast north-and-south trough of the Colladeen. Dave Myatt had unrolled the leather curtains, fastening them down to shut out the wind-driven rain, and it was fairly comfortable within the buffeted coach, except for the shocking lightning blasts that sent Alma cringing into his arms, the jarring thunderbolts that set the plain a-shudder under the sloshing wheels.

"A girl who fights Comanches," laughed Dave, "afraid of a little lightnin'."

"It's the only way I can get your arms around me—tonight," Alma said, laughing with him.

"Got a lot on my mind, I guess."

"For instance?" she teased, knowing full well but trying not to think about it, trying to be lighthearted and winsome.

"Well, I feel kind of guilty down here, snug and dry," Dave Myatt said, "with Trey and that poor hostler up there on top, right in the teeth of it."

"I know," Alma said. "I do too, Dave, but it wouldn't help them any if we were up there getting soaked, too."

"That's right, Alma. That's the sensible way to look at it."

"Oh, I'm very sensible—about some things."

They were silent for an interval, listening to the howling wind and slashing rain, wincing slightly at the blinding explosions of weird light, the stunning crash of thunderclaps.

"What are you going to do, after . . . ?" Alma asked then.

"I don't know. I can ride shotgun with Trey, he says. It's a pretty good job."

"Do you want to do that?"

"I thought I did. It was my ambition once. Now I'm not sure."

"What would you like to do most, Dave?"

He grinned reprovingly. "You know that answer—marry you, Alma."

She smiled happily and stroked the clean hard line of his jaw. "That can be arranged, Mister Myatt."

"Not so easy," he said. "There are complications."

"Easily cleared away, Dave."

"How, Alma?"

"Well, there's the Cross-C," Alma Caulfield murmured, feeling the muscle ridge his jawbone beneath her caressing fingers.

"Yes," he said rather harshly. "But we won't talk about that—now."

"Norman's too easygoing and lazy to run it," she persisted.

Dave Myatt shook his head firmly. "Never mind, Alma, please."

"I'm sorry. I guess women are more heartless than men—in certain ways."

"We'll see what happens in Freeland," he said, gentle-voiced again.

"Why don't you let the law handle it?" she pleaded.

"The law can't do it," said Dave Myatt. "It's up to Mike and me—if they haven't killed Mike."

The storm eased off well before the lights of Freeland came into view. A thin incessant rain was still falling, but the wind had died down, the thunder and lightning receded. Dave rolled up the wet curtains and snagged them, letting the sweet rain-washed air flow through the coach. He shouted up at the topside, "You aren't drowned or anythin', Trev?"

"Not quite," Trechock yelled back. "But it's goin' to take a whole lot of whiskey to equalize all the water I absorbed up here!"

The misty rain-blurred lights of Freeland glowed on the north now, and Dave and Alma stared at them in silence, wondering what awaited them there in town, conflicting emotions mingled in their breasts. "A strange homecoming, Dave," whispered the girl. "Happy and sad, sweet and bitter, full and empty, bright and dark." He nodded with grave understanding, experiencing what she had put into words.

They approached the bridge over the Fork, Bittersweet Creek joining the Colladeen, both streams swollen and turgid in the rain, choked with driftwood and debris from overflowed banks. The stage crossed slowly, the trampling clatter and booming rumble muted by the wetness of the timbers. Dave Myatt remembered that morning when he had listened to the noise of the coach on this same bridge, headed south then, with old Hank Kurner up on the box beside Trechock. The morning on which Chief Caulfield had died. It seemed years back, ages ago, and yet it was only a couple of weeks, at the most. Dave had lost track of the days and couldn't tell for sure.

Well, it would end back here where it had started, and that was fitting enough.

The horses swung the bend into Main Street, splashing and sloughing through fetlock-deep mud, and late as it was, the town was awake and alive, the hotels dim-lighted, the saloons and restaurants fully ablaze, music jangling from the Palace. The rain came harder now, drowning the sounds of the stagecoach, screening the amber lamplight, dulling the racketing noise from the places of pleasure. The street looked deserted as Trechock pulled into the Wells-Fargo station, rein-sawing the shining-wet, mud-slimed horses, their heads

hanging in fatigue from fighting the elements, slogging through muck and water.

