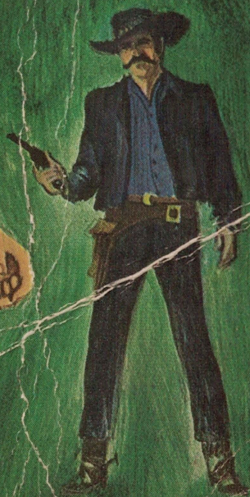
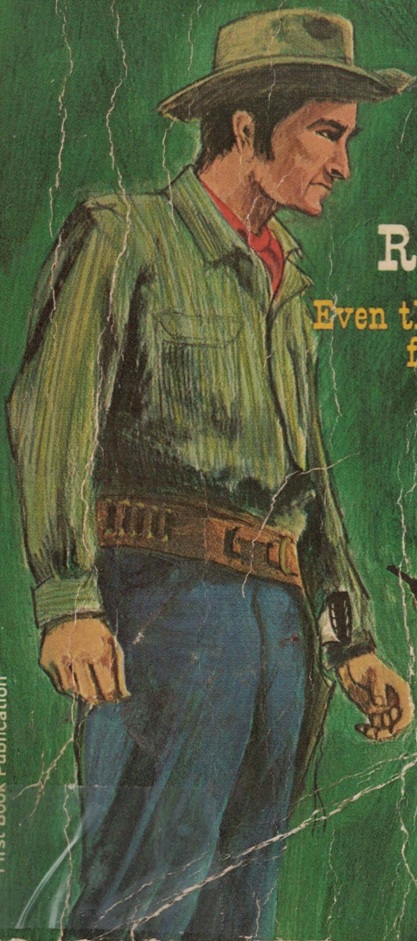


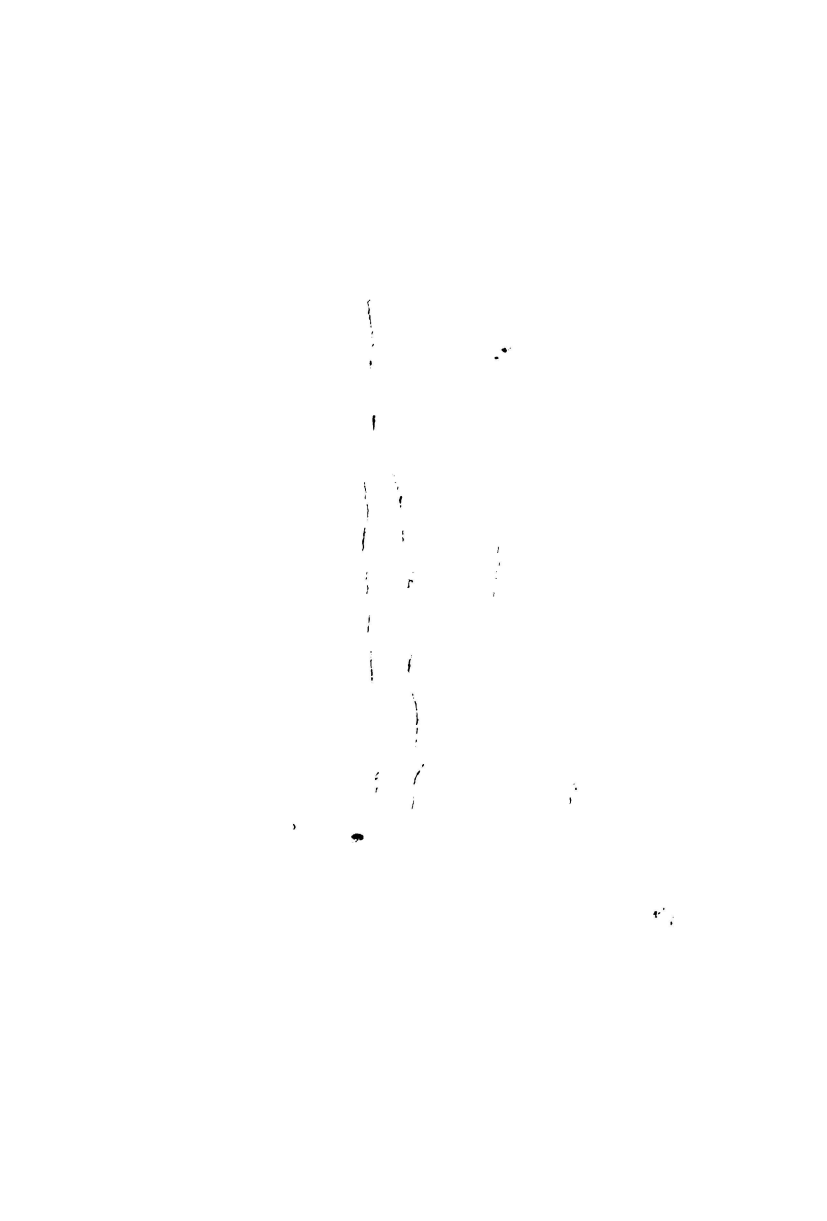
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DEADLY LIKE A .45

Reese Sullivan

Even the law wasn't safe
from Skull's wrath





BRAND OF THE SKULL

"You're going to jail, Dolph."

Dolph Emery threw a surprised look at Gard, then reddened. "Damn it, Gard, did you expect me to just stand there and take it?"

Gard looked at the blood trickling down Emery's cheek. "Hell, no. But can you think of a safer place for us to be?"

Jail was the only place they could go in this God-forsaken town, Gard Hubach, Deputy Marshal, thought bitterly. He and Emery had stood up to Skull and Skull owned this town. The people in it would rather hide than fight for friends.

So all they could do was wait and hope for a miracle, because only a miracle would stop Skull when revenge was in its blood!

Turn this book over for
second complete novel



Deadly Like a .45

by

REESE SULLIVAN

ACE BOOKS, INC.

1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

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Reese Sullivan has also written:

THE BLIND TRAIL (M-106)

NEMESIS OF CIRCLE A (M-128)

LAST STAGE TO GOMORRAH

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R

I

A DEPUTY MARSHAL looked at a town through different eyes than other people. But even to Gard Hubach the town looked peaceful enough. Even so, the ominous little tingle along his backbone persisted.

The baking sun held human and animal movement to a minimum, and even the great, brassy sky was empty. It was nearing the end of a long, hot day, and only with darkness and its illusion of coolness would some semblance of life return to the town.

The town sat at the edge of the Owyhee breaks in southeastern Oregon, and it took a stubborn vitality to even live in this rough country. Most of its days slipped by in unbroken calm, but every so often violence burst through its thin containing crust. For the town served a rough country, and it

took hard men to live in that country. The harshness of life, the abrasion of weather against disposition, and the cussedness of human nature always simmered in a devil's cauldron. Every now and then it slopped over.

The man lounging against one of the supports of Parnell's wooden awning looked the picture of indolent ease. The westering sun came through the cracks of the awning and striped his face. It was a calm face, the eyes heavy and hooded. No casual observer would have noticed it, but the eyes held a restless disquiet. They swept up and down the street, then retraced their path. The problem was that Gard Hubach didn't know what he was looking for, and it built his irritation. Some atavistic instinct of warning crawled along his skin. He might scoff at it, but it had forecast correctly before, and he had learned to pay it heed. Some kind of trouble was coming, and it would involve him. It always did.

Jed Parnell came out on the porch and asked, "Hot enough for you, Gard?"

Gard smiled. It was the standard opening for a conversation these days, for it had been a long siege of hot, dry weather. It put a file on the already too light chains holding men's tempers. He had noticed before how men's dispositions improved or worsened with the weather.

"Hot enough," he agreed.

He lacked a couple of inches of being six feet, and he looked deceptively lean, but his weight was concentrated in his shoulders and chest. His noticeable limp had fooled several men into believing him handicapped, but he was a catty man on his feet, and equally fast with fists or gun. They were the tools of his business, and his survival depended upon how well he learned the use of them. His face was lean, and the high cheekbones gave it a hollowed look. His nose was sharp, and only the mobility of the big mouth gave his expression some warmth. There was too much reserve for a face

that young, and his gray eyes had the somber, brooding intensity of a hawk on a high perch.

"I could do a hell of a lot better job of running the weather than this," Parnell said. He was a stooped man with thinning hair and a growing paunch. He had the indoor pallor of a storekeeper, and the harried expression of a man who wasn't too many jumps ahead of his bills.

Gard chuckled. "You better hadn't let the preacher hear you say that."

A sour humor touched Parnell's face. "Wouldn't that give him ammunition for the next six Sundays? Gard, what keeps a man at the same old thing day after day?"

Gard shrugged. "Hell, Jed. I don't know. Too ignorant to change, I guess."

How could he answer that question for Parnell when he couldn't even answer it for himself? Hadn't he been in the same business for the last six years? Most of life was monotony. The more time a man spent at it, the fewer peaks he discovered.

Ordinarily, Parnell was a fairly stable man. Something had happened to put that testiness in his voice.

Gard asked, "Who pushed on you today, Jed?"

Parnell extended his arms. "Look at my wrists." They were crosshatched with angry scratches. "Isn't that enough to set anybody off? I unloaded two wagon loads of barbed wire by myself this afternoon."

The stuff had a fiendish intelligence. No matter how much a man tried to protect himself with leather and cloth, those barbs still found bare flesh to bite.

"That'll teach you to keep your hands out of a bobcat's nest," Gard said.

Parnell found no humor in the remark. "I couldn't find anybody to help me. I tell you, it wore me down to nothing."

"I saw Sully's horse tied out front of the Golden Eagle."

The poor brute was still there, fighting a losing battle

against flies and heat. Gard had a rough name for a man who would treat an animal like that.

Parnell snorted. "I didn't even bother asking him. Did you ever know him to work?"

Gard hadn't, and it was a fact he had filed away in his mind some time ago. A man had to have money for his needs some way.

He asked, "That wire for Costigan?" Two wagon loads was a pile of wire, and Skull was about the only outfit around here that could handle that much at a time.

A wariness touched Parnell's face. The "Yes" slipped reluctantly from his mouth.

"Why didn't you send it out and unload it there? It'd save you handling it again."

"Mr. Costigan told me to have it here when he wanted to pick it up. He's not ready for it out there yet."

That was typically Breck Costigan. Another man's inconvenience meant nothing to him.

"And you wouldn't think of questioning his orders."

The words stung Parnell. "Goddamnit, Gard. He's my biggest customer. Sure, I do everything to please him. I'd go under without him."

"How do you know? Have you ever tried it?"

Parnell's face was stiff. "Just because you don't like him—" He broke off at the flash in Gard's eyes.

Gard stared at him until Parnell shifted his gaze. He had almost been drawn into that old argument again. He couldn't fill out the fingers of one hand with the names of men who liked Breck Costigan. They might fear and respect him—but like him, no. Nothing was to be gained by railing at Parnell. He was only expressing the opinion of everybody in town.

But no matter what Skull did, you couldn't get anybody to lift a hand against them. Breck Costigan's father had founded this town, and he had kept it alive during its first, difficult days. It was his town in every way, and the son had

followed in his footsteps. The need for Costigan support and direction had long since gone, but nobody in this town would believe it. Habit was a strong, familiar thing, and the Costigan grip was old.

Gard drawled, "Why, Jed, it doesn't make one damned bit of difference to me. It's your business."

He pushed away from the awning support and stepped into the dusty street. He grinned as he heard the door slam behind him. Parnell put a lot of violence into that slamming.

Dust puffed up from around his boots. The earlier polishing he had given them would be dimmed before the sun set. He was a proud and meticulous man. He put on a fresh shirt every evening before he came to work, and wiped the dust from his boots after his work was done. He couldn't do anything about the uneven line of sweat stain above the band on his hat. The gun belt was sweat-stained too, and set to the contours of his waist. And the Colt made a familiar weight against his upper leg.

Sully Graham must have seen him coming, for he was lounging in the Golden Eagle's doorway. He was eighteen years old and big enough to hold a man's job, but he didn't want one. He hung around the places where men gathered, cadging drinks or the loan of a coin or two. Pretty soon all his sources would be dried up, *and*, Gard thought, *that's the time he'll come to some lawman's attention.*

Graham had a bad complexion and broken teeth. Gard had never seen him looking overly clean. He supposed every town had its Sully Gramahs. The problem was, how did you go about getting rid of them?

Graham said, "Look what's out in the street. Only deputies and mad dawgs would be out in this sun." He turned his head to accept the applause of the audience behind him.

Gard's face didn't change as he heard laughter from several men in the saloon. For the last month Graham had found some kind of pleasure in baiting him, maybe because

he thought it increased his standing. *Keep on asking for a broken head, Sully, Gard thought. You'll get it.*

He said, "And if you're smart, Sully, you'll stay out of the way of both of them."

He locked eyes with Graham, and Graham couldn't hold steady. He looked at the ground, then back, and Gard saw the meanness in his eyes. Was this why he felt the warning crawling of his skin? Not because of Sully Graham. Graham wasn't important enough to disturb anybody.

"Anything else you'd like to say, Sully?"

Graham couldn't meet the probing of Gard's eyes, and his face flamed in an agony of embarrassment. He flung himself back inside the doors, and Gard heard laughter again. But this time it wasn't directed at him. Graham would store up the memory of that laughter.

Let him fill a warehouse, Gard thought, with a sudden violence. Someday he was going to have the pleasure of running Graham. He needed a little stronger reason, and it would come. But right now just being a piddling nuisance wasn't enough.

He strode down the length of the street and noticed the level of the sun. It'd be another hour until sundown. He always made this first round early. Everything was normal enough, and he doubted it would change, for it was a week night and the saloons wouldn't draw well. Then why did he feel this gloomy sense of foreboding? He shook his head and moved on to the office.

It was in the next to the last building on the block, a narrow space with a dingy, fly-specked window. The faded letters, "Marshal's Office," were beginning to peel.

He stepped inside and the heavy air wrapped around him like a hot blanket. The office had a front door and a small, rear window high in one of the cells. Even if the wind was in the right direction it couldn't do much in the way of ven-

tilation, for that rear window faced a blank wall on the other side of the alley.

He had swept out the office last night, and the dust was already back, thickening its film every time traffic stirred it up in the street.

It was the oldest, shabbiest building in town, a building nobody else wanted, and he felt a sudden wave of rebellion. Goddamn it, Marshal Mason Norman could at least demand paint and a stick or two of new furniture. But Norman wasn't a demanding man, and maybe that was one of the reasons he had been marshal so long.

Gard hadn't expected to find Norman in the office, not on a long, hot afternoon. The best place to look for him would be in one of the saloons. In two months he would be sixty years old, and there wasn't much dignity left in him. He was a fat old man with a labored step, but a step still agile enough to keep out of trouble. And if trouble was unavoidable, didn't he have a young deputy to handle it for him?

When you worked for a man for two years you know him pretty well. You knew the sham and the pretense and if there was anything solid in him. There wasn't a solid spot in Norman, and the kindest thing Gard felt for him was pity. It must be rough when a man was old and frightened, when he knew he was pinning a badge on an empty shirt.

Gard stayed on because Lucas Clay wanted him to and because the range of jobs he could fill with the lamed leg was limited. And this was his town because Martha Emery lived here. It wasn't as though he had no future. Clay said Norman would retire when he was sixty, and that was less than two months away. With the marshal's badge and its step up in pay, Gard could do several things. He sat down behind the desk and his face was lost in contemplation. He could move out of that cramped hotel room and buy that little house at the edge of town. If he had that house, he'd have a right to say what was on his mind to Martha. If

it all came true, it wouldn't be at all bad for a man with a limp.

He lifted his head at the drum of hoofs. It was faint, probably a couple of blocks away, but strengthening fast. The sound meant an emergency. Nobody would run a horse on this kind of day unless urgency demanded it.

He was standing in the doorway when the horse pulled up before the tie rack. It was in the last stages of exhaustion—its sides heaved like bellows, its head hung almost to the ground, and twin strings of greenish saliva hung from its nostrils. It was rib poor to start with, and, Gard thought, it would never come out of this.

Loney Kenyon threw off from the broken saddle and in his haste tripped and almost fell. He was hatless and wore bib overalls. The toes of his heavy work shoes were broken, and the soiled shirt had a tear in the shoulder. He threw a glance up the street, and a sickly pallor was in his face.

He didn't even take time to wrap his reins. It didn't make any difference. The horse wouldn't stir.

He ran towards Gard. "My God, Gard. You've got to help me!"

Kenyon had a hundred and sixty acres that bordered on Costigan's land. Twenty years ago Costigan would have burned and driven him out. Now the law handcuffed him, and he sat and waited. And time was always on his side, for time drove the Loney Kenyons out of this country. Gard wasn't so sure that Costigan's way wasn't kinder—at least it was quicker.

Kenyon turned his head and looked up the empty street. Gard followed his eyes.

"Skull's after me," he gasped. "They're gonna hang me sure as hell."

His hands clutched at Gard's shirt. "You gotta help me."

Gard looked up the empty street again. Skull would come in from that direction. He couldn't see a soul. But how much

farther beyond that emptiness were they? The crawling feeling itched his skin like prickly heat. He cursed the insidious warning. It never failed.

II

THE BROKEN WHEEZING left Kenyon's breathing after Gard locked him in a cell. But his knuckles were white as he clutched the bars.

"You won't let them hang me, will you, Gard? They can't hang me just for that, can they?"

Gard's face was harsh. "If they'd caught you before you got to town, you'd be hanging now." Skull hated rustlers. Breck Costigan would hang a man for stealing one head as quickly as he would for a hundred. Even if hanging for rustling was outdated, Gard had no doubt Costigan still practiced it whenever he caught somebody at it.

Kenyon winced. "It don't hardly seem fair. They got so many."

"You Goddamned fool—" Gard stopped helplessly. Reason wasn't going to reach Kenyon, and besides it was too late for it. He wouldn't have believed Kenyon had enough guts to steal from Costigan. Not guts, he decided. Just a plain shiftlessness that overcame any fear. He wouldn't ride any farther than he had to after his beef, and Skull was the closest.

Kenyon dabbed at his nose with a knuckle. "What's a man going to do? I didn't have no crops. A man's got a right to feed his family, hasn't he?"