Dave Myatt opened the door and stepped out on the depot side, reaching back to gather Alma Caulfield into his arms and lift her from the coach. He was still holding her, nudging the door closed with one shoulder, when her eyes widened and her lips parted in terror.

Wendell Caulfield had slid silently out of the blackness behind Dave, the side lamp of the stage etching his handsome archangel's face, the widow's peak of curly hair under his pushed-back hat, the fine nose with the flaring nostrils, the scornful curve of the mouth. Wendell had left his slicker on the porch. His right-hand gun was raised to strike at the back of Dave Myatt's head, since he couldn't shoot with Alma in Dave's arms.

The girl's scream went up, sharp and shrill into the rain. Trechock glanced down from his spread-legged stance in the boot, ripped the bullwhip out of its socket, and swung it with instant slashing speed. The long whiplash snaked hissing down and cracked like a rifle-shot, cutting Wendell's arm back and tearing the gun from his fingers, numbing that right hand and forearm to the elbow.

Dave Myatt set Alma down and spun swiftly about, as Wendell stumbled and twisted under the shocking bite of the whip, the gun splashing into a pool of water. Wendell recovered quickly, pressing the injured hand to his body, lunging lithely forward. But not at Dave Myatt. He wasn't even looking at Dave any more; his flashing eyes were fixed on his half-sister.

"You slut!" Wendell said with railing invective, as he rammed past Dave. "With him!" And he struck her back-handed across the face, a stinging savage smack with his left hand held rigidly straight. Alma gasped and recoiled, sinking back against the panels of the coach.

Dave Myatt's left hand caught Wendell's shoulder, knotting into the cord jacket, hauling Wendell back and around with wrenching force. As Wendell turned, Dave unleashed his right fist with killing fury and hatred, smashing Wendell full and solid in the mouth. The curly head jerked far back, snapping the neck to the extreme limit, and his hat skimmed off into the mud as Wendell went reeling backward, tripping and falling on the porch steps.



After him on the jump, Dave Myatt was waiting when Wendell got up slowly, waiting poised and ready. Dave struck again, pouring everything into the punch, landing with a sodden smash. Wendell fell clear back across the veranda, blundering into crates and bundles, crashing finally against the broad window. The glass shattered into jagged shards, cascaded in brilliant fragments, and Wendell Caulfield hung there on the wide sill, shaking his black curls, blowing blood and broken teeth from his gashed mouth. Dave Myatt stood before him under the board awning, balanced and waiting with quiet deadly intentness, his hands ready to strike or draw.

"Take him, Jason!" shouted Wendell pantingly. "Take him, you fool!"

Jason Caulfield had left the alley beside the Prairie Queen when the stage halted, stalking deliberately across the street toward it, a tall stark figure, the raincoat brushed back to clear his gun-handles. Mike Topliff had caught the wet shine of Jason's rubber slicker, and moved out from the jailhouse and the dripping alders, angling to meet this brother in mid-street. They were converging in the rain when that whip cracked and the subsequent blows rang out. Jason, intent on skirting the rear of the coach, was unaware of Mike Topliff's approach from his left side until Mike called clearly, "This way, murderer!"

Water sprayed up from Jason's boots as he pivoted and stared through the slanting misty rain, cold and stoical, masking his surprise, the vague lamp-light touching the cruel predatory lines of his dour hawk face, the queer white fire of his pale eyes.

"So?" Jason said, flat and emotionless. "We won't have to hunt you down after all, Topliff."

"No more huntin', Jason," said Mike Topliff evenly. "Not for me or anybody. This is where you get paid off, Jason. For my father and mother—and your brother Cleve."

Jason Caulfield's right arm crooked and swung with sharp assurance and speed, his wet raincoat glistening like oil in the dim light. His gun cleared and lifted fast, but Mike Topliff's right hand was a blurred flicker of matchless speed, glinting with steel, jetting flame from the hip, livid and lancing again and again with blended roaring blasts.

The crushing numbing impacts jolted Jason into a jerky-

legged backward stagger, his late shot spattering mud and water across Mike's legs. Jason's boots skidded in the greasy muck, sliding wide apart, and he sat down with a sudden awkward splash in a watery pool. Jason was still striving to get his gun up, and a final shot flung wet dirt against Mike's crouched knees. Mike threw down once more, the fire licking out toward Jason in a long orange spurt, the slug slamming him over, laying him flat on his back in the mire, bone-bleak face upturned to the slow rain.

On the Wells-Fargo porch, Dave Myatt was waiting for Wendell to make a move, and Wendell was still waiting for Jason to come and take Dave from behind, when the shooting broke out in the street beyond the stagecoach. The firing ceased and still they waited, Wendell's eyes flickering out past Dave's shoulder, widening as he saw Mike Topliff come around the Concord, narrowing again with raging disgust.

"Come on, Wendell," said Dave Myatt. "Looks like you won't be gettin' any help."

"My hand," Wendell moaned, blood streaming darkly from his swollen mouth. "I can't use my right hand. That whip ruined it."

"Your gun's on your left side," Dave said. "You're supposed to be just as good left-handed."

"No, no, that was braggin'. You've got to give me a chance right-handed, Dave."

"Maybe we'll just throw you in jail, Wendell."

"Look at that hand," Wendell Caulfield mumbled, holding out his bloody right hand, swearing and shaking his curly locks, anything but handsome and dashing now, a thoroughly beaten man.

Dave Myatt looked, in spite of himself, and Wendell's left hand streaked in that split-second. He *was* good with his left hand, quick as a striking snake. Flame burst searingly at Dave Myatt, as he switched into a sidewise stance and drew with fluid swiftness. The bullet hit like a hammer, turning him fully front again, his Colt coming cocked and lined, blazing and bucking in Dave's hand as he squeezed the shot off. It went home, dead center, doubling Wendell and lifting him back onto the glass-littered windowsill.

Wendell grunted, his left hand spouting loud fire into the floor-boards, and Dave Myatt gave him one more, the forty-four flaming like a blow torch. Wendell Caulfield reared

up on the impact, swiveled and dropped to his knees, falling loosely against the wall, his curly black head bowed on the ruined bloody sill.

Dave Myatt turned away and walked wearily down the damp gritty steps into the soft swishing rain, his left arm hanging useless from the heavy molten numbness of that shoulder, the gun swinging slackly from his right hand.

"You're hit, Dave," said Mike Topliff anxiously.

"Nothin' bad, Mike." Dave sheathed the gun, shook hands with Mike, and they went on toward the coach where Alma was standing with her face hidden against the great shoulder of Trechock.

"It's all over, Alma," said Dave.

"Dave, Dave," she sobbed, turning from Trechock and clinging to Dave, stiffening when she felt the warm wetness of his torn left sleeve. "You're hurt, Dave!"

"Let's get to the doctor," Mike Topliff said, "before we get trampled by the mob."

They saluted Trechock and moved away in the murmuring rainfall. From the Prairie Queen and the Palace, all the saloons, gambling halls, restaurants and hotels, people were pouring out into the damp darkness, floundering through the mud, surrounding the stage, clustering around the bodies of Jason and Wendell Caulfield.

Milling about the Concord, they were bombarding the tired thirsty Trechock with questions. "What happened here?" "Who killed them?" "Jason and Wendell both dead!" "Was it Topliff and Myatt?" "What the hell happened anyway?"

Trechock smiled gravely and squirted tobacco juice into a puddle. "Somethin' that should've happened a long time ago," he said. Then his rugged face scowled, and his voice rose angrily. "Get away from that stage, you buzzards! Clear out of here, before I unreel this bullwhip!"

Some of the people had been trying to cut the arrow shafts out of the battered coach for souvenirs, until Trechock routed and scattered them into the stormy night. Then Trechock wheeled to an innocent group of bystanders, to put a question of his own, "Where's the rest of the Cross-C tonight?"

"Fallin' down drunk and passed out cold," a man said. "Jason's gunslingers, that is—and just as well for them. Norm's with Ackeret and the main part of Cross-C is behind

them, half of 'em deputized till this blows over. Myatt and Topliff are safe as a church."

"Quite a pair of buckaroos, them two," said Trechock. "I aim to drink a small toast to 'em—about a quart of straight whiskey."

At Doc Sargent's, Alma and Mike waited while the doctor attended to Dave's wound. Wendell's bullet had torn cleanly through the upper outer part of Dave's left arm at the shoulder. It was excruciatingly painful, after the numbness and shock passed, but the bones hadn't been touched, the damage was temporary. Doc Sargent bathed, sterilized, dressed and bandaged the wound, placing the left arm in a sling.