Not this way, not with Costigan beef, Gard thought grimly. And this poor, shiftless fool hadn't enough sense or energy to drive the steer very far onto his place or bury the hide and offal very deep. Skull riders must have seen the buzzards and investigated.

"I topped the hill and seen 'em," Kenyon whined. "Lanos and two of his men. They had the hide stretched out and was looking at it. I ducked back, and they didn't see me. I know they'll be ridin' to my house. I hope they don't hurt my old woman or kids."

Kirby Lanos was Costigan's foreman. He was ruthless and intensely loyal to Breck Costigan. Perhaps it took a tough man to keep a place as big as Skull rolling.

Gard had Kenyon locked up, but how safely? *Oh hell*, he thought. *Even Skull wouldn't come into town and take the man. This wasn't the old days.* Still, the worry had sharp little rat teeth that kept nibbling at him. Kenyon should have worried about his family before he started stealing Skull beef. Gard would bet this wasn't the first time. He could imagine Kenyon's fear lessening with each successful attempt. The poor fool didn't realize that with each steer he stole he whittled down on his odds for survival. Lanos would take Kenyon's place apart looking for him. But he wouldn't hurt the woman or children—not until he caught up with Loney Kenyon. Then he'd hurt them by not leaving anybody to take care of them.

"Some varmint must have dug the hide out," Kenyon said hopelessly. "I never had no luck in my life."

"You had luck this time. You had luck you got here without them catching up with you."

Kenyon's knuckles jumped as he tightened his grip on the bars. "Will they come here?"

Gard nodded. He thought so. Probably not tonight. It would be almost impossible to track Kenyon in this dry weather. Not finding Kenyon home wouldn't stop Lucas from looking, but it should take him some time to figure or guess where he went. *Tomorrow*, Gard thought. *He'll be here sometime tomorrow.*

"What's going to happen to me?" Kenyon wailed.

"You'll do time." That was the best Kenyon could hope for.

Gard didn't care how much time. Kenyon had handed the town a hot problem. For Skull was going to ride in here and make its demands. Costigan wouldn't leave it to the law to handle it. He boasted that he stomped his own snakes. Was the town going to refuse Skull's demands? That would be Norman's problem. All Gard had to do was to get Kenyon through the night.

Kenyon walked over to the bunk and sat down. He buried his face in his hands. "It ain't fair." His voice was little stronger than a husky whisper. "Nobody cares what happens to a poor man and his family."

Gard's sigh was half anger, half helplessness. The Kenyons of the world would never see it differently. They needed their self-pity. It was a blanket for them to cover themselves with.

He turned and walked to the door. The street was still empty. He was too tight. He was building this up out of all proportion. Nothing was going to happen tonight.

Jimmy Vorhees stood on the walk looking at Kenyon's horse. He said, with a ten-year old's candor, "I don't think he's going to make it."

Gard didn't either. The animal's eyes were closed, and its breathing was a hard, rasping tear. The tremble was increasing noticeably in its front legs.

"Whose it belong to?" Jimmy asked.

"Just a man." Gard smothered a curse. The horse wasn't going to last long enough to lead it away from here.

Even as the thought formed, the horse's forelegs buckled, and it fell heavily. It still breathed, but it didn't even struggle to lift its head.

"Jimmy, run down to the livery stable and tell Bargaen to hitch up a team. Tell him I want this dragged off the street."

"You going to shoot him?" Jimmy was round-eyed.

"Yes. Do you want to see it?"

The boy considered it a moment, then gulped. "I guess not." He took off at a dead run.

Gard stepped into the office and said, "You keep your mouth shut. No matter what you hear out front."

"Are they here?" Kenyon had trouble forcing the words out.

"No. But you keep still."

Gard pulled the door shut behind him. He swore at the coming necessity. He wanted as few people as possible knowing about Kenyon.

The horse still breathed in long, rasping gulps. Gard placed the pistol muzzle against the animal's head, hoping the report would be muffled. If Bargaen moved fast enough he might have the horse dragged away before a curious crowd gathered.

He pulled the trigger, and the horse didn't even flop its head. Its nostrils flared a little as a shuddering sigh left it. Gard looked at it with a somber face. It hadn't known too much ease.

The shot wasn't muffled enough. It pulled Sully Graham and a half-dozen men from the saloons. They stood around making unfeeling comments about the poor old piece of crow-bait.

Gig Pitkins looked at Gard and asked, "What did you shoot him for?"

Gard said a few swear words. "Somebody rode him right off his feet and left him here. He was down when I came out."

Graham snickered. "Did you have any trouble hitting him, Deputy?"

There wasn't any open laughter, for Gard was looking at them. But the covert grins were there.

The wrath pushed up behind Gard's eyes. "Sully," he said, "one of these times—" He chopped it off and let out his anger in a carefully controlled breath. He had enough trouble on his hands without compounding it.

Pitkins said, "Isn't that Loney Kenyon's horse?"

They argued about it among themselves, and it pulled their attention from Gard. A downed horse looked so much different than one standing—shrunk and caved-in and so much smaller than in life. All a man had to compare it with was a mental picture.

"Sure it is," Pitkin said. "Nobody but Kenyon would let a horse get in that shape."

Gard said wrathfully, "If it's Kenyon's and you see him, tell him to get it off the street. And he's going to pay for its removal."

He wanted to break them up. But any official pressure might rivet more attention to the spot, and he didn't want that. If he left them alone they might leave in a few minutes.

He said, "I've seen a dead horse before," and headed for the office.

He closed the door behind him and shook his head at Kenyon's wild-eyed stare.

It was still too hot for the men to linger long around the horse. They drifted back up the street, and Gard sighed. He hoped it was too small an incident to lodge in their minds.

Kenyon whispered, "I heard a shot. What—"

"I shot your horse."

Kenyon's mouth sagged open. "But why—"

"Because it was down. It'd never get up again."

Kenyon looked as though he was going to cry. "Poor General. I knew I was riding him pretty hard."

"You rode him to death." Gard felt no desire to spare Kenyon's feelings.

Gard couldn't believe it. That was a tear rolling down Kenyon's cheek.

Kenyon blotted it with a fingertip. "Now you tell me that's fair. Skull made me kill my horse. But are they going to pay me for it? Are they going to give me another one to replace it? No, a poor man—"

Gard snapped, "Shut up."

He shook his head as he turned away. It wasn't possible, but Kenyon actually believed that.

He went outside and looked down the street. Bargaen was coming with the team. Jimmy danced along beside him pointing ahead.

Age hadn't made much encroachment upon Bargaen. He didn't look any different than Gard remembered him fifteen years ago. The skin from his jaws hung down like a turkey's wattles, and it had been a long time since he had had any teeth. But there was no fading in those blue eyes.

He said, "Damn it, Gard. I was readying supper." He fashioned a loop to place about the dead animal's neck. "Couldn't it have waited until after I ate?"

"I wish it had dropped dead in front of your door."

Bargaen showed toothless gums. "It is a sorry-looking thing, isn't it? This is going to cost somebody a dollar. Whose is it?"

"I don't know. I came back, and it was down. I put it out of its misery."

Bargaen started the team and took the slack out of the rope. Jimmy's eyes grew bigger as he watched the dead animal's neck stretch. It seemed to stretch a couple of yards before the body began to move.

"Gosh," he said. "I thought he was going to pull it off."

Gard tousled his hair. "How'd you like to make a dollar? All for yourself."

The shine in the boy's eyes was answer enough. "Just find Marshal Norman and tell him I need him here. I can't go looking for him. I've got to hang around here."

"That's all I do?"

"That's all."

Jimmy took off at a dead run.

Norman was going to be unhappy at the summons, but if he wanted the town covered tonight he was going to have to do it—or stay in the office and let Gard do it. But one or

the other of them should stay close until they saw what the night would bring.

When Gard walked into the office Kenyon said, "I'm hungry. It's been a long time since I et."

Gard had had a bellyful of Loney Kenyon. "I don't want to hear anything else out of you," he roared. "You're damned lucky to be breathing!"

Kenyon shrank back. "I didn't aim to make you mad. All I said—"

Gard put the lid back on his temper. "I heard what you said." Kenyon made people mad by just being alive. He was going to have to think about feeding him—and himself. He hoped it wouldn't take Jimmy long to find Norman.

He walked to the door again and looked out. He grimaced as he turned back to the desk. At this rate he'd wear a path in the floor.

He sat down at the desk and pulled the Colt from the worn holster. It was an 1872 Army model, now showing wear. Its thick, curved butt fitted a man's hand just right. The bluing was getting a little thin along the gun barrel from rubbing against the leather.

He rubbed a forefinger across the cylinder's flutings, spinning it, and the whirring was like a contented cat's purr. He had given it every care a man could give a gun, and it showed it. He knew how the gun cocked, and he knew its short, crisp trigger pull. This was one thing a man could depend upon.

He put the gun back into the holster, thinking that his handling of it was probably childish. He always checked the gun before leaving the hotel room. But the feel of the gun had given its touch of assurance. It had lessened the lonely feeling and pushed back against the emptiness out there.

He walked to the door again. Where in the hell was Norman?

It was well after seven when Jimmy stuck his head in the door, and Gard yelled at him, "Where have you been?"

The kid pulled his head back, and Gard thought he was gone. "Jimmy," he called taking the bite out of his tone.

It pulled the scared face back around the door jamb. "I looked, Gard. Honest I did. I can't look no more. Maw says I have to come in."

"Sure," Gard said.

He fished in his pocket and found a dime. He tossed it through the door and watched the kid scramble for it. His face was calm, but there was blackness inside him.

He walked to the door after the kid had gone. That damned, empty street was too quiet. He cursed himself for his imagination. He should be grateful it was this quiet. But something kept rasping against his skin like a rough-toothed file. He thought, *You're getting nerves worse than a woman.* But something was out there. He couldn't see it, he couldn't point at it. But he knew it was there.

He ran through a mental list of men he might call on in an emergency, and he couldn't say that a single one would stand if needed. As far as that went, he doubted that Norman would. But at least Norman could free him from this hot, stinking office. He could move about town and find out how big a part his imagination was playing in this.

Kenyon said, "Don't I get fed tonight?"

Gard wondered if Kenyon would risk his neck for a meal. It might not be as farfetched as it sounded. If Lanos rode into town and found the office empty, he wouldn't hesitate about taking Kenyon.

If he does come, do you think you're going to stop him? Gard looked at the shotguns and rifles in the gun rack. He might not stop him, but he sure as hell would give him pause.

He should explain the situation to Kenyon. That would

make his appetite fade. He said, "You'll eat when I get the time to go get it."

"All you been doing is sitting there," Kenyon complained.

That was all. Sitting here and waiting for the minutes to drag away. And the only way he could break it up was by repeated trips to the door and swearing at Norman.

But time did crawl along, and maybe some of the pressure was easing. He hadn't turned on the lamp, and he wouldn't light a match to look at his watch, but it had to be getting after eleven. It was getting late for Lanos to come tonight.

He jumped as Sully Graham said from outside the door, "Gard, Gard. Are you in there? Oh, Jesus Christ. Answer me."

The smart alec tone was gone. That sounded like pure fright.

"What do you want?"

"Oh, Jesus Christ," Graham said again and paused to catch his breath. "Palmer Barnes is cutting the guts out of Jude Kelso. We were drinking, and they got to arguing about Cora. You got to stop him."

This argument over her was summer-old, and Barnes had made a few threats about cutting Kelso right out of the picture.

"Where?" Gard asked. He had no choice. He had to leave Kenyon alone.

"Down between Morris's and Wyatt's stores. You may be too late now."

There was a ten-foot strip between the two stores and both Morris and Wyatt used it as a dumping ground. It was always weed-grown, and more than one argument had been settled there.

Gard broke into a run. The strip was less than a block away. If he could stop the fight in good time he shouldn't be gone too long.

He slowed as he came to the mouth of the strip. It was too dark for him to see far into it, and he couldn't hear a sound. Maybe the fight was over; maybe Barnes had already done all the cutting necessary.

"Palmer. Jude," he called. "Goddamnit. Answer me."

He sensed rather than saw the movement at his side. He whirled, jerking at the Colt and throwing up his left arm at the same time. Neither motion was quick enough to save him. Something slashed him across the head, and the brutal force of it ground his teeth together. A great ball of red fire burst before his eyes, then shattered into blackened tatters. The tatters fused, and the blackness was one great maw devouring everything.

III

GARD RETURNED to consciousness a bit at a time. His reluctance said he dreaded what he would find, and he was right to dread it. His first clear thought brought a hammer blow of pain that exploded in his head and ran the length of his body. It kicked his stomach over several times, and he was certain he was going to be sick.

He waited until the nausea passed, keeping his eyes closed, afraid that even the slightest light would trigger another explosion of pain. He lay there, letting the thoughts trickle in, a fragment at a time. He had some problem which he had to take care of, but if he came to full grips with it he knew his head would fall off.

What was he doing lying here on the ground? And why did his head hurt so damned bad? He put careful fingers to it and couldn't find any broken spots. His hat was lying beside him, and he picked it up. Without his hat that blow would probably have crushed his head. He was thinking pretty good, and it wasn't ripping him apart. A name popped

into his mind. Sully Graham! Graham had tolled him here. He didn't know why, but he was going to find out.

He sat up in unwise haste and yelped at the results. He had to cradle his head in his hands until the deafening roar subsided. He hung onto the name grimly. He had never wanted to see anybody more. He hoped Graham laughed a lot at his little joke, because when he got through with him there wasn't going to be any laughter left in him.

He took it slow and easy getting to his feet, and only half the world fell in on him. He leaned against Wyatt's wall waiting for the bucking, lurching earth to settle down.

He made his steps light, and even then each was a jolt that traveled the length of his spine and smashed into the base of his brain. He had the feeling he had been unconscious for a considerable time.

It wasn't until he saw the knot of people before the office that he even thought of Kenyon. A soft groan escaped him. Something was wrong down there.

Norman saw him coming and pushed out of the crowd. "Where the hell have you been?" he demanded.

Gard thought bitterly, he had asked that question of Norman fifty times this evening.

Norman showed every year of his age. His face looked like a hard-used road filled with deepening hollows and ruts. The lower lids sagged, forming pockets which were always filled with water. Those pockets gave his eyes a vague, uncertain look. His belt fought a losing battle with his paunch. He had carried a gun and a badge for a long time—maybe too long.

Gard thought, *He's getting in the first licks. He's jumping me before I can jump him.* He wouldn't fight the "why" of it right now.

He asked, "Is Kenyon all right?"

He heard a murmur of sound from the gathered men—not

words, but an increased rush of breathing that sounded like a sad, lost wind.

Norman eyed him queerly. "Don't you know?"

"I don't know a damned thing. Somebody knocked me out cold."

The black faces didn't change. They looked like the faces of dummies unable to assimilate information of any kind.

He started into the office, and Norman said in a heavy voice, "No use looking for him in there."

Gard felt the spreading hollow in his stomach. For the first time he realized that Sully Graham hadn't been part of any little joke.

"What happened?" he asked hoarsely.

Norman didn't answer him. Instead, he turned and marched down the street with the crowd at his heels.

Gard followed in their wake. He felt the touch of a cold dread. Maybe he already had an idea of what Norman wanted to show him.

The cross timber over the livery stable's entrance was a good twelve feet off the ground. It had been put to a new use, but it was well suited for it.

Gard looked at the dangling figure. It didn't look like a man at all. It looked like a pathetic rag doll with all its stuffing dribbled away. It was hard to imagine that there had ever been enough stuffing in it to hold it erect.

The blank faces stared upward at the figure with a sort of horrid fascination in their eyes.

Gard said, "Goddamnit. Cut him down." There was something indecent in those staring eyes. Kenyon had been right about one thing. He never did have much luck.

He saw Bargaen standing off to one side, his face moody. He moved to him, and Bargaen said, "I'll see that every time I look up that way."

"Bargaen, did you hear anything? See anybody?"

"Not a damned thing. Until Norman hammered on my door."

He looked squarely enough at Gard. Gard couldn't tell whether or not he was lying.

Norman came up and said, "There's a lot of things that need explaining. I'm not satisfied at all with this."

Gard's eyes raked the man's soft face. He was bruised in body and spirit, and his failure rode him heavily. "There sure as hell are," he said hotly. "Including how you managed to stay away so long when I had somebody looking for you."

He turned and strode back to the office, and Norman followed him, trying to put an expression of righteous anger on his face.

The crowd started to follow Norman into the office, and Gard yelled, "Shut that damned door." He had been pushed too far this night, way too far.

Norman shut the door and leaned against it. Some anxiety showed in his face. "Easy, Gard. I'm only trying to find out what happened."

Gard stared at him with hostile eyes. *You know*, he thought. *Everybody in this whole damned town knows.*

He said in a flat voice, "Skull hanged him. That's all."

Norman made a small noise of protest and held out a hand. "You can't say things like that, Gard. Not when you haven't got any proof."

"Can't I?" Gard raged. "They caught Kenyon stealing one of their beeves. He ran for it and made it here. I promised him protection. And Lanos walked in here and took him out."

He looked at that tired old face, and it hadn't changed except that the quivering seemed more pronounced. He knew he hadn't really said anything to shock Norman.

"That doesn't do anything to you?" he raged. "That doesn't outrage you? They came into your town and took a

man out of your jail. I guess you don't even call it breaking the law."

Norman pulled at a knuckle. "You got no proof, Gard. Nobody saw them. Nobody heard them."

"Somebody saw them. They're not ghosts. Sully Graham saw them. They used him to sucker me out. They were waiting for me, and they made sure I wouldn't interfere. And where were you? You weren't around to interfere either."

Norman lifted his hands and let them fall. "Would it have made any difference if both of us had been here? We couldn't have stopped them."

"Ah," Gard said, and his eyes were hot and dangerous. "So you admit it was Skull."

"I didn't say that," Norman said too hastily. "I was just trying to show you—" He backed away from what he was going to say, then added in a woeful voice, "Some things you can't do anything about, Gard. That's all I was trying to tell you."

Gard stared at the haggard face. Kenyon didn't represent anything to Norman. He didn't represent a principle or even a man. He was just a void, and the quicker it was filled in and forgotten the better off everybody would be.

"You forget it, Mason," he said. "Because I'm not going to." He could add a lot to that statement, but it wouldn't be any use. Acceptance had rounded Norman's shoulders. Anything he said would roll right off them.

He started for the door, and Norman asked in a small voice, "Where are you going?"

Gard had an aching head and an anger to match. He was going to take a quick look around town for Sully or any of the Skull people he might find. He was quite sure the look wouldn't be successful.

"Why," he said, "you wouldn't be interested, would you, Mason?"

His eyes dared Norman to comment. Norman found a great deal of interest in a crack in the floor.

IV

LUCAS CLAY HAILED Gard as he passed the bank. Clay beckoned to him, and Gard followed him into his office, a frown on his face. He knew what Clay wanted to talk about. Everybody in town wanted to talk about it this morning.

Clay offered him a cigar, and Gard shook his head.

"I haven't much time," he said.

"He's gone," Clay said dryly. "But you knew that last night."

"Who?" Gard asked sharply. He would like to hear a name put to somebody.

"Sully Graham. I talked to Norman and some of the others who were out last night."

"They didn't give you any other names?"

Clay paused to get his cigar going well. He was a tall man, beginning to stoop under the burden of the years. His face was lined, and liver spots dotted his hands. His eyes had a trick of going far away and remote, but he wasn't fading. His eyes and mind were still as sharp as ever. He was in a business that demanded a hard shell, and yet Gard had never heard of him turning down a man with a story worth listening to. He had a reach of affection for this man. His mother had been widowed when he was four, and she would never have made it without Clay's judicious help. She had died when he was fifteen, and the regret that filled him when he thought of it came flooding back. She had never known it easy, either.

Clay said, "You know they didn't. But you're going out there anyway." He made it a statement instead of a question.

"Yes," Gard said simply.

"Why?" Clay demanded and there was anger in the word. "Do you expect to find Graham out there? If you do, do you think he'll talk?" His words slowed. "They wouldn't let you ride off of the place with that kind of information."

No, Gard didn't expect to find Graham at Skull. His bet would be that they'd paid him off and sent him on. He knew exactly how little he would accomplish by riding out there, but it was something he had to do.

He said, "They played it real cute last night. Sully knew the trouble between Palmer and Kelso. It was something I'd believe and jump at. They knock me cold, and they're free to do what they want to." He looked at Clay with burning eyes. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Clay made a weary gesture. "It means as much to me as it does to you. But you can't do a thing about it. Just because you know doesn't mean you can prove it. You're going out there and jump Costigan, and it'll get you absolutely nothing. No, that's wrong. It'll get you something. It'll get you his hatred."

Gard said, in a flat voice, "For two years I've heard nothing but 'go light where Skull's concerned.' I've arrested Skull men for drunk and disorderly conduct and seen them turned loose without even a fine. Last night was a little more than drunk and disorderly conduct. Last night was a man's life."

Clay said fiercely, "Twenty Loney Kenyons aren't worth one of you!"

The stubborn blaze remained in Gard's eyes. "I promised him protection. I told him he'd get a trial." He leaned forward, his face filled with intense feeling. "Every man in this town ought to be fighting what happened last night, and they won't even look at me when I try to talk to them. Somebody saw Lanos and his men when they came in last night. And they won't even talk to me."

Clay said harshly, "What are you? The town's moral conscience? A hard rock for them to hide behind?" He said

instantly, "Gard, I'm sorry. But I know what you're going to do. You're going out there and face Costigan. You're going to draw a line that even he can see. And it won't do one damned bit of good."

"It'll do me some good," Gard said simply.

Clay glared at him. "I wish I'd never gotten that badge for you."

The memory of it was in both their eyes. Gard had been riding for Willowby's Half Box, and he had ridden into town that morning for supplies. Three men holding guns had been backing out of the bank. Gard remembered how their heads snapped around, and that wild, desperate light filling their eyes. He had dropped two of them, but the third one had blown him out of the saddle. He would never forget Doc Klepper's probing for the bullet that had shattered part of his thighbone.

And it wasn't hard to recall the worry about what he was going to do. Klepper had said flatly, "You can try riding again. I don't think you'll make it."

When his misery was at its height, Clay had walked into his room and handed him a deputy marshal's badge. He had said, "I'm grateful, Clay. The Council's grateful."

Gard's first inclination had been to refuse it. But there weren't many avenues open to a crippled man. Maybe this was the only one left to him if he wanted to stay around Martha.

Clay said softly before he left, "You don't have to make up your mind today."

It wasn't difficult to make up his mind. Hours in the saddle built an ache in his leg until he couldn't bear it. But he had a job. And he'd never forget his gratitude.

He said, "Lucas, I haven't forgotten a thing."

Clay said gruffly, "I didn't call you in here to kick that dead horse around. But if I could see any profit in what you intend doing—" He shook his head.

"Don't try." Gard stood.

Clay's voice picked up an edge. "Have you thought this all the way through? The Council's made of businessmen. And Norman's always been Costigan's man. If Costigan presses it, you could lose your job. Who would stand for you?"

Gard fixed him with level eyes. He was sorry Clay had made that veiled threat. It made a smear on their friendship. "I wouldn't expect anybody to stand, Lucas. I wouldn't expect any change. But someday this town is going to have to grow up. Then the law will apply to everyone. Someday it isn't going to matter whether or not Costigan has money in the bank, and buys his supplies in town."

Clay's face burned a dull red. "You make a harsh judgment, Gard."

"Just as I see it, Lucas," Gard said.

He put a final look on Clay before he left the bank. Clay looked old and defeated. This morning had put a rift between them, and Gard was sorry for that.

He heard the ringing of the anvil a block before he reached the blacksmith shop. His eyes gleamed as he saw his saddled horse tied to the rack in front of the place. Dolph Emery wouldn't ever try to argue a man out of something he had to do.

A half-dozen loafers were in the shop. As Gard came in, a furtive expression came to their faces. They ducked their heads as they gave him a nod or a murmured word of greeting.

He stood there, blank-faced, not returning nod or word, and one by one they slipped out of the shop with some muttered excuse.

Emery grinned at him and mopped his face. He had stripped off his shirt, and the light summer underwear clung damply to his massive muscles. He was a big man, plodding in thought and action, but he rarely took a false turn along either line, and in the end he arrived where he was going

about as fast as some of the more flashy ones. The kids in town loved him, and they should have worn his patience thin the way they rode his back and legs. Only once had Gard seen him lose his temper, and the results had been awesome. Gard liked the man for many reasons. Probably the biggest was that he was Martha's father.

He asked, "What were they talking about?"

Dolph gave him an amiable grin. "As if you didn't know."

"Did any of them say anything definite?"

Emery gave him a shrewd glance. "Like they'd seen or heard something in town last night?" He shook his head. "Not any of that bunch. If they did, they're too smart to be talking about it. Even if they let something slip out it wouldn't do you any good. They wouldn't stand steady behind it."

He put a shoe on the anvil and began pounding on it. He put a pleasant rhythm into the ringing blows.

It was a pleasure watching the man work. He never let pressure make him turn out a sloppy job. He never burned a shoe on a hoof to save the long, arduous pounding. That was the cruel, lazy way to do it. Dolph Emery would spend a half day, if necessary, hammering a shoe to fit.

Gard said, "Thanks for saddling my horse." When he had first pinned on the badge, Emery had suggested he stable his horse in the big shed back of the shop. "It'll save livery fees," he had argued. "And I got all that room going to waste."

"Figured you'd want him this morning," Emery said. He squinted at Gard. "You think it was Skull?"

"I know it." Gard waited a moment. "Go on. Tell me I'm a damned fool, like everybody else."

Emery picked up the tongs, lifted the shoe off the anvil, and tossed it into a tub of water. The hissing and bubbling was a sharp, short sound and it gave off a stench.

"If a man wants to take a pride in his job, he's got to do

it the way he knows is right. If you've got to ride out and talk to Costigan, you've got to do it."

"I probably won't accomplish anything." Instantly, Gard wished he could take back those words. It sounded as though he were fishing for a way out.

Emery put a quizzical eye on him. "Does it scare you, thinking of making Skull mad?"

"It doesn't scare me." He returned Emery's grin. A thought struck him, and he said, "Dolph, I've never seen any of Skull's business here. You on the outs with them?"

"Breck and I had an argument about how long it took to do a certain job. He didn't like me telling him that he could run Skull, but that I'd run my own business. He promised me I wouldn't have any business to run." He shrugged. "That was better than a couple of years back. He's caused me some empty hours, but we're still eating." He spat, and it plopped against the floor, rolling the dust up into a ball.

He said, "Before you leave, you ought to know the lawyer is with Martha." He never referred to Dan Eckart as anything but "the lawyer." Eckart's calling on Martha worried Emery. He didn't know the understanding Gard and Martha had.

Gard said soberly, "Maybe you ought to encourage him, Dolph. He's going to be a big man in this town. Maybe in the state."

"Him and his soft ways," Emery said in disgust. "He never talks to you but all around you. Can a girl's head be turned by all the big words he uses?"

"It's a worry," Gard said gravely. He didn't grin until he turned towards the house.

Eckart was just coming out of the door as Gard approached the porch. He was a handsome man, in his early thirties. He had thick, black hair and even after a visit to the barber shop his blue-black beard made a mask of his jaws. He was

always immaculately turned out, and he had spent many a barb on Gard.

He frowned at him and said, "That was a terrible laxity last night. Leaving a prisoner unprotected. Especially when everybody knew what was going to happen."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Gard said softly. "Now you can help me draw up the proper charges against Skull. We'll petition the governor, and maybe we'll stop things like last night from happening again."

Eckart said in quick dismay, "I never said anything about Skull."

"But that's what you meant." Gard was enjoying this. Eckart liked to swing a whip, but he didn't relish the taste of the lash on his own back.

Eckart's face flamed. "I don't know what you're planning, but don't you use my name in anything you do against Mr. Costigan." He pointed a finger at Gard. "I want to warn you about making irresponsible charges. Something could happen to shut you off."

Martha was standing in the doorway, and Gard wanted to wink at her. It wasn't often he had Eckart backing and filing like this.

"I imagine it is useful knowing Mr. Costigan," he murmured. "Particularly if a man has any hopes of going into politics. If a man has ambitions to be a senator or even governor, he'll certainly need Breck Costigan behind him. In that case, a man just has to shut his eyes to everything Breck Costigan does."

Eckart's eyes were chilly with dislike. "I will not discuss Mr. Costigan with you," he said stiffly. He looked at Martha and gave her a grimace that was meant to be a smile. He went down the street rapidly, his anger showing in his rigidly braced shoulders.

Martha came out, and Gard bent his head and kissed her.

She wasn't beautiful in the classic sense, but she had a warmth and an honesty of nature that was better than beauty. She had honey-blond hair and freckles and a mouth that was too generous. And she was Martha, and that was more than enough.

She said, "Are you running all my gentlemen callers away?"

"If you're keeping him around to make me jealous, you're wasting your time."

She sighed in mock regret. "I was afraid you'd see through me."

"But you are making Dolph worry." He gave her a broad grin.

She laughed in return, and their understanding flowed bright and shining between them.

"Poor Dan," she said. "He doesn't stop around often. Should I slam the door in his face?"

Gard shook his head. "I guess eventually even a lawyer will understand." His face sobered. "Martha, I'm riding out to Skull."

Only the quick catch in her breathing showed any concern. "Dolph and I talked about it this morning. We thought you would."

She didn't beg him not to go or tell him to be careful, though those things were in her eyes. She was an unusual woman. She came to him, and there was a trembling in her lips as she kissed him. Her fingers on his arms had an additional pressure, too.

She said, "You'd better get started. As it is, you'll be riding back in the heat of the afternoon."

He untied Ranger's reins and mounted. He turned his head and she had gone back into the house. He was glad she had. It would do neither of them a damned bit of good for her to stand there.

He said, "Ranger, we've got a long, hot ride ahead of us." The bay snorted its displeasure.

Gard wasn't happy about it either. His leg would be aching like hell before he got back.

V

GARD TURNED into the fenced-in lane that led to Skull's ranch house. He still had a good six or seven miles to ride. Costigan owned and operated a tremendous amount of country, but then, it took vast areas to run a cowherd. Some of this land produced so sparsely that a cow couldn't live on less than thirty acres of it. It took ability and hard-driving determination to run a ranch successfully in this country. The Costigans had demonstrated they had both qualities in abundance.

His face was blank as he thought of the coming meeting. He wasn't even sure of what he was going to say once he reached the house. *It'll come*, he thought bleakly. *Once I see Costigan, it'll come.*

Twenty or thirty calves were grazing near the fence just ahead of him. As he drew even with them one of them turned broadside, and he saw the great, ugly brand covering most of the round. Inside the crude outline of a skull were the empty eye sockets and the wide, grinning mouth. He wondered soberly what possessed the first Costigan to pick a brand like that. He had to admit it was distinctive—and almost impossible to blot out or change.

Every one of the cows had a calf following it. Men might grumble about Costigan's luck; but it wasn't luck. He kept the top hands, and he paid the best wages. He furnished the best horses and the best equipment, and in return the men he hired gave him loyalty. Gard could admire the man if he would just run Skull—and let other things alone.

The house and outbuildings sat in a little bowl. The rise to the north would keep the winter winds off of the house, and the trees around it kept it shaded in the summer. This was the first time Gard had ever been out here, and he looked around with more than a normal curiosity. The outbuildings, the corrals, everything was in top repair.

Three men lounged on the long, shady veranda, and Gard had the feeling they had been waiting for him. He rode up and stopped a dozen feet from the veranda railing. He knew Lanos by name, the other two by sight.

Lanos got to his feet, stepped over the railing, and moved to within a yard of Gard's right side. He was a tall man with bunchy shoulders that spoke of power. He was swarthy complexioned, and a hot, dangerous spark gleamed in his black eyes. He had big-knuckled hands and the reputation of using them at the slightest provocation. Gard suspected that his lopsided nose came from some past brawl. The man's temper was legendary, and he seemed poised now on the balls of his feet.

"Aren't you kinda lost, Deputy?" he drawled.

Gard hooked a knee around the horn. It didn't do much to ease the ache in his leg. "I don't think so," he said in easy tones. "I came out to see Costigan."

He saw the hot flicker in Lanos's eyes. Lanos expected men to say "Mr." Costigan.

He started to swing down, and Lanos said, "Don't get down. You're not staying."

Gard sat there debating his choice. It was meager. He could swing around and ride away in beaten disgrace—or he could step down. If he did Lanos would rush him. It was in the man's eyes.

Before he had to make his choice a voice said from inside the house, "What is it, Kirby?"

Lanos half turned his head. "Nothing I can't handle, Mr. Costigan." His face had a savage, disappointed look. He

didn't want Costigan's interference in this. He had his man backed against a wall, and he didn't want to lose him.

Breck Costigan came out onto the porch, followed by a woman and a boy of about sixteen years. Costigan was only of average height, and he walked stiffly erect as though too conscious of this fact. The first impression might have taken him to be fat. He wasn't. That chunky look came from layers of hard-packed muscle. He had a face like an eroded, granite knob, pitted and lined and scarred by the vicissitudes of the years. He could have been fifty or seventy. A man couldn't tell by his face. An iron will held it together, and it would until the final crumbling. His white, bushy eyebrows were as wild as briar patches, and the coldest blue eyes Gard had ever looked at stared out from under those brows.

The length of Costigan's stare before he spoke was an affront. Gard bore it without changing a facial muscle. He would force Costigan into some kind of recognition of him, into speaking first.

The boy was a smaller, younger duplicate of Costigan. He had the same blue eyes and the same jutting cut to his chin. He moved with a swagger because he had neither success nor authority behind him.

He said, "Pa, what's the tin badge doing out here?"

"Shut up, Dane," Costigan snapped. A flare of anger appeared in his eyes. The boy had forced him into speaking first, and he hadn't intended to.

The woman leaned against a veranda support, and her posture outlined a woman's rich fullness beneath the thin blouse. She would put a catch in any man's breathing. Gard dared put no more than a glance on her. Her eyes were green. A cat would stare in that unblinking manner. He had never seen harder eyes. They reminded him of green agates.

She said, "Where's your hospitality, Father? Ask the deputy down and offer him a drink."

She mocked all of them, and Gard saw the red mottling of anger in Costigan's face.

Lanos's eyes narrowed, and Gard caught that narrowing. Was it in response to Costigan's anger or because Gard had dared look at Stella Costigan?

Costigan said, "And you shut up, Stella." His anger was increasing. His son and daughter had forced him into handling this differently than he intended.

Gard was transfixed on the pinpoint of their stares, and still he waited. He thought, with sardonic humor, Costigan was marking him well. He would surely know him the next time he saw him.

"You're out of your jurisdiction, aren't you, Deputy?" A subtle tightening was in Costigan's face. He knew he had been out-waited.

"Maybe," Gard said gravely. He let the silence get awkward again before he added, "Somebody broke Loney Kenyon out of jail last night and hanged him." He couldn't see the slightest flicker of emotion in Costigan's face.

"Does that concern me?"

"That depends on who did it."

Some hard amusement was in Costigan's eyes. "You trying to say somebody out here did it?"

"They'd have a reason. He told me he stole one of your steers."

"Then he got what he deserved."

Gard couldn't keep all the heat out of his voice. "He deserved a trial. Nobody is going to ride into my town and break into jail—"

"We've got a big man here, Mr. Costigan," Lanos interrupted. "He owns the town and the jail. Maybe he won't let us ride in anymore."

Costigan came down the steps. He tilted his head to look up at Gard. "Are you saying that, Deputy?"

Dane followed him and moved to the rear of Gard's horse. Gard missed the wicked speculation in his eyes.

"I'll make it as plain as I can, Costigan." He took a perverse pleasure in letting the unadorned name rake the man. "Don't break any more laws in town. Not the smallest one of them. Not any of you."

Mingled rage and bafflement were in Costigan's eyes. "You rode out here to tell me that?"

"I did." It would put no restraint on Costigan, but Gard felt the better for having said it. It marked out a line for both of them to see; it separated him from the rest of the town. ✓

He saw Costigan's lungs swell and waited for the following blast. He didn't see Dane Costigan throw the handful of gravel, but he heard it splat against Ranger's rump. The ride and the stand in the sun had shortened the horse's temper. He squealed his fury and kicked with both rear hoofs. The kick didn't unseat Gard, but it loosened him. He slewed around in the saddle and grabbed for the horn. Ranger kicked again, getting more height and indignation into it. The jar when his hoofs landed was a slashing force that whipped Gard out of the saddle. He lit on his right shoulder and cheek, and he felt the hard, dry ground rake at his flesh.

He shook his head a couple of times before he could get the water out of his eyes. He climbed to his feet locking his teeth against the throbbing in his leg. He must have come down twisted on it. Ranger was racing down the lane, and Gard looked after him with bitter eyes. At the moment he could have shot him with pleasure. The horse might run a mile, or might not stop until he reached the end of the lane.

He stopped and retrieved his hat and beat the dust out of his clothes with it. Laughter raked him from all sides. Stella's lighter, higher notes jabbed him like needles.

Even Costigan had a frosty grin on his lips. One hand rested on Dane's shoulder in a mark of approval.

Lanos said between gasps, "Look at him. He's trying to figure out some law we broke."

Gard stared at them. He knew just how sorry a figure he cut.

Costigan said, "You poor, damned fool. I hope this taught you something, but I doubt it. Stay out of Skull's way."

Gard said flatly, "It depends where that way goes."

He turned and limped down the lane, and the hooting laughter followed him. He remembered the looks in Costigan's and Lanos's eyes, two different looks, but both weighing. By riding out here he'd put this on a personal plane with both of them. And he thought savagely, *That suits me just fine.*

VI

THE MONTHLY DANCE was drawing a big crowd. This was an eagerly awaited night, for it broke the monotony of hard work during the prolonged hot spell. Riders galloped up and down the street, whipping around at its end to come dashing back. They yelled at the top of their lungs, and Gard grinned in sympathy. Their screeching hammered at a man's ears, and the dust they raised was bad, but this was only because of an excess of spirits and it did no real harm. As long as some fool didn't try to pack a gun in town, he could put up with the yelling. So far he hadn't heard a single shot, and he hoped it stayed that way.

Buggies, runabouts, carryalls, and wagons fed towards the school yard from all directions. Some of these people would drive as much as forty miles. And for a few hours the hard grindstone of making a living would be forgotten.

Just as soon as the first strains of the fiddle sounded, those

riders would stop weaving through the wheeled traffic and head for the dance. And that wouldn't be long away.

He bent his steps towards the Emery's house. He had on a new shirt, and his boots had a high gloss. He hoped the damned dust wouldn't dull them before he reached Martha.

She and Dolph must have seen him coming, for they were standing outside on the walk waiting for him. His eyes glistened as he looked at her. She had on a gold-colored dress that complimented her hair and put shiny lights in her eyes.

He drawled, "Real pretty."

"She oughta be," Emery said. "She spent four hours trying for that effect." He laughed at the face she made at him.

She took Gard's arm. "At least I didn't use the language he did while he was dressing."

"You'd use it too if you wore a collar and tie," Emery growled. He ran a forefinger inside his collar. "This is the way a hanging man must feel."

He never looked comfortable in a dress shirt and tie. It always seemed as though the material was ready to burst at the seams.

"You're getting fat," Gard jeered.

Martha's laughter rang out as she took Emery's arm. They went down the walk three abreast, and she looked diminutive between the two men. She would never allow Gard to rent a buggy, scoffing at the necessity of a rig to replace a three-block walk.

Gard tried to minimize his limp. That long walk after Ranger three days ago had put a lingering ache in his leg. He regretted the limitations it put on him. He wouldn't be able to dance as long and as hard as some of the young blades. Martha always said, loyally, that she was glad to sit out some of the dances to catch her breath. Gard had to insist that she take dances with some of the others. Eckart would be there, his face begging, and Martha would dance one or two with him. Gard never felt resentment or jealousy.

It was a pleasure to watch her float over the floor. She loved to dance, but she never forgot him for more than a few seconds at a time. Her eyes would come back to him, and he would smile at her. When a man knew how a woman felt about him, it left no room for jealousy. He thought, *It must drive her partners crazy sometimes, though.*

He wore no gun or badge tonight. He had an understanding with Norman that he was free on dance nights—unless something serious broke out. But there had never been anything Norman couldn't handle.

They joined the ever-widening flow of people towards the schoolhouse, and he nodded in return to greetings he received. He didn't miss the way men looked as they glanced at Martha, and he couldn't blame them for that look. She was easily the prettiest girl for miles around.

Emery said, "Skull's here," and jerked his head towards them.

Gard saw the Costigans go into the building ahead of them. Dane Costigan swaggered along beside his father, trying to imitate his heavy, heel-thrusting walk. Stella moved a step ahead of them, paying no attention to the greetings the Costigans received.

Gard's mouth tightened. The Costigans got deference from people, but not liking. He saw no quips nor jests nor handshakes. Maybe the Costigans liked it that way, but that would be living in a lonely world to Gard. He didn't see Lanos nor any of the Skull riders. Probably in one of the saloons, he thought, taking a few shots before they came to the dance. He felt that old tightening of his skin, and the curious tingle along his spine. *Not tonight*, he thought savagely. This night was reserved for laughter and gaiety.

Martha was perceptive to his moods, and she asked, "What is it, Gard?"

"Nothing," he said promptly. "I was just looking around to see who's here."

✓ She didn't press it, but her eyes were worried.

They were barely inside when old Malburn drew a tentative bow across his fiddle strings. Young Johnny Halveran was good with that guitar too. He picked up the tentative chord and swelled it into a growing invitation to step onto the floor. His boot picked up a faster tempo, beating out the time, and the music rode gay and high.

Gard held out his arms and Martha fitted into them. He was well aware of his deficiency on a dance floor, though Martha wouldn't hear of it. But he was certain of one thing. It was pure pleasure dancing with her.

Her eyes sparkled as the dance ended. "Now, what was wrong with that?"

"From my viewpoint, nothing. But I'm luckier than you. I've got you to dance with."

She laughed and squeezed his arm.

He danced two more and was willing to sit out one. Eckart claimed Martha for the next one, and Gard grinned at the look she gave him over Eckart's shoulder. He didn't feel any pity for Eckart. Some men just never knew when to quit trying.

He didn't see Stella skirting the edge of the floor, until she was almost on him. She wore a green dress cut disturbingly low in front. There would be a lot of outraged women's comments on that dress tonight and tomorrow. The color of the dress made her eyes more sharply brilliant. She would have been a beautiful woman if those eyes contained any warmth.

She said, "Deputy," and the mockery was in her voice and eyes. "No hard feelings against us?"

"Why, no," he said and couldn't keep all the stiffness out of his voice. He had the feeling this woman feasted on the trouble she could stir up, and he wondered why she had made this obvious approach.

“People were watching them with covert glances, and Martha saw them too.

“You don’t sound like it,” Stella said. “Dance with me next time and prove it.”

He wondered what her intent was—certainly not for the pleasure of dancing with him. He looked past her across the floor and saw Lanos glowering at him. *That might be it*, he concluded. *She might be using me to stir him up.*

He said, “I’m sorry, Miss Costigan. But I have the next dance.”

Her eyes sharpened, but her lips were still loose. She turned her head and surveyed Martha, and anger kindled in Gard at the effrontry of it.

“The next one then?” Her words still came easily.

He shook his head, trying to make his regret ring true. “That one’s taken too.”

The good humor was slipping from her face. She had Breck Costigan’s mouth when it tightened like that.

She said, “Don’t tell me the little wren has you tied up for the rest of the evening.”

He was weary of her barbs, and he said, “Why don’t you just drop it, Miss Costigan? Nobody’s going to be helped by this.”

Now the fury was alive in her eyes. “I made a public spectacle of myself coming over here and asking you. I’m not used to being turned down like this.”

He said gravely, “Most of us get used to it a lot earlier.”

Her face went white, and her breathing was gusty. “You mean it’s a lesson I should get used to. There are all kinds of lessons, Deputy. And most of them cost something.”

She turned and walked through the dancers, and her head was high. People looked from her to Gard, then quickly away.

He sighed as he watched her. She had built something out of nothing, and now some unreasonable pride would

demand an accounting. *Damn her*, he thought with a sudden violence.

She stopped beside Lanos, and Lanos bent his head to her. Gard saw his face blacken as he listened to her, and he started across the floor. She caught his arm stopping him. She said something else, and he remained beside her, the blackness staying on his face.

Eckart brought Martha back and asked eagerly, "Later, Martha?"

"Maybe," she said, impatiently to be rid of him. Eckart had missed all of the byplay between Gard and Stella. His attention had been solely on Martha.

She waited until he left, then asked, "Was she making trouble, Gard?"

"I think she is now," he said soberly.

She flashed a glance across the floor and saw Lanos's expression. "Would you like to leave now?"

"That would be running," he reproved. He grinned, easing the sting of it. "And you know I'm too hardheaded to do that. But all your dances are taken. I told her I had every one of them."

"You think that makes me unhappy?" she asked.

He smiled at her. "You know, I might even be getting fond of you."

He danced the fast ones and the slow ones. And the ache in his leg increased. The last dance broke sweat out on his forehead, and he said, "We're going out for some air."

Lanos had never taken his eyes off him, and Martha objected. "I think that's what he wants."

"Probably," Gard agreed. "But if it's in his head, it might as well be now as later."

He took her arm and moved towards the door. He wouldn't let himself look back. He was quite certain Lanos was following them.

Outside he said, "Go find Dolph. I haven't seen him for quite a while. I don't want to have to carry him home."

His attempt at humor didn't ease her worry, and his voice sharpened. "Find him, Martha." Lanos was just coming out of the door, and there was trouble in his stride. "I'd like to have Dolph around in case more than one jumps me." There was some truth in what he said, but mainly he wanted her away from there if Lanos insisted on pushing things.

He said, "Go on," and this time it was an order. He pushed her gently, and she went with a backward, pleading glance.

He was standing easy when Lanos reached him. He said, "Hot, isn't it, Lanos?"

Lanos was half drunk. It showed in the slurred oaths he used on Gard. He wound up by saying, "Nobody insults Miss Stella."

Gard snapped, "Back up. I never insulted her."

"Are you calling her a liar? She says you did."

He was wasting his time arguing with Lanos. Lanos had his pretext, and he had no intention of letting go of it. "Have it any way you want it," he said.

He was prepared for what might follow, but Lanos's quickness almost nailed him. The man had a fast hand, and the blow grazed Gard's cheek. He felt the sting as the opened flesh and the night air mingled.

He pivoted and went in under the next blow. He sank a fist deep in Lanos's belly, pulling a pained grunt out of him. It rocked Lanos back and dropped his arms to the hurt area, and Gard followed up the advantage. He sledged at Lanos's face, trying to end this quickly, and swore as two blows missed the man's jaw. Lanos had tremendous vitality and quick recovery, and he was a moving, bobbing target. One blow smashed his nose, and the other split his lips. Blood curtained the lower half of his face, but the hurt was superficial.

Lanos fell back until he had a clear moment and pawed

at his bleeding. Gard didn't want to give him this advantage, but that last quick turn had pulled a stab of protest out of his leg, and he waited for it to subside.

People were running towards the scene, and Gard heard their cries of excitement. Stella stood on the top step, and her face looked wickedly eager.

I hope you're happy now, Gard thought bleakly.

His blows had put caution in Lanos, and it was going to be harder to get a good, open shot at him again. He bounced a fist off of Lanos's forehead, and the hard bone put a throb in his knuckles. He let Lanos circle him, willing that Lanos would expend more energy and breath than he did. Lanos had power in his fists. The aching knot beneath Gard's left eye attested to that.

But he could whip the man. The conviction grew stronger with each passing second. And maybe Lanos knew it too, for his swearing sounded in a steady stream. It wouldn't be done with one blow. He'd have to whittle the man down, but he was content to follow that course.

He heard Emery's great roar, "Take him, Gard," and his lips moved in the ghost of a grin. So Martha had found him. He was sorry she was back before the windup of this, but so far he wasn't bleeding too badly. If he could hold it this way, it wouldn't be too bad a sight for her to see.

Lanos came in and fainted, and Gard caught the real blow on his forearm. He whipped in a clubbing blow that smashed against Lanos's Adam's apple, and the man fell back, gagging. Gard gave a soft oath. He couldn't tag the man's chin squarely.

Lanos was sagging, and now was the time to take the gamble—to end it. Gard started to spring forward, and a boot toe was thrust before him, tripping him up. He went down hard and came up to a knee, throwing an angry look behind him. It was easy to identify the tripper. The Skull rider had a broad grin on his face.

Lanos took advantage of his unexpected help. He rushed Gard, and there wasn't time for Gard to get to his feet. He was in a crouched position, and the weak leg was behind him, giving him poor leverage. He tried to thrust from it, but couldn't avoid the man's upraised knee. It smashed him squarely in the face, knocking him over backwards. He heard Lanos's triumphant yell, followed by the rush of boots. He knew Lanos would never let him get to his feet. Lanos would kick him to pieces. Gard tried desperately to get out of the way. His eyes were filled with water, and his senses were scattered and uncoordinated. He made feeble, pawing motions, but he couldn't avoid those pounding boots.

Then, suddenly, the blows stopped as a great voice roared, "Kick him. Go on, kick him. I'll break you in pieces."

It was odd that his hearing was unhampered when his other senses were failing him. That was Emery's voice, and he was declaring himself a part of this fight.

Breck Costigan's voice sounded a long way off. "A bad mistake, Emery. You had no part in this."

Emery said furiously, "As much a part as the man who tripped Gard. How many of you does it take to whip one man? Oh, I forgot. This is Skull. You people don't know the meaning of a fair fight."

Angry sound rumbled in Costigan's throat, but he formed no articulate words. Emery's contemptuous words held him before this watching crowd.

Lanos started to make a move, and Costigan said sharply, "That's all, Kirby."

Gard pushed himself to hands and knees, letting his head hang. His nose was running blood, but his head and eyes were beginning to clear. He looked around the circle of watching faces and saw Martha's face drawn with worry. He tried to grin reassuringly at her, but it didn't come off too well.

He pushed to his feet, and the ground tilted several times before it settled back down.

"Do you want him, Gard?" Emery asked.

"He doesn't want any more," Gard replied. "He was whipped, and he knows it. Come on, Lanos. I can finish it."

He heard Martha's little cry that was quickly smothered. She knew what he had to do.

Lanos didn't want any more. It was written all over his face. But he squared off, despite the reluctance in his eyes and movements.

Gard had gotten careless, and it had cost him. He had abandoned his plan and tried for a quick end. Now he'd stand off and literally cut Lanos to pieces.

That knowledge was in Lanos's face too, for he threw a harried glance about him.

"No," Costigan said. "It's over. We didn't come in here to ruin an evening of pleasure for people."

Emery's laugh was a slap across Costigan's face. "The first time I ever heard you worry about people, Costigan."

Costigan turned a black face towards him. "You'll chew pretty hard before you swallow this mouthful," he promised. He pushed through the crowd roughly and barked over his shoulder, "Kirby!"

Lanos followed him, and his face was sullen. "Another time," he said as he passed Gard.

"Any time," Gard assured him.

Stella followed the two, and the disappointment was a hunger in her face. She stopped before Gard and said, "I've got a feeling this has just started."

Gard was weary of Stella Costigan. He said shortly, "If he ever gets any sense he'll figure you set him up for a beating. But maybe you don't have to worry. Maybe he's not that smart."

Her eyes flashed furiously at him before she walked away.

Martha ran up to him, and her face and hands were anxious.

"Looks worse than it is," he said. He didn't know whether or not his nose was broken. It had taken a brutal blow from Lanos's knee.

Emery rumbled, "Why didn't you throw his ass in jail, Gard? That wouldn't've given them something to chew on."

Martha threw him an indignant glance at the language he used.

Gard said, "It wasn't an official fight, Dolph." He looked at Martha. "I'm sorry I ruined the dance for you."

"You didn't ruin anything. I want to get you home and stop that bleeding."

He looked ruefully at his blood-stained shirt front. The bleeding was slowing, though he still felt an occasional drop roll off his chin. He wondered if all the blood would come out of that new shirt.

They left groups of people behind them engaged in excited talk. Gard had a feeling Stella Costigan was right. She had said something about this being only the start. *However they want it*, he thought, and the anger was a bright flame in him.

VII

GARD SAID, "One snicker out of you, and I'll brain you."

Emery laid down his hammer and asked, "Can I grin a little?"

"Go ahead," Gard said in resignation. "Grins are all I've seen this morning."

"Is it broken?"

Gard shook his head. "Doc says not. But it's sure as hell sore."

"And colored. And swollen." Emery's grin broadened with

each word. "I never saw a bigger nose. You've got every color in the rainbow in it."

Gard resisted the temptation to finger his nose. It felt like a monstrous blob in the middle of his face, and it was hard to keep from touching it.

"Martha made me promise to come by this morning," he said and sighed. "She wanted to see for herself I'm all right."

"Seeing her will prove something." Emery chuckled. "If she can still stand you with that nose, she really cares for you."

"Funny," Gard said bitterly. He was a little weary of humorous remarks about his nose. And they'd last until the swelling and coloring subsided.

"She just took a fresh batch of gingerbread out of the oven. Maybe you can drown your sorrows in a chunk of it."

Gard said wryly, "I sure need something. You coming in?"

Emery shook his head. "Not with the rush of work I've got this morning. They snowed me under."

Gard walked to the kitchen door and knocked. If he saw laughter in Martha's eyes that would be the last straw.

"Oh," she said and gasped.

"Pretty, isn't it?"

"Is it broken?" she faltered.

"Doc says not. Maybe I'm lucky it didn't black my eyes."

"Oh Gard, what can I do?"

"Just give me time."

She took his hand and drew him inside. The warm, spicy aroma of freshly baked gingerbread filled the kitchen. At least he could still smell.

She cut a huge slab and buttered it. She filled a large glass with milk and set it before him. She sat down across the table, and her eyes couldn't stay away from his nose.

"Don't you laugh at me," he warned.

Sourly, he watched her efforts to avoid it. Her nose kept crinkling, and she made the oddest faces.

"Go ahead," he said and sighed. "I know how I look."

She covered her face with her apron, and peculiar gasps and choking sounds came from behind it.

Her smothered laughter reached him, and he chuckled. He should be indignant, but her laughter was infectious. He wouldn't have believed it possible, but he was laughing as hard as she was before he was through.

She wiped her eyes and apologized. "Oh Gard, I'm not laughing at you."

"You could've fooled me," he said and laughed again.

"Gard," she said seriously, "I think it's just relief that you're not hurt badly."

He took a huge bite of his gingerbread. She had a way with an oven. "You cut me another slice twice this big, and I'll forgive you."

He took another bite and said, "Fair." She deserved that punishment.

She smiled at him through the misty sheen of her tears. "Now I want to cry, Gard. The next time I see that Lanos I'll—I'll—"

"If you're going to do something to him, think of something drastic."

"He won't make any more trouble, will he?"

He shrugged. Who knew what Lanos would do? Everybody who saw that fight last night knew he had been whipped. To a man of Lanos's temperament that would be a hard thing to bear.

He said, "I think he'll stay away from town for a while." But he wouldn't bet on it. Costigan would be smarting, too. Costigan would consider the whole thing a blow to his prestige. And Skull wasn't used to such blows.

He said, "It's a funny thing. A lot of people laughed at the way I look, and I didn't resent it too much."

"Don't you see? They were laughing with you. You earned their respect. Not a man of them would have stood up against Lanos, and they know it."

She might be right—if he excluded Norman. Norman had raved like a madman against the disrespect Gard had brought down on the office. A lawman prevented fights; he didn't deliberately provoke them. Gard had stalked out in the middle of the tirade. Norman could have this badge any time he wanted to ask for it.

He finished the first slab. "This was almost worth it. Where's the rest of my order?"

He spent a pleasant hour, and the pan of gingerbread was a wreck when he stood up and walked to the door. He said, "I didn't leave much for Dolph. It serves him right. He laughed at me."

She joined him at the door. "I'd kiss you, but it'd probably hurt your face."

He grinned and started to reach for her. "I'll try not to howl too loud."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw somebody riding up to the front of Emery's shop. He paused and turned his head from her.

She said with real indignation, "I like that. If you're not interested any more than that—" Her eyes followed the direction of his stare, and she said in a small voice, "What's Stella Costigan doing out there?"

"I don't know," he said, and his voice hardened. It surely wasn't business, for Dolph had said Skull quit him over two years ago. And it wouldn't be in the nature of an apology. Stella wouldn't know the meaning of the word.

He said, "We'll wait a minute and see."

Stella put a calculating glance on the house. She wondered what the little wren was doing this morning? She still smarted from Gard's rebuff of last night. She had no real

interest in him—except malice. Last night it had amused her to think of how easily she could take him from his girl. She seethed when she thought of how differently it had turned out. She still wasn't sure why she was here. Maybe she wanted to look at Martha in the daylight. Maybe it was true that rejection sharpened one's interest, instead of dulling it.

She raised her voice against the ring of the hammer and anvil. Her face was flushed with impatience when Emery finally turned his head. That was the fourth time she had called him.

He laid the hammer and tongs down, wiped his hands on his leather apron, and walked to the front of the shop. He looked up at her and said, "Yes?" Neither the word nor his nod had any real warmth.

She said easily, "I think Concho has a loose left-front shoe. Will you look at it?"

He stood rooted, his searching eyes digging deep. He asked bluntly, "Why did you come here?"

His scrutiny and question built a quick anger in her. "You're a blacksmith, aren't you? Where else would I take Concho?"

"Your father doesn't think so, Miss Costigan. He took all his business away from me."

She had to force her laugh. "But this is an emergency. Concho could lose that shoe on the way home. Then I'd be in real trouble."

She couldn't believe her eyes. He was shaking his head in a stubborn, determined gesture.

"I'd be happier if you took it someplace else, Miss Costigan. I always like to know exactly where I stand."

Her grip on her temper was always a shaky thing, and she could feel it slipping away now. She didn't need the work done, but that didn't make any difference. He didn't know that.

She made a last effort and said, "Please."

Her smile and the word had its effect, for he said reluctantly, "Bring him back this afternoon, Miss Costigan. I've got four jobs ahead of you."

She stared at him incredulously, feeling anger heat her face. He was putting her behind somebody else. As far as he was concerned, she didn't rate any higher than those other jobs.

"Who do you think you are?" she snapped.

His face hardened, though his voice was still mild. "I know who I am, Miss Costigan. Ask yourself that question." He half turned to re-enter his shop.

The thin restraint on her temper burst. Her quirt dangled from her wrist by its leather thong, and she grasped its handle. She leaned far out of her saddle and cut at him.

The blow sliced across his shoulder, and he ducked and whirled. His face was raw with anger as he glared at her.

She was in the grip of blind passion, and she raised the quirt again. "I'll teach you who I am," she cried. She swung the quirt again.

He caught the blow on his palm, and his fingers curled around the quirt. He jerked, and she came out of the saddle. She would have fallen if his big hands hadn't caught her.

He held her aloft in a hard grip, and his eyes bored into her. But he said in a reasonable voice, "I'll put you down if you can behave like a sane person."

She struggled in his hands, and those biting fingers hurt her arms. She kicked at him ineffectually, and those fingers kept digging deeper. She cursed him, and her voice kept getting shriller and shriller.

He said patiently, "You might as well calm down." He turned his head at the pound of running feet. Gard was coming towards them, and Martha followed him.

He said, "This little wildcat thinks she can claw anybody she pleases, Gard."

"I saw it. What's it about?"

"She's a Costigan. She doesn't have to take her turn like other people."

He set her on her feet and said, "If you try to quirt me again, I'll use it on you."

She half raised the quirt, but the expression on his face warned her. The expression was stronger than the blind rage that drove her, and she dropped her arm.

Three cold pairs of eyes stared at her, and her own eyes filled with hot tears of fury. "This isn't over," she panted. "You haven't heard the last of it."

"Get on your horse," Gard ordered. "You're lucky you're a woman."

He stepped forward to assist her in mounting, and she slapped at his cupped hands.

Concho was a tall horse, and she had to struggle to get into the saddle. She looked down at them, and her thoughts were plain on her face. She wanted to drive Concho into them.

"I wouldn't," Gard said. His own anger was riding hard, and he said, "Don't come back to town until you learn how to behave."

She cut a ridiculous figure and she knew it. "Wait," she sobbed. "Just wait." She whirled Concho and lashed him into a dead run.

Gard's eyes were sober as he watched the dust raised by the horse's hoofs.

Martha's face was worried. "But why—"

Gard said, "She lost her satisfaction of seeing Lanos kick me to pieces. I think she was hitting back at Dolph for interfering."

Emery worked his shoulder and grimaced. "She hits back pretty good." He inspected his palm, and a red welt was rising on it. "I had the feeling she worked herself up too fast. What's it going to gain her?"

Gard looked back at the dust. It was just beginning to

settle. "I don't know." He would have to do as Stella Costigan said—wait. She was right in another thing too. This wasn't over.

VIII

KIRBY LANOS WATCHED Stella with guarded eyes. She had damned near ridden Concho off his hoofs. It had taken him forty minutes to cool the horse out. Something had happened in town to set her off.

She stalked back and forth between the stalls, lashing out blindly with the quirt. Concho was cooled down, but she wasn't.

He hurt everytime he looked at her. He had hurt since he had become aware she was growing into a woman. He was reaching pretty high for a foreman, and he knew it. The old man would explode if he even suspected. But if Stella felt the same way about Kirby Lanos as he did about her, she could get around Costigan. Hadn't she had her way all her life?

He watched the heaving of her bosom under the thin material of her blouse. He groaned inwardly. At times he had hope, then she would dash it with deliberate cruelty. She had cost him many a sleepless hour thinking about her.

He said, "Stella, anything I can do?"

She flashed him a hot, wild glance, and for a moment he thought she was going to turn her rage on him. Then he saw some of the wildness fade, to be replaced by a cold calculation.

"If I was a man, I'd kill him," she said.

Was it Gard Hubach she was talking about? He knew a wild jealousy. She had shown interest in him last night, or she wouldn't have approached him. And she had talked him into that fight. The mirror said it was going to take a

couple of weeks for the marks of Hubach's fists to disappear. He owed that deputy a reckoning. Anger whipped about in him like a blind snake's strike. None of it was directed at her. He never even thought that maybe it should be.

He kept his voice even. "Better let me take over that job for you."

She gave him a grateful glance. "When I think about it—" She put a break in her voice.

His hopes always sprang higher than a mountain when she looked like this. "Let me think about it for you."

"I wouldn't want Breck to know." She leaned towards him. "He'd go crazy."

The eagerness quivered in his voice. "Tell me." He could accomplish two things—take care of the deputy and earn her gratitude.

It must've been pretty bad, for she had a hard time getting it out. "That Emery—" she started.

He felt a tremendous letdown. "The blacksmith?"

She frowned at his question. "Do you know of another Emery? When I think of it—" She turned her face from him.

He could still win her gratitude. "Tell me about it, Stella."

"Concho had a shoe that needed attention. I stopped by his shop, and he said something to me." Her voice was little stronger than a whisper.

"I'll kill the bastard." His rage made him overlook his language.

"I shouldn't have stopped there," she went on, "but his shop was the closest." She looked at him with wide eyes as though she just realized what he said. "Kirby," she gasped, "I wouldn't want that."

"You think I'm going to let him get away with it?" he growled.

She considered it, then admitted, "He needs a lesson. But I wouldn't want you getting into trouble because of me."

He snorted at the words. "I'll teach him a lesson he'll

never forget. Before I'm through he'll wish it was as simple as a killing."

She wailed, "Kirby, I'm frightened. I shouldn't have gone there. When Breck hears about it—"

"He doesn't have to. I'll take a few of the boys and ride there in the morning."

She was very close to him. All he had to do was to raise his arms, and she'd be in them.

"Kirby, maybe it'd be best if we just forgot it."

"I'm not forgetting it," he said grimly. He started to raise his arms, and she slipped easily away.

She gave him a tremulous smile. "Whatever you think best, Kirby."

He stood there a long time after she left the barn. He could feel the hard thump of his heart. It had almost happened, and she hadn't been too unwilling. It was something a man sensed. Tomorrow afternoon when he came back she wouldn't be unwilling at all.

Emery was deep in thought, and he wasn't aware of the horsemen until they surrounded him as he crossed the inter-section. He moved back a step to keep from getting a foot trampled and frowned up at Lanos. Lanos had five Skull riders with him, and there was something wicked in his eyes.

"Here now," Emery said. "What's this?"

Lanos's teeth flashed in his dark face, but there was no humor in it. "Why, we're going to teach you a few manners."

They pressed in tightly against him, buffeting him with first one, then another horse's shoulder. Emery moved against that pressing weight. He could do nothing else but move.

Anger began to burn in Emery's face. He was off the main street, and so far this action had attracted little attention. They could maul him thoroughly before it pulled anybody's interest.

A hoof pinched the edge of a boot, and he swore deep in

his throat. A horse snorted and blew greenish foam all over him.

He said, "I don't know what's prodding you, Lanos. But you'd better call 'em off."

"Hear the man," Lanos said and bumped Emery hard with his horse.

The horses milled in a tight circle about Emery, keeping him confined to a small space. Dust was rising in a choking cloud, and he could feel it plaster against his face.

The muscles in his arms bunched. In about one second he was going to start jerking them out of the saddle.

"I'm telling you for the last time, Lanos. Call 'em off."

"You're telling me nothing," Lanos snarled. "Before I'm through you'll be on your knees begging me to let you off."

He added a long string of personal oaths, and the other riders filled in any that Lanos had missed.

Emery's anger was a slow-burning fire. It took it a long time to get thoroughly heated, but once it was roaring, nothing could douse it.

He waited until Lanos came around again, until he came a little closer. Far down the street he heard a cry. People were finally beginning to notice this hurraing.

"You'll know how to treat her the next time you see her," Lanos said.

Ah, so Stella Costigan was behind this. Emery might have known. And he could depend on it that her version would be highly distorted.

He said doggedly, "I don't know what she told you, but she didn't tell it straight."

"Are you calling Miss Costigan a liar?" Lanos yelled.

"Have it any way you like," Emery snapped.

One of the riders uncoiled his rope and slipped the honda down as far as it would go. It made a hard, bulky knot, and he whacked it a couple of times against his chaps. He was

a small man with a weazened face, and Emery knew him only as Blackie.

Blackie said, "Let me have him, Kirby. I'll whip a little manners into him."

He flicked out the bulky end of the rope, and it stung against Emery's face. His lips were a tight, thin line at its sting, but he showed no other reaction.

He stood with drooping shoulders, his head partially bowed.

"He gives up pretty quick," Blackie said scornfully. He snapped the rope end out again, and Emery flinched at its bite against his neck.

It seemed as though Emery could only look at the ground. Some fear appeared to have seized him, rendering him incapable of action. The cry down the street was louder, and it was swelled by other voices.

"Get on your knees, you hulk," Blackie yelled. "Get down and beg, before I peel the hide off you."

The other riders were hooting and yelling, and Lanos sat there, a wide, cruel grin on his face. He shouted, "Pop him again, Blackie."

Blackie flicked the rope again, and that big, patient bulk in the street wasn't rooted to one spot any longer. He could move. An arm flashed up and a hand caught the rope. A couple of feet of its end wrapped around Emery's forearm.

The cries were much closer and sustained. By the volume it sounded as though quite a few people were racing to the spot. One voice stood out stridently above the others. "Hold it, hold it," the voice yelled. It registered in the back of Emery's mind, but right now he was too enraged to understand what it said or even to try and identify it.

His powerful arm muscles bulged as he took all of the tension out of the rope with a savage jerk. Blackie squawked as the force of the tug pulled him in Emery's direction. It came too quickly for Blackie to let go, and it hauled him

out of the saddle. He was still yelling as he landed on the ground on his back. He flopped his arms as he tried to get rid of the entangling rope, then the yelling broke off on a frightened squeak as he saw Emery's hands reaching for him and the expression on the face behind them.

It happened in a split-second, and the unexpectedness of it froze the men from Skull. They sat there with gaping mouths, and their dazed eyes saw, but didn't comprehend.

Emery picked Blackie up by his belt and a handful of shirt front. Both material and leather were solid, for they didn't give at Blackie's weight. Emery held him at arm's length for an instant, and rage made a livid mask of his face. He brought his arms down sharply, raising his knee at the same moment, much in the manner a man uses to break a stick across his knee. It sounded like a breaking stick. In the silence the sound was distinct and sharp.

Blackie screamed once, a piercing thing that cut through to a man's guts. His face was twisted with agony as Emery dropped him. He tried to raise himself, and his muscles no longer obeyed his mind. He made queer, twisted floppings in the dust, like a broken-backed snake, and he said over and over, "Oh, my God."

The riders looked at each other and licked their lips. For a long moment they were speechless, then one of them said in an awed whisper, "I think he broke his back."

Lanos was the first to recover. He clawed for his gun, and his wild eyes bulged in his face. "Goddamn you, Emery," he yelled. "You're a dead man."

"Hold it, Lanos," a voice roared. "Lanos, I'll kill you."

The volume of the voice got through Lanos's crazed senses. He turned his head and looked at Gard, and his hand hovered motionlessly an inch from the gun butt.

"Go on," Gard said. "Touch it and find out who the dead man is." His eyes were as bleak as the muzzle pointed at Lanos's belly.

One of the riders shifted, and Gard said, "One of you rather be first? I can arrange it for you."

He stood there on wide-planted legs, and every man who faced him was sure those merciless eyes and that hungry pistol could easily be meant for him.

"Unbuckle it, Lanos," Gard ordered. "Get careless. I wouldn't mind."

Lanos's chest heaved with the passion of his breathing. "Did you see what he did to Blackie?"

"I saw what went before, too. I'm not telling you again, Lanos."

The exchange of looks was brief. Lanos had a killing passion in his eyes, it broke against the cold rage in Gard's eyes. Lanos slowly unbuckled his gun belt. It raised dust as it plopped against the street.

"Now haul out the rifle. And stay smart, Lanos."

Lanos cursed him as he hauled the rifle out of the scabbard. He used the tips of his thumb and forefingers and handled the rifle by the extreme edge of its stock.

Gard disarmed each man in a like manner. They sat there, sullen-faced, whipped for the moment, but the danger in them would build again, and fast.

"Now get your man to a doctor."

Lanos jerked his head at them, and four men dismounted and picked up Blackie. They handled him as gently as they could, but he still moaned at every touch and movement.

Passion showed on Gard's face for the first time. "Get him to the doctor, Lanos; then get out of town." His rage was climbing higher and higher, for as he saw Lanos start to speak he roared, "And keep your Goddamned mouth shut!"

He waited until the men moved away with Blackie, and said, "Get out of here, Lanos. I'm sick of looking at you. Pick up those reins and get those horses off of the street."

Lanos had trouble gathering up all the reins. His face was flushed and wicked-looking when he had the horses

finally under control. He put a last murderous glance on Gard and Emery, then moved slowly away, leading the animals.

Emery said, "I'm sorry, Gard. I lost my head. But they were whipping me like a damned dog. I couldn't take that."

"I wouldn't expect you to," Gard grunted. "Pick up the guns, Dolph."

He turned bitter eyes on the watching people. Many of them had seen it all, the same as he had, but no one of them stepped forward or raised a voice in protest.

"Clear out of here," he yelled in a sudden excess of temper. "Your show's over."

They straggled away, turning resentful faces back at him.

"Pick your friends out of that, Dolph," Gard said.

Emery had an armload of weapons. "You give me a sorry choice," he said. He bobbed his head at the guns. "I think I'd rather pick one of these."

"You're going to jail, Dolph."

Emery threw a surprised look at him, then his face reddened. "Damn it, Gard. I'm sorry about Blackie. I didn't mean to go that far." Blood was trickling down his cheek, and it oozed from the welt on his neck. "Did you expect me to stand there and just take it?"

"I expected you to do what you did. Do you know of a safer place, Dolph? Don't you think Lanos has picked up more guns by now? Even if we got out of town, they'd run us down. At least at the jail we've got them coming at the front of us."

Emery's face was somber. "Step out of it, Gard. I don't want to make you trouble."

Gard scowled at him. "Do I got to yell at you too? Move."

Emery looked at him a long time, then shook his head before he turned and strode away.

Gard went down the street after Emery, and his eyes

watched every window, every doorway. It was probably too soon to expect real trouble right now, for Skull hadn't had time to reorganize. But this was a false moment of peace, and he couldn't expect it to last very long.

IX

EMERY DEPOSITED the guns on the floor of the marshal's office. He said, "You know you're a damned fool, don't you?"

Gard gave him a bleak grin. "A known fact."

Emery's voice was tight. "Gard, let me make a break for it."

"How far do you think you'd get? We know Lanos has four men here in town. And we don't know how many of the townspeople will help him." He saw something in Emery's eyes and mistook it for hope. "Don't fool yourself, Dolph. Don't count on a damned soul out of this miserable town. If they don't actively help Skull, they'll stand by and do nothing."

Emery said, half angrily, "That's more reason for you to step out. Why make it your job alone?"

Gard said slowly, "It became my job when I pinned on this badge, Dolph." He let a grin relieve the seriousness of the statement. "Besides, I've got another reason or two."

"You're a damned fool," Emery repeated flatly and peered out of the window.

Gard knew the street was empty. He had just looked a few seconds ago. He had seen neither animal nor human movement. It looked like a deserted town. But they were out there—the aggressors and the non-participants. And the non-participants could hurt them as much as the others. He wasn't kidding himself about the situation. They needed help.

He'd make a break for it if he thought it at all possible.

But Skull would be watching every outlet from town. He and Emery couldn't take a dozen steps without somebody spotting them. And a report of that spotting would get to Lanos. He had no doubt that already a Skull rider was whipping his way back to the ranch. And Skull would be pouring into town. Not until mid-afternoon or later, he thought. They had some leeway. But what were they going to do with it?

"What do we do?" Emery asked, and a note of helplessness was in his voice.

"Wait," Gard said flatly. They had the small advantage of position. Skull would have to come at them from the front to take them. And the price it would cost might discourage Skull. He thought of Breck Costigan and let that thought slip away. Costigan wouldn't consider any price too big. But something else could happen. The town might find its lost conscience. And that conscience might spur them into making a united stand against Costigan. A man built false hopes in spite of what he knew. He let go of the second thought. It had less substance than the idea Skull might quit.

He said, "Dolph, I'm going across the street to Hardin's store. Don't let anybody in. And I mean nobody."

"Watch yourself, Gard."

Gard nodded. He thought they had a little margin of time. At least he felt no immediate pressure.

He stepped into Sam Hardin's store, and the man's eyes were frightened. He said, "Gard," and swallowed hard.

Gard gave him a bleak smile. "Don't worry, Sam. I'm not staying. I need some things."

He saw the refusal forming in Hardin's face. "I'll take them or pay for them. You've got a choice."

That was anguish in Hardin's face. What a sad, little hope it had been about the town's conscience. Hardin was in an

agony of fear at the thought Skull would blame him for letting Gard have anything.

He said, "I never saw a town so filled with brave men. Tell Lanos I took the stuff at gun-point."

He ordered canned goods, staying to the liquid ones, such as tomatoes and fruit. He bought two of the biggest canteens Hardin had, and ordered, "Fill them."

Hardin dipped water out of a barrel into the canteens, and Gard watched the man's rapid movements with cold eyes. Hardin was in a terribly frenzy to get him out of here as fast as possible.

He paid for everything and slung the canteens over his shoulders. He picked up the canned goods, and it was quite an armful.

"You can run and hide now, Sam. I'd advise you not to stay here. You'll be right in the line of fire."

He heard a frightened squeak, and his lip curled. "How do you stand yourself, Sam?"

He crossed the street, and Emery opened the door. He watched Gard set his purchases down and said, "I got to thinking about water. Do you know that my mouth's dried up?"

Gard offered him a canteen, and Emery shook his head. "I can wait awhile." The same thought was in both of their heads. They didn't know how long they'd have to make their water last.

"Anybody here?" Gard asked.

Emery took too long with his reply. "Nobody," he answered, and he was hiding something.

"Who was it?" Gard asked sharply.

"Martha," Emery said reluctantly. "I sent her home. I told her we had enough on our minds without worrying about her."

Gard was filled with regret that he had missed seeing her. But Emery had been wise. Martha might protest it, but she

would do as Emery said. The waiting would be pure hell on her. But then, he had never heard of anybody that waiting came easy to.

An hour dragged away, and the street remained deserted. He saw no movement inside Hardin's store. The man could still be there, but Gard imagined he had slipped out of the back door.

The heat was building up in the office, and the damned flies hummed incessantly. Emery swatted at one, missed and swore. Gard darted a glance at him. Was the growing tension stringing him fine?

He opened a can of tomatoes with his knife and sawed off the top. He handed it to Emery. Any little diversion was a welcome thing.

Emery raised the can to his mouth, and Gard saw his Adam's apple bob. Emery lowered the can and asked, "What the hell kind of a host are you? You forgot the salt."

Gard grinned. He could forget any worry about Emery stringing fine on him.

Emery handed him the can, and Gard finished it. He walked to the window and looked out of it. He said, "Norman's coming down the street. I was wondering when he'd show up."

He opened the door and stood in it, blocking Norman's entrance. The man looked like a tired old wreck, and strain made his face haggard.

He said, "Gard, do you know what you're doing?"

Gard said, "I do." His eyes were hot coals of accusation. Norman should be in this room with them. Not that he expected it, but that badge said he should.

"Blackie just died. It's murder now."

"I still call it self-protection," Gard snapped. "You got your hole picked out yet, Mason?"

Norman gave him a puzzled look.

"The one you're going to hide in later."

Norman swelled with indignation. "By God," he blustered. "This is my office. I'm ordering you to leave it. I'm ordering you to unpin that badge."

Gard said wearily, "Keep standing there, and you'll make me throw you into the street." He couldn't lock eyes with the old man. Norman wouldn't look at him.

"I'm warning you, Gard."

"Get out of here," Gard yelled at him.

Norman gave him an uncertain glance and caved in. He turned and retraced his steps, and his boots seemed immeasurably heavy.

Emery said, "Gard, you heard him. You'd be smart—"

"Nobody ever accused me of that," Gard interrupted. "Now keep still."

Emery's face was sort of twisted. He said gruffly, "I don't know why, but I always fancied a hardheaded man."

"You recognize like," Gard jeered.

It broke up that little, strained moment, and Gard knew it would never return.

The waiting dragged on. He tried to doze while Emery watched at the window, but the sweating and the flies made it impossible. His eyes flew open as Emery said, "Lucas Clay is coming."

Now what did he want? Gard hoped he wasn't coming with more of the same kind of talk Norman brought.

He blocked Clay's entry into the office. His eyes were remote in his expressionless face.

Clay gave him a strained smile. "Have you forgotten who your friends are, Gard?"

"The only one I know of is in here." Bitterness spilled out of him. "I thought at least one of you might ride to the sheriff's office and tell him what's going to happen here."

"I tried that, Gard. I sent Ramsey. Lanos caught him outside of town. They manhandled him pretty bad. Nobody is willing to try it again."

Gard nodded slowly. He didn't feel full appreciation, but at least a little effort had been made.

An awkward silence fell between them. Clay broke it by asking, "What good is it going to do, Gard?"

Gard eyed him steadily. "If you don't know the answer to that I can't tell you."

A slow flush crept up from Clay's collar. "Be reasonable," he pleaded.

Gard's patience was wearing thin. "Lucas, you tell me what good this is doing."

Clay's sigh was long and heavy. "None I guess." His shoulders drooped as he turned away.

"Lots of company," Gard said and grinned at Emery.

Emery's face didn't have even a glimmer of an answering grin. "Gard, you can still change your mind."

Gard swore at him and finished with, "I'm getting damned sick and tired of talking about it."

Emery's eyes were squinted to little slits. "I said you were hardheaded," he muttered.

The sun finally decided to abandon its overhead position in the sky and started its slide towards the horizon. It was the longest afternoon Gard had ever spent. He was surprised that Skull wasn't here by now. He guessed he had underestimated the time it would take them to organize."

Emery said, "A rider coming down the street."

Gard moved to his side. He didn't ask if Emery could identify the rider. He was pretty sure he knew who it was. That could only be Costigan riding down the street this boldly. In a way, it was a relief. The waiting was about over.

He stood in the doorway and said, "Don't get off, Costigan."

Costigan glared at him. His face was heat and rage flushed. "I want that man."

Gard drawled, "Do I have to tell you what you can do with your want?"

Costigan's face burned brighter. "You Goddamned fool," he yelled. He controlled himself with effort and lowered his voice. "You standing back of murder now, Deputy?"

"Not murder, Costigan. Didn't they tell you how Blackie earned it?"

"Blackie was just having a little fun," Costigan protested. "If a man can't come in here and have fun without getting killed for it—"

"If you call peeling off a man's hide—" Gard broke it off. He didn't have to tell Costigan the difference.

He said, "Get out of here, Costigan."

Costigan's jaw had that belligerent jut. "Are you telling—"

"Not telling. Ordering."

Gard drew his pistol and planted a bullet under the horse's belly.

The horse reared and plunged, almost unseating Costigan. He grabbed the horn to retain his balance, and then viciously jerked the animal under control.

He said, "All right, Deputy." He turned and rode back as slowly as he came.

Gard watched him until he was out of sight. That bullet was an invitation to all who wanted to join this.

Emery said, "They'll wait for dark."

Gard nodded. He thought Emery was right. He said, "We've got a little work to do between now and then."

He shut the door and dropped the crossbar into its brackets. He motioned for Emery to help him, and they scooted the desk against the door. He tested its weight and frowned. He wished it were heavier.

An idea struck him, and he said, "Help me carry the bunks in here." If Emery had any questions he held them.

They took the bunks from the cells, and Gard said, "I've got a hammer in here someplace." He had seen it a couple

of weeks ago—a rusty old thing with one of its claws missing. But he wanted to drive nails, not pull them. He rummaged in the cupboard at the back of the office and found the hammer and a handful of rusty nails on the bottom shelf.

He came back and knocked a couple of sideboards off of a bunk, then angled them from the edge of the desk top to the floor. He nailed cleats at the top and bottom of the boards. He tested the desk, and it was much more solid. It wouldn't stop a battering ram propelled by determined men, but how determined would Skull be with guns blazing at them?

He walked over to the gun rack and took out a rifle. He used its barrel to hammer the glass out of the front window. He wanted no cutting shards flying at them.

He grinned humorlessly at Emery. "Won't the City Council raise hell when they hear about this?"

He made two thicknesses of the bunks and nailed them against the window frame. The mattresses were thin, but combined they should dull most of the power of a bullet. At least they'd keep the bullets from flying full force into the office and ricocheting off of something.

He didn't like that small, back window high up in one of the cells, for it was directly in line with the front of the office. He studied it and decided there wasn't much he could do about it.

He got out all the guns, and Emery helped him load them. He wished he had more shotgun shells. There was nothing that knocked the tough out of a man quicker than the blast of a shotgun.

He looked around and didn't see anything else he could do. Everything depended upon how big a price Skull was willing to pay.

Emery looked at the guns and ammunition lined against

the front wall. "All the joys of home," he said. "A real cozy little place."

"It'll do," Gard said. He hoped it would.

He opened two cans of peaches and handed one to Emery. He sat on the floor while he ate. The fruit was hot and almost tasteless. He drained the syrup from the can and tossed the empty container into a corner. That syrup had been a bad idea. It made him thirsty.

He uncapped one of the canteens and drank. The water was tepid. He handed the canteen to Emery and listened to the gurgle of the water. It sounded a hell of a lot cooler than it actually was.

He rolled a cigarette and handed the makings to Emery. Emery rolled and lit his cigarette. It was getting to be dusk, and each puff highlighted their faces.

"Now all we need is guests," Emery said.

Gard didn't blame him for the tight note in his voice. He felt some of it himself.

"We'll get those," he said flatly.

He crawled to the nailed-up bunks and peered out over them. The shadows were thickening. He had spent all afternoon trying to hurry the hours. Now he wished he could put on a drag and slow them down. He grinned bleakly. A man was never satisfied. But darkness would be no friend. From now on every move they made would have to be a guarded one. Any looking they did out that window would have to be done in brief glimpses.

A few lights were coming on in town, but a lot of Main Street was dark. People would be huddled in their homes, awaiting the coming hours in fear. Yes, they'd know fear, but not like he and Emery would know it.

The saloons were lighted, but they wouldn't be doing much business tonight. Men would gather there, but it would be mostly for talk—talk that would be carried on in hushed tones.

He thought of all those men and resisted the temptation to curse them aloud. If those men had made a determined stand, Skull would never have dared to ride in here.

Somewhere a couple of blocks down a dog barked. It didn't sound like a domestic animal at all. It had a mournful, eerie sound, as though it contained all the wailing of the human race.

It kept up the noise, and Gard said, "That Goddamned dog."

X

IT WAS DARK outside. Gard had walked these streets almost a thousand times at night and never realized it could get so dark. It was a cloudless night, but the moon wouldn't be up until about midnight. His teeth showed in a grimace. Midnight was a long way off.

Neither he nor Emery felt much like talking. Occasionally, they exchanged a word or a phrase. Tension was a tangible force, building up its weight until a man felt crushed under it. He thought of Martha and shook his head at the tortured anguish she must be going through.

Emery risked a quick peek and complained, "I can't see a damned thing."

"You will." They were out there. Gard could feel it in the tingle along his spine. It was like an itch, and he wanted to scratch it. They were out there in the stores across the street, or moving flattened out against the buildings on this side. And every second carried them a little closer.

The floor grew hard against his knees, and he shifted irritably. It was hard for a man to keep his attention at an intense, high point, and he amused himself with fantasies. Wouldn't it be something if he could suddenly turn on the

sun? He'd like to see their faces if that could happen. The shock of it would freeze them in their places.

"I'd cut the bastards down then," he said.

He didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until Emery asked, "What did you say?"

He made himself laugh, and it didn't sound too forced. "Nothing, Dolph. Just talking to myself. I'm beginning to slip."

Emery grunted in reply, and the sound held a little irritation. Gard didn't blame him a bit.

The sharp crack of a rifle came with startling unexpectedness. He had been waiting for that sound for hours, and yet, when it came he was totally unprepared for it. The slug whined above the bunks and thwacked into a rear wall.

It was here, and the strain changed to a different type. But this type involved action, and he welcomed it after the long period of doing nothing.

He poked his rifle barrel around the edge of the window, and said, "I didn't see the muzzle flash."

Emery hadn't caught it either, but from where the bullet had hit Gard would say it had to have come from across the street. Hardin had turned his store over to them. That wasn't a fair weighing. Hardin wouldn't have any say-so in the matter.

He was tempted to throw a return shot into the store, but instead he waited for a target he could see. The shots came like wicked bees humming above their heads and thudding into the bunk mattresses. He could pick out muzzle flashes now, at least a half-dozen of them blinking on and off like fireflies.

He shot at one and heard no answering yell. He swore at his marksmanship.

The street was suddenly filled with the pound of running feet, and the concentrated yelling hammered at a man's eardrums. He had better targets now. Those running figures

bulked a darker blob against the lighter background of the street. He got off shot after shot and levered new cartridges into the chamber with smooth, unbroken precision. He heard a high-pitched scream that cut shrilly through all the other yelling, and one of the running figures threw up its arms and pitched forward on its face. Another ran a half-dozen steps, bending lower and lower with each stride until it finally fell into a crumpled heap. He heard the deeper boom of a shotgun as Emery sprayed the street with both barrels.

The charge was broken and thrown back, but three figures didn't join the general retreat. They lay still and crumpled in the street, and another dragged itself painfully through the dust. Gard had it in his sights, then let it go.

Working a rifle lever was no real physical exertion, but he found himself panting. The acrid reek of gunpowder bit at his nostrils. He heard the click as Emery inserted new cartridges into his gun and his fingers finished his own reloading.

He wondered who had ordered that charge. It had been a suicidal thing. Probably Costigan, in the first flush of his anger. It wouldn't lessen Costigan's determination, but it would put caution in him. And caution was the forerunner of thinking.

His throat was suddenly parched, and he crawled to one of the canteens. He took several swallows and brought the canteen back to Emery. The water was still tepid, but it tasted better than it had earlier.

A bullet whipped into the room, followed by others at irregularly spaced intervals. Gard had the feeling they weren't aimed bullets or even intended to hit anything. They were for one purpose only—to keep them pinned down and occupied.

He thought of that rear cell window and said, "Dolph, cover the front."

He slewed around and crawled a few feet to a better

vantage point. The window was a square of dim light against a darker background. He thought he heard a scraping noise back there, but that might have been his tight nerves playing him tricks.

Then he saw that dim square of light being blotted out. A head, rising to the window, could be doing that blotting.

He aimed at the darker blob in the window and fired. He heard a hoarse grunt followed by a rasping gurgling, as though a throat had suddenly opened and the breath was leaking out of the hole. He wasn't sure about the thud. He could have imagined that. But there was no imagining the infuriated yelling. Whoever had helped the man up to the window were now looking at the results of their efforts.

He didn't think they'd try that again. The window was too vulnerable. He crawled back beside Emery and said, "That ought to stop that." Emery's face was a white, dim oval. Gard couldn't see any expression on it at all.

The office was again filled with angry, whining bees. A bullet glanced off of a wall and screamed across the office on a tangent. It plunked into the flooring not far behind where Gard lay. He wasn't afraid of an aimed shot, but nobody could tell where a ricochet was going, nor protect himself from it.

Emery said, "They're using a lot of ammunition."

But not enough, Gard thought. There wasn't the slightest hope that Skull would run short.

The firing picked up in intensity, and Gard said, "Watch it." That intensity had a purpose. He risked a quick glance and saw a man running across the street on an angle. He fired and said a soft oath as he missed. The running figure whirled and reversed its direction. He threw another shot, and the figure never stopped.

He heard Emery's shotgun boom again, and Emery said with wicked satisfaction, "Got him." At this range that shotgun had a wide-reaching pattern.

Four figures lay in the street now, and Gard thought he could safely add another in the rear of the building.

Emery put the question in Gard's mind into words. "Will they stop now?"

Gard said a flat, "No." Skull might stop if two of those still figures were Costigan and Lanos. But as long as the driving force behind this was alive they wouldn't stop.

The firing was really better than the silence. The silence picked at a man and filled his mind with menacing ghosts. While the firing was going on it occupied his mind.

Emery said, "Maybe they'll wait until daylight?"

Gard shook his head. The only way Skull would wait for daylight was if they were forced to. Daylight could only be a disadvantage for them.

He said, "They might try to starve us out."

Probably a bigger hope for them was that thirst would drive them out. He was grateful he had enough foresight to think of the water and canned goods. They could last a couple of days, and maybe another one. He conjectured briefly on what the town would do if Skull kept up this siege. *Nothing*, he concluded. The town hadn't done anything at the start. What made him think they'd step in at some point farther down the line?

The continuing silence bothered him. It wasn't Costigan's nature to sit still too long. Frustration would be a savage rowel driving the man to action.

He picked up a shotgun and said, "They could be working down this side of the street." By flattening themselves against the buildings on this side it would be possible for them to work their way close.

He said, "Take your side, Dolph," and Emery nodded understanding.

It was a risky business to lean out of the window and sweep a look along the building fronts. He put the shotgun butt against his shoulder and said, "Now." He stood and

leaned far out over the bunks. He caught a glimpse of something white that could have been a man's shirt. He didn't give himself time for a longer look. He pressed first one trigger and then the other, and the butt kicked back hard against his shoulder. He heard the double, deafening report of Emery's firing. It was followed by frightened yells and the pound of running feet.

The best he could hope for was that a few of those pellets had stung somebody. He hadn't had the time to aim. But it should keep them from trying that again for a while.

Emery said, "I don't think I got anybody."

Gard thought his results were negative too. Emery partially straightened to peer out, and Gard said, "Keep down."

Every time Skull was thwarted they filled the office with lead. The pattern wasn't broken this time.

The firing died to a few desultory shots, then stopped altogether.

Emery asked, "What will they try now?"

It was a constant question, and its stinging plagued a man. He asked, "Dolph, if you were on the other side of the street, how would you get us out without losing any more men?"

Emery gave it some thought, then said, "It looks like a tough nut to me."

"You know what I'd do? I'd get me a bundle of dynamite and fuse it. I'd get as close as I could, and if I couldn't toss it in the window, I could at least get it close enough to blow out the whole front of the building."

Emery stared at him. "That's a hell of a pleasant thought."

Not pleasant, but a distinct possibility. And Gard wouldn't bet that one of them wouldn't think of it. They could get dynamite in town. Parnell stocked it in the little shed behind his store.

Emery lay in silent thought for a long moment. "Damn it,

Gard," he complained, "why did you put that in my head? Now I really feel helpless."

Gard nodded. He knew exactly what Emery meant.

XI

HE LAY THERE, exploring first one avenue of escape, then another. And he knew it was useless. Because there were so damned few avenues. They couldn't get out through that small back window, and the moment they stepped out in front they'd be cut down. He'd take that in preference to being blown to bits. That left the roof. If they could break through the roof—he knew how impossible that was.

He swore suddenly as the thought hit him. There might be a chance of breaking through it, and he hadn't thought of it until now. A man became so occupied with saving his hide that he forgot little details. There had been an old trapdoor to the roof, but in rainy weather it had run streams around its edges. He remembered how he used to cuss as he set pans to catch the water. The City Council had finally listened to him and paid for boarding up the door and tar-papering over the boards. Old Pike Workman had done the work because he was cheap. Now, everything depended upon how well the work had been done and how sturdy the materials were. He had a glimmer of hope because Pike was never too thorough. Emery's strength might be able to burst through those boards.

He said, "Dolph, we boarded up an old trapdoor in the roof. I just thought of it. Do you think you can break it open?"

"It's worth a try," Emery grunted to hide the new hope in his voice.

It was going to be tough breaking through because Emery wouldn't be able to get the strength of his back and shoulder

muscles against it. Gard wasn't even sure he could reach it by standing on a chair. If he could reach it, all he could depend on was the power in his upraised arms and hands.

"You can find it," he said. "It's recessed. See if you can reach it."

He heard the scrape of a chair as Emery dragged it beneath the old trapdoor. He waited tensely. Emery had no protection of any kind right now. If Skull took this moment to fill the office again with bullets, one of them could hit Emery.

He heard the chair creak under Emery's weight, then Emery said, "I can get my hands against it."

He must have exerted some pressure, for Gard heard the boards groan. In the stillness it sounded ominously loud, and he was sure it carried at least across the street.

"Dolph, hold it."

"It gave a little," Emery said impatiently.

Gard crawled closer to him. "I'm afraid Skull will hear it and guess what we're at."

Emery gave it a moment's consideration. "Blast a couple of shots when I give you the word. That'll cover it."

"If they return the fire you'll be wide open, standing on that chair," Gard objected.

"I'll have to chance that." Emery's voice had an eager, excited note to it. He saw a way out of their trap.

"All right," Gard said and crawled back to the window. He wasn't happy as he remembered the other times Skull had filled the office with flying lead.

Emery said, "Now."

Gard pulled first one trigger then the other, and the shotgun's boom was obscene in its loudness. He thought he heard a savage wrenching behind him, but that could have been imagination. It was followed by a thud, as though a considerable weight had been dropped on the floor. He was right about Skull's response. The bullets whined into the

office again, giving the walls a worse case of pocking. He felt tight and strained as he recalled the sound of the thud. Had Emery been hit?

He said huskily, "Dolph?"

Emery said cheerfully, "They're quick on the trigger. I dived for the floor."

Gard swore at himself. If he had remembered the sequence of sounds, his worry wouldn't have been necessary. The thud had come a split-second before Skull's return fire.

Emery said, "I split the boards and got the nails started. I think I can get them out of there now without too much noise."

The firing died down again. Gard put a hand on Emery's arm, holding him to the floor a moment longer. There was always a late bullet or two. He was right. Only this time there were three of them. He removed his hand from Emery's arm.

He heard the chair creak again, and he knew Emery would work with all the care and caution in the world. But even then he winced at each squeaking protest of a nail being pulled loose from its mooring.

Emery's whisper was triumphant. "It's open. I'm going up."

All Gard could see was a dark, struggling mass trying to hoist itself into the air. Emery threshed his feet around to add a little momentum. Then the dark form disappeared and the roof creaked.

Emery stuck his head back down through the opening. "Come on, Gard."

Gard poked two shotgun muzzles out of the window and propped them into position. He added a rifle. If Skull could see them, that might make them pause a little.

He decided against taking a canteen or a rifle with him. They were running now, not fighting, and the pistols in their holsters would have to do.

He climbed up on the chair and stretched his arms towards the opening. Emery's hands clamped on his wrists. He heard Emery's deep grunt at the strain put on him, then Gard was being lifted towards the roof. In his pendulum-like ascent he scraped against a jagged edge of board, and a shirt sleeve and some of his skin was left on it.

He got his elbows hooked over the edge, then Emery pulled him up and onto the roof. He lay full length a moment and panted. The exertion had been brief, but that kind of exertion took everything a man had.

Emery said, "We made it," and Gard didn't blame him for his elation.

They weren't in the clear yet, but they were in a lot better shape than they had been a few moments ago.

Gard chose the long side of the block, wanting to be as far as possible from the office before they dropped to the ground. They crawled to the next roof, and it had a false front. They could move across it in a crouch. The silence behind them held, and Gard prayed it would last minutes longer. He wanted to get down to the end of the block before Skull tried another rush. The moment Skull entered the office they would spot that gaping hole in the roof.

They had one bad spot—a four-foot gap between roofs. It wasn't that the distance was so great, but they would have to jump it, and the landing on the opposite roof was going to make some noise.

He went first and turned to steady Emery if he needed it. Emery landed, and the pound of his boots sounded louder to Gard than a thunder clap.

He waited tensely and heard no outbreak in the street below. The landing noise hadn't carried as far as he had feared.

They made their way to the last roof in the block, staying low to keep their silhouettes from showing. They crossed diagonally to its edge and looked down into the dark abyss

of the alley below. The blackness made the drop look endless, but Gard knew it couldn't be over nine or ten feet. He dropped, and the impact of the ground beat him to his knees. He grunted under it and smelled the dust his boots raised. Emery landed beside him.

He moved to the mouth of the alley and looked up and down the cross street that intersected the alley. The street looked deserted, but he still felt naked and vulnerable. That stretch looked so open.

He said, "Cover me," and sprinted across the street. His skin crawled in anticipation of an outcry of discovery, but none came.

He turned and waited for Emery. He couldn't see Emery's face plainly when he joined him, but he was sure a grin was there.

Emery said, "We're going to make it."

Gard couldn't be that positive, but he dared to breathe more freely. Their chances of being spotted were minimized with each step. And their chances would continue good as long as Skull's attention was focused on the office.

They had covered that block, crossed the intersecting street, and made the opposite mouth of the alley, when the deep, sullen boom stopped them. It had volume and the sound of ominous power, and no other man-made noise could rival it in intensity.

It was followed by a prolonged, savage burst of yelling, and Gard could visualize the wrecked building. He almost imagined he could smell the fumes of the dynamite.

Emery jerked his head towards the sound. "We didn't have much time to spare," he said, and Gard could easily forgive him for the tremble in his voice. "One of them thought of your dynamite."

Gard nodded. But that should buy them a little more time. Skull would be cautious about entering the wrecked building, and it would take time to search through the ruins.

He wished they had horses, then let go of the wish. Maybe going on foot was the better way. Skull had good horseflesh. If they spotted them racing from town, they would probably be able to run them down. Besides, finding mounts involved too much danger. The livery stable would surely be covered, and he was positive the same would hold true of Emery's shop.

He said, "We've got a long walk ahead of us."

"Where are we going?"

"Welles's old mine."

Emery reflected on it, then bobbed his head. "We can lay out there until Skull gets discouraged and gives up."

That would take too long. The problem of food and water would overcome them before their wait ended. Gard knew Breck Costigan's driving determination. Costigan had been licked and outfoxed. He would never rest until that was wiped away.

XII

THE ABANDONED mine tunnel lay halfway up the hill. Gard's legs ached after the four-mile walk. But they had been given the most important thing they needed right now—time. And from the vantage point of height they had a good sweep of the country.

He inspected the old mine timbers as best as he could in the darkness, and they appeared sound. But best of all there was a seep of some deep-earth spring a hundred yards down the tunnel. It made a small pool on the tunnel's floor. The problem of water was removed.

"You get some sleep," Emery said gruffly.

Gard's argument was only halfhearted. He was grateful for the chance to stretch out. He didn't think he would sleep, but some of the tension should drain away.

He didn't mind the hard ground nor the pebbles that dug into his back. A couple of hours ago he wouldn't have given a plugged nickle for their chances, but they were out of a trap that had had no possible way out. He looked at the dark bulk of Emery hunched at the tunnel's mouth. It was a comforting sight. He wished he could see Costigan's face about now. Maybe the man would choke to death on his spleen.

He thought of Martha and wished there was some way she could know they were safe. Maybe she did know. Other people in town besides Skull should have learned the dynamited building had been empty. He hoped so.

Emery's big hand shook him awake. He opened his eyes, and strong daylight was flooding the mouth of the tunnel.

"Damn it, Dolph," he protested. "You shouldn't have let me sleep so long."

"You needed it. I wouldn't have woken you up now, but my eyes kept closing on me."

He needed sleep. His eyes were red-rimmed, his face haggard. "Just give me an hour or two," he said.

He stretched out, sighing in bliss. He shut his eyes, and the soft snoring came immediately afterwards.

Gard moved to the little puddle of water. He slaked his thirst, and it wasn't too bad. Only a taste of mud was in the water, and he wasn't complaining. He splashed water into his face, and he felt better. Not refreshed nor rested, for the weariness was a dull weight in him, but immeasurably better than he had any right to expect.

He walked to the mouth of the tunnel and scanned the country. Nothing stirred in it. He should be able to see even the smallest of dust clouds before it got within miles of where they were. The sun was a hot orb, and it would get hotter. They would be grateful for the shadow of the tunnel before the day was out.

He let Emery sleep until well after noon, and Emery woke

of his own accord. He sat up and stretched and yawned. He looked at the slant of the sun's rays coming into the tunnel and yelped, "I didn't expect to sleep all day."

Gard grinned at him. "You didn't. It's still daylight." He was sure Emery was thirsty. "The water's not too bad."

"I know. I tried it last night." Emery drank a long time, then raised his head. "I'd only ask for one other thing. A big, juicy steak."

"I ought to brain you," Gard said sourly. His stomach had an emptiness in it that yelled at him every time he thought about it. Add another ten or twelve hours, and its clamor was going to be deafening.

He looked out over the desolate country. Even if they could find game and get close enough to shoot it with a pistol, he would be afraid to risk it. A pistol report would carry a long way. The nearest town was at least fifty miles away, and he considered trying to walk it. It wasn't an impossibility, though walking that far under this punishing sun without water would be a cruel trek. They might find an isolated ranch or two, but that couldn't be depended upon. He filed it back in his head as a last resort. What they needed were horses to get Emery out of the country.

He sat there and pondered it, through the long, afternoon hours. Emery must have been tugging at the same problem, for he said, "What we need is horses, Gard."

That was an obvious problem, and Gard asked half irritably, "You got any answers?"

Emery said calmly, "Maybe. I can slip into town after dark." He held up his hand, shutting off Gard's protests. "If I can't find some I'll ask Martha to bring them out tomorrow. And don't tell me you're going along. Two of us would just double the chance of being seen. I know every bush, tree, and building in that town. And I know how to use them. I can get in and out without being seen. It's the only way," he finished.

Gard had a thousand objections he wanted to voice. The greatest was the deadly risk to Emery. The menace lay not only with Skull—it would come from the townspeople, as well. He had no doubt that too many of them would hasten to report to Costigan if they saw Emery.

Emery grinned. "Can't think of anything against it, huh?"

Gard made a helpless gesture. "A thousand things. But maybe you can make it, Dolph." Despite his bulk, Emery was light and fast on his feet. And if he ran into an emergency his strength might buy him out of it. He would have to count on strength rather than gun play. If it came to gun play, Emery would be a dead man, with the noise a shot would make.

"You better let me go," Emery said. "It's the quickest way I know of to get some food out here."

Gard's belly rumbled at the mention of the word food. There was no question that Emery could make a faster trip. Gard remembered how the trip out here put a drag in that bad leg. Double the distance, and he'd really be crawling along.

He said, "For God's sake, be careful, Dolph. Their attention won't be focused on one spot. They'll be scattered all over town, watching and waiting." He'd bet any amount that Costigan would still be there. It would take much longer than a day to make Costigan give up that bone.

"Sure," Emery said. "They'll be watching the house. I know that. But I don't think they'll really be expecting me. They won't think I'm that crazy to come back so soon. That's a little advantage."

He squinted at the setting sun. "I'll start in about an hour. It'll be well after dark when I get there. Don't sit here and worry."

"Hell no," Gard said, and Emery grinned at the sourness of the words.

Emery filled up on water and said, "About time to be

going." He stood at the mouth of the tunnel, his eyes sweeping the country. The late sun still had a baking intensity. He glanced at Gard and said, "I'll be back as soon as I can." His tone was as casual as though he was only going for an evening stroll.

Gard wanted to say again, "Be careful, Dolph." He had already said it once, and Emery knew it still held.

He watched Emery plod down the hill. He watched the bulk of the man diminish in size, then it was only a dot on the horizon. He stared at the dot until it disappeared, and the intensity of his staring put water in his eyes.

He turned back to get a drink, hoping to drown some of the gnawing ache in his stomach. He needed to hear sound, and he put his thought into words. "The bastards," he said viciously, and it included everybody with the Skull smell on them.

He pictured Emery's slow walk towards town, and he wondered if Emery felt as lonely as he did. It would take about an hour and a half for Emery to reach the outskirts. It could take him almost as long to get to his house, for he would have to weigh every step before he took it. It would be a long time before Emery came back, and the waiting would eat Gard alive.

Emery slowed as he saw the first light ahead of him. That came from Donniphon's house, and Donniphon kept a dog. That was something else to keep in mind—the real danger from dogs. Not from their teeth but from their barking, for a sustained barking was certain to pull attention his way. A dog might not have the best eyesight in the world, but the keenness of his nose more than made up for it.

He made a wide swing around Donniphon's house, keeping his ears tuned for the rush of canine feet, followed by yapping. He breathed a sigh of relief as he thought he was safely away from the house.

But the houses were becoming more congested, and he wouldn't have space to maneuver in. He was going to have to start going between them, and the threat that somebody would step outdoors and see him was with him every step of the way.

It almost happened at Greeley's house. He was cutting through the backyard when an orange oblong of light showed at the rear of the house. Emery froze in the shadow of a bush as Greeley stepped out of the back door. He was afraid to breathe as Greeley peered into the blackness.

"Who's there?" Greeley called sharply. He waited a moment, then yelled, "By God, you'd better answer me."

A slighter figure joined him, and Greeley's wife said, "What is it, Pat?"

"I swear I saw somebody slinking through our yard. I'm going to get my gun, and—"

"You'll do no such thing," she said. "With all those terrible men in town I'd die of worry while you were out there. You probably only saw a shadow anyway."

Greeley wasn't hard to convince. "Maybe you're right," he muttered.

He threw a last look around and followed his wife back into the house.

Emery raised a limp hand to his forehead and wasn't surprised at the dampness it touched. What if Greeley had made a search; what if he had approached him? He hadn't faced that question yet, and it was time he looked at it. For at any moment he could run into somebody he knew well. That question could have only one answer. Gard was waiting for him, and his own hide was at stake. If it happened, that person was going to have a broken head.

He abandoned his idea of picking up a couple of horses. He would have to go into sheds or barns after them, and he'd never get an animal out of them without noise. And noise would bring on the problem he was trying to avoid.

There would be horses tied to the racks along Main Street, and he thought longingly of them. But it was only a thought. He wasn't crazy enough to go anyplace near Main Street. No, his best bet was Martha, and maybe he had known it all the time.

He slowed his progress until he was barely moving, a shadow that drifted from cover to cover. He used back yards and alleys, and every shadowy bush and tree that he passed. He was a couple of blocks from his house when one of his fears materialized. A small black and white dog ran out from under a porch and yapped at him. His heart jumped up into his throat, momentarily blocking his breathing. Then he recognized the dog and squatted.

"Tiger," he said wheedlingly. "Here, Tiger."

The dog identified his voice, and its barking stopped. It came towards him, its tail whipping back and forth.

He petted the animal, and it went into an ecstasy of joy. It tried to jump up and lick his face, and he kept trying to quiet that twisting, delighted body.

He straightened and moved a few steps, and the dog followed him. He said in a harsh whisper, "Go home."

He could send it back a few steps, but every time he moved it followed him. He sighed and eased his pistol out of the holster. He called Tiger to him and held him halfway quiet with one hand. He raised the pistol barrel, and he would never know better the meaning of treachery. He brought the barrel down across Tiger's head. He heard the strangled noise rattling in its throat, and the animal went limp. He hoped he hadn't hit too hard. He hoped Tiger would wake up a little later with a sore head and nothing more.

He felt the tightening of his nerves as he approached the back of his house. Now he was barely moving, only taking a step after he had thoroughly tested what lay before him.

His caution paid him well. He would never have spotted

the man in the shadow of a huge lilac bush if the blinking of a cigarette hadn't marked him,

He remained motionless until his eyes picked out the darker silhouette of a figure. He heard it shift restlessly, and his eyes searched for a companion.

The man shifted again and muttered, "Goddam waste of time."

That oath against boredom told Emery what he wanted to know. The man was alone. He shifted his course, and no cat ever moved more lightly. He placed each boot carefully, praying no crackle of dried grass or snap of a twig would give him away.

His swing carried him behind the man. He thought of slugging him, then decided against it. In the darkness an accurate blow was almost impossible. The hat could muffle it, or he could be off just enough to let a squawk out of the man. He couldn't risk either thing happening. Yet, he couldn't just stand here and wait for a more opportune moment, for some basic instinct might warn the man he was being watched.

He was wrestling with the problem when he saw the man flick his cigarette away. Emery moved then, figuring the man's attention would be on the glowing, arching descent of the butt. He didn't know a man who didn't watch a flicked-away cigarette butt.

He was within reaching distance when the man started to turn his head. Emery sprang the last few feet. A forearm went against the man's windpipe, and the only sound was a tiny, stifled gurgle. Fingers tore at his forearm, and boot heels lashed at his legs. The struggle couldn't last long against that brutal pressure. He lowered the limp form to the ground after its final, convulsive frenzy. He felt no regret. This man would have shot him in a wink. He was only sorry it had happened so near the house. Martha wouldn't be

blamed for it, but it could tell Skull that somebody else had been here.

He studied the dead man a moment longer. Maybe he could do something about it when he came back out.

The blinds were drawn, and he couldn't see into the house. But a light was still on. Martha hadn't gone to bed. He went up the two steps to the kitchen door. The latch was faulty, and at times it failed to catch properly. He hoped it was that way now. Getting Martha's attention could pull notice to him.

He fiddled with the latch, and each metallic movement of it sounded agonizingly loud. Then it moved freely, and he was inside the door. He saw the circle of light moving along the floor towards the kitchen. Martha had heard the noise of his entrance and was carrying a lamp to investigate it.

He said in a sibilant whisper, "Martha, it's me."

He heard her gasp and saw the circle of light waver and knew her shaking hand caused it. He said, "Put the lamp back." He didn't want light in here.

She did and hurried to him. Her arms went around him, and he felt the emotion racking her body. "Easy, girl," he kept saying as he patted her head. "Everything's all right."

She got her feeling under control and asked in a trembling voice, "Gard?"

"He's fine," he assured her. "Just hungry." A ghost grin touched his mouth. He should have said wolf-hungry and been more accurate.

"I knew you'd gotten out of the building," she said. "Everybody in town's talking about it."

He didn't have to ask if Skull was still in town. Proof of it was out in back. "I guess Costigan's raving," he said.

"He's searched every house in town. He's kept a man out front and back here. You shouldn't be here," she cried.

"I know," he said. "I'll be all right. Right now I'm hungry."

She moved towards the stove, and he said, "No fire. If

they saw smoke coming out of the chimney this time of night it could make them curious. "I'll take anything cold you've got."

She had the major portion of a cold roast, and he made giant inroads on it. He left a chunk of it for Gard and filled up on bread.

He said, "Get me a sack, honey."

He put the remains of the roast in the cloth bag, and she said, "Let me do it."

She put in all the bread she had in the house.

Weariness washed over him, and he sat down, watching her put in various items. His attention was dulled, and he wasn't sure of all she put in. He said, "That's enough," as the sack was almost filled.

He stood and hefted the sack. It was bulky but not heavy. He said, "I'm going back now, honey. We're out at the old Welles's mine. You remember it? We rode by it one day."

He refreshed her memory with landmarks, and she nodded.

"Can you bring us a couple of horses? Bring Scotty and Ranger."

She said fiercely, "I'll get them there."

He grinned at her vehemence. "Don't let them follow you."

That was an unnecessary warning, but he wanted to impress it on her.

She hugged him again before he stepped outside. He didn't censure her for that brief display of emotion.

She said, "I'll be there sometime tomorrow."

"Fine, fine." He brushed her forehead with his lips. "Don't you sit up worrying. I got in. I'll get out."

He stopped outside and pulled the door to behind him. He moved quickly away from the house, for he knew he was a black silhouette against its whiteness. He paused when the deep shadows had again wrapped around him. He heard nothing out of the ordinary. At the far end of town a dog was

keeping up a love tryst with the moon. A couple of cats disputed possession of something, and their yowling rose to a crescendo. It was suddenly broke off as one of the cats decided it didn't want that something after all.

All he heard were the normal summer night's noises of a town. He wished it were true; he wished the town were normal.

He moved to the spot where he had left the body and stood looking somberly down at it. He couldn't leave it here. It was a grisly finger pointing squarely at his house, and Skull would know he had been here. They would keep Martha under closer watch, and even worse, they might harm her.

He picked up the body and moved across the alley that ran behind his place. He walked up it for a hundred feet until he came to the Wiltons' shed.

He studied the house, and it was dark. He'd have to take a little chance of being seen from the house, but if he got the body inside the shed he didn't think it would be found for at least several days. He had never heard of the Wiltons using the shed for anything else but storage for their winter wood.

The door hinges creaked dismally, and he had never heard a noise so God-awful loud. He waited tensely, then breathed out a little sigh. The noise hadn't carried as far as he'd feared.

The doorway was festooned with spider webs. It had been a long time since the Wiltons had entered this shed. He dragged the body inside, stepped back out and shut the door. He put the peg holding the latch back in its hasp and scraped cobwebs from his face.

He retraced his steps and picked up his sack of food. He had a new urgency coursing through him. He told himself it was because Gard would be pacing ruts in that tunnel. That wasn't all of it. He had been under quite a strain steal-

ing in here like this, more strain that he had realized. Now he wanted to get away from this town where he could walk without the hairs crawling along his flesh. Maybe he could make better time returning than he had coming.

XIII

MARTHA WAS UP and dressed before the first false light of dawn strengthened into the true day. She looked out the front and back to see if she could determine whether or not the house was being watched. She drew a deep breath as she saw no one. Perhaps Skull didn't believe the house needed watching in the early small hours.

She stepped outdoors, and she wanted to run. She wanted to run to the shed, saddle Scotty and Ranger and ride out of town as fast she she could.

She made her movements as normal as possible. If anybody saw her she wanted them to think she was only taking a morning ride. They might question her sanity at the hour, but she didn't want them questioning her purpose.

She saddled Ranger first and debated about riding him. She decided against it, fearful that he was too much horse for her. She knew Scotty. He had a disposition like a gentle kitten. She had trouble lifting and throwing Dolph's saddle onto the animal's back, and she was panting when she had finally cinched up.

Outside the shed she mounted and led Ranger. He was a strong-jawed brute, and she thought he would jerk her arm out of the socket. She really needed another horse, and she had thought about it. But she was afraid that leading two horses would be really conspicuous. Maybe not any more so than one, she thought dismally. But anyway, she intended to walk back. Gard and Dolph would holler their heads off, but they couldn't stop her.

She breathed more freely when she was a short distance out of town. She hadn't seen a soul. This was going much better than she had even dared hope for.

She put Scotty into a canter when she was outside of town, and Ranger led better, taking the pull off of her arm. She kept twisting in the saddle to look behind her. She was beginning to relax in her new confidence. Nobody was following her.

She threaded her way through a deep coulee, and after she had climbed its opposite side she paused for another check. Her heart bounded into her throat, blocking her breathing. She was sure she had caught just a glimpse of a rider ducking his mount behind a jumble of boulders.

She sat there several moments, and she saw nothing else. But she couldn't go on—not until she had disproved or confirmed that glimpse.

She headed back across the coulee, back towards town, and her disappointment made her blink to keep the tears from spilling out.

She headed straight for the boulders, and when she was opposite them Lanos and three riders moved out and blocked her passage. She kept her face blank, though her nerve ends were a shrieking rawness. That glimpse had saved her from riding on and leading them to the old mine.

"Morning, Miss Emery," Lanos drawled. His face was drawn as though he hadn't slept for a long time, but his eyes were wickedly bright. "You're out riding awful early."

"The horses needed exercise." She hoped her tone had the right amount of icy reserve. She didn't want any shakiness in it, and certainly no fawning.

"Is that so?" His face seemed to have sharpened. "You didn't get word somehow to bring these horses to somebody, did you?"

"How could I get word?" she said contemptuously. "The

way you people have been watching me. I think this whole thing has affected your mind."

His face turned raw and savage, and he reined in close to her. He leaned over and seized her arm, and his fingers dug deep.

"Don't get smart with me," he snarled. "How did they get word to you? Where are they?"

His fingers carried a cruel bite, but she kept her face from twisting against it. "You're hurting me," she said calmly.

The wildness in his eyes was growing. "I'll do worse than that. Who came into town last night? What happened to Tribbe?"

Despite her intentions, a cry slipped out. She bit her lower lip to lock other sounds in. "I don't know what you're talking about."

One of the riders twisted uncomfortably in his saddle. "Aw, Kirby," he protested. "Look at her face. You manhandle her any more, and it won't sit well in town. Maybe she doesn't know. She was riding back towards town, wasn't she?"

Lanos glared at him. "Who cares what the town thinks?" But he removed his hand. "I wish to hell I'd put you out in back of her house instead of Tribbe."

For a moment the release was almost as bad as the pressure of his fingers. The returning circulation put fiery needles throughout her arm, and she wanted to cry out against it.

"May I go now?" She was proud of how steady her voice sounded.

"Get out of here," he yelled at her. "And just try leaving the house again." He leveled a finger at her. "I'm warning you—" He broke off, not finding the words he wanted. "Just try," he repeated.

She heard them quarreling among themselves as she rode away. It was really Lanos doing most of the talking, and much of it was oaths directed at the luckless rider who had dared question him.

She couldn't stop her tears, but it didn't matter. They couldn't see her face. The tears rolled freely down her cheeks as she thought dreadingly that she had failed them. Gard and Dolph would be expecting her this morning, and she wouldn't be there.

The tears were drying by the time she reached home. She unsaddled the horses and put them into the shed. She walked into the house and splashed water into her face. It didn't help much. When she looked into a mirror her face was red and puffy.

She couldn't sit still, and she couldn't think clearly. She had to get those horses out there, but how? Every way she turned she ran into a blind wall. Perhaps if she waited until tonight—? She shook her head, discarding that idea. Darkness wouldn't lessen Skull's alertness. After the incident this morning, Lanos wouldn't let the watchfulness slacken a bit. If she only dared leave the house to find somebody to help her. She ran over a list of names, and she didn't have enough confidence in any one of them to trust them. Besides, whom-ever she talked to would only focus Lanos's attention on themselves.

She wanted to scream at the offensive loudness of the ticking of the clock. She thought, *If I don't get out of this house, if I can't talk to somebody, I'll go crazy.*

She jumped at the knock on the door, and then put calmness into her face.

She opened the door, and Dan Eckart was there. She said, "Dan," and there was never more eagerness in her voice.

His face brightened at her welcome. "Martha, I just came by to see if you're all right."

"Oh yes," she said and took his hand. She drew him inside and shut the door. "Who saw you come in here?"

He frowned at her, not understanding what she meant. "Nobody, Martha. At least, I didn't see anybody."

She wrestled with a monstrous decision. She was sure he

cared for her, and she could use that caring. It was deceitful, but she felt no self-censure. Gard and her father depended upon her, and that dependency might carry their lives with it.

"Would you do something for me, Dan?"

He said solemnly, "Anything I could, Martha. I don't have to tell you that."

"Even if it meant danger to you?"

He made a deprecatory gesture, showing her what he thought of the danger.

"Dan, I'm in desperate need. Dolph was here last night."

His eyes went wide. "That was foolhardy."

"No," she argued. "Gard and Dolph need horses to get out of the country. They won't be safe until they do. I tried to take the horses to them this morning. I was stopped. They're expecting me, and I can't get to them."

"My God," he said angrily. "Getting you involved in this—"

"I am involved, Dan," she said quietly. "Even if I only sit here."

He pulled at a finger and stared at the floor. She hadn't asked him, but he guessed at what was in her mind. He could bind her to him forever with this tremendous favor. And at the same time he would get rid of his competition. Gard Hubach would never dare come back to this town—not as long as Skull existed.

He smiled and asked, "Martha, would you like me to take those horses to them?"

A little shiver ran through him as soon as the question was asked. If Skull ever learned he— He broke off the thought. How could Skull know? They didn't even know of his interest in Martha.

She tilted her face up to his. "Oh Dan," she said. She looked full into his eyes, his head was lowering to her. She gave him her lips and put as much honesty as she could into them. But the word had no place in what she was doing.

His face was beaming when he raised his head. "Martha," he said huskily. "I never dreamed—"

"You underrate yourself, Dan," she said steadily.

He wanted to kiss her again, and she held him away. If she went through that performance again, her feeling of sickness would show.

Her rebuff didn't upset him. He could understand her agitation in this situation. But the promise was ahead of him, blinding him with feeling.

He started discussing his plan of action. "I'll wait until dark, Martha." He saw the objection in her face and asked, "You wouldn't want me stopped, would you?"

Her anguish faded. He was probably right. Gard and Dolph would be strung tight by nightfall, but she had no other course.

"I'll slip a horse out of town this afternoon and stake it out," Eckart said. "Then I'll ride out after dark and pick it up." He really needed another horse, one for his return trip, and he frowned over the problem. He decided against the third animal. That would only make him that much more conspicuous. It meant a long walk back. He looked at her, and the problem faded. It was worth it.

He asked, "Where do I take them, Martha?"

She hesitated in tortuous indecision. Once she spoke, she couldn't recall the words. But there was no other way. She had to trust him.

She described the landmarks that would lead him to the old mine, and his forehead wrinkled as he tried to visualize them. He said, "I think I know where it is, Martha. Now don't you worry. You'll hear from me as soon as I get back."

She let him kiss her again. He stared at her and shook his head. "My God, Martha, I never dared to hope. You always seemed—"

She didn't want a recounting of what she had done and of

what she was doing. She pushed him towards the door. "You'd better start your arrangements, Dan. Be careful."

Those last two words were the only sincere ones she had said to him, and he didn't prompt them. She watched him go down the street, a briskness in his stride. She looked at her hands and wasn't surprised to see them clenched tight.

Dan Eckart walked down the street, and his step was long and eager. He hadn't given a damn about what happened to Gard Hubach and Dolph Emery. In fact, when he first heard of the affair he had hoped that Skull would wipe them out. Wasn't he here to console a grieving daughter? But this was better. Saving her father would bind her to him much more tightly. But he wasn't going to take any unnecessary risks; he wasn't going to draw Skull's attention to him.

His mind jumped from one point to another. He could buy Charley Mercer's horse for one of the animals. Mercer lived at the outskirts of town. That was the animal he would stake out. He could ride his own out of town. If he were successful with Mercer's horse, no one would question him riding his own. Everything depended upon his handling of Mercer. A little before supper time, he thought. That would be the best time to see him. He wouldn't haggle with Mercer. He wanted a fast and simple sale.

He turned the corner, and Lanos blocked the walk. Eckart's heart picked up a rough, uneven beating. He controlled his face and said, "Good morning, Lanos." The man had the coldest, most probing eyes he had ever seen.

"Is it?" Lanos drawled. "Or do you know something about it that I don't?"

Eckart tried to put honest bewilderment on his face. "I? I don't know what you mean."

Lanos was enjoying this. It was in his eyes. "Let's see if we can find out. What were you talking about?"

Eckart said stiffly, "That's my business."

He saw the deadly gleam brighten in Lanos's eyes and said weakly, "It a personal matter. Martha and I have an understanding."

"Now that's interesting," Lanos said. "Let's go talk to Mr. Costigan about it."

Eckart felt a fluttering in his stomach. If it kept up he was sure it would make him sick. "I can't this morning. I have business—"

"Are you refusing me?" Lanos asked softly.

Eckart looked at those gleaming, feral eyes. "Why no. I just thought—" He swallowed hard and let it die.

He went down the walk with Lanos, and some of his reassurance returned. Mr. Costigan was a reasonable man; he wasn't like this hired hand of his.

Lanos took him to room 211 of the Drover's Hotel. He knocked on the door, and at Costigan's roar, opened it. He pushed Eckart into the room and closed the door behind him.

Eckart thought it was frightening to look at Costigan. He had never seen the man look so wildly unkempt. Flesh seemed to have melted from his face, and the grizzled beard stubble stood out starkly against the bunched ridges of his jaws. Eckart was sure Costigan hadn't changed his shirt nor taken off his clothes since this had started. A wildness blazed in Costigan's eyes, as though something was eating his guts away and he couldn't do anything about it.

He looked at Eckart and roared, "What the hell, Kirby?"

Lanos grinned. "I picked him up outside of Martha Emery's house. I thought he might have something interesting to say about his talk with her. He looked like he was in some kind