"You're a lucky lad, Dave," he said as he completed the task.

"In more ways than one, Doc," said Dave, smiling wanly.

"You'll have to take it easy for some time, let that heal properly."

"I'm willing, Doc. I can stand a little rest."

Doc Sargent regarded him in quiet approval. "With all due deference to the dead, you and Mike have done a fine thing for the Colladeen tonight, Dave."

"Thanks, Doc. I'll take care of this, when I can."

"Forget it, Dave," said Sargent. "Let this be my small contribution to the general welfare of Freeland and environs."

In the outer room, Dave found Sheriff Ackeret and Norm Caulfield with Alma and Mike.

"I'm sorry that you boys had to do my work for me," Ackeret said. "But you did a damn good job of it."

"It was marked for us anyway, Ack," drawled Mike Topliff, and Dave nodded his agreement.

"There'll be some real law here from now on," Ackeret said, nodding to the men, bowing to Alma, and taking his departure.

"Be right with you, Ack," Norman called after him, and smiled at the others. "Just wanted to thank you boys, and tell you... well, things are goin' to be a lot different hereafter. Cross-C is goin' to be short-handed. We could use a couple of men like you—couldn't we, Alma?"

Her dark head nodded firmly. Norm smiled, gestured, and went out after the sheriff. The three were alone once

more, and Mike placed a nicely tapered cigarette in Dave's mouth and held a match to it. "What now, folks?" he inquired.

"I'm ridin' out to the Narrows," Dave Myatt said, "so my family, and all those other people, can sleep in peace tonight."

"And all the rest of the nights—now," murmured Alma Caulfield. "I want to go with you, Dave."

"Sure, Alma. And how about you, Mike?"

Mike Topliff grinned and shook his blond head, his eyes mild and gray now. "Tell Sally and your folks I'll be out later, Dave. I promised Trechock I'd help him drink some of that rainwater out of his system!"

They walked back toward the center of town. The rain had ceased entirely and the sky was clearing, a few steel-pointed stars pricking through the blackness, the moon rimming a cloudbank with silver fire as it soared toward an opening in the firmament.

"I'll get a couple of horses ready for you at Huffnail's," Mike Topliff said, and went on ahead of them, a slim graceful figure.

The night was serene and peaceful after the storm, cleansed and purified by rain and wind, and this quality of clear calm composure invaded Dave Myatt and Alma Caulfield, shining within them, binding them close, as they strolled side by side. A falling star streaked the brightening heavens, heartbreakingly beautiful for a fleeting instant, fading into oblivion even as Alma pointed and cried softly, "Did you wish, Dave?"

Dave Myatt smiled and put his good right arm around her shoulders. "It's already comin' true for us, Alma," he said.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROE RICHMOND is an oldtime Western author who ranks with Luke Short and Ernest Haycox for the authenticity and action of his fiction. A Vermont native, Mr. Richmond graduated from the University of Michigan and, before turning to writing fulltime, he worked as a ranch hand out West and played semiprofessional baseball. He and his wife Evelyn raised a son during the bleakest years of the Depression while the author wrote award-winning short stories and books. Having penned more than twenty novels of the West, Mr. Richmond retired from writing and currently lives in Concord, New Hampshire.

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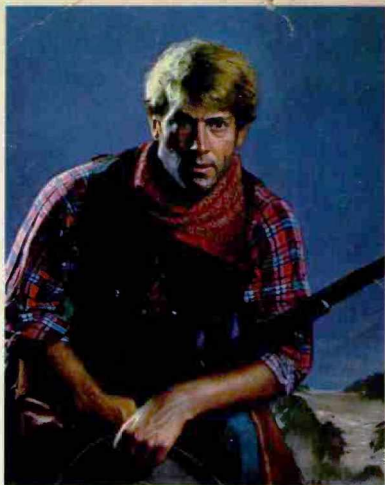
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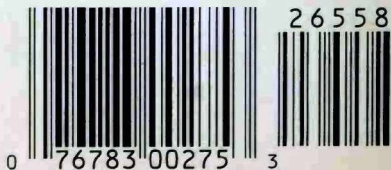


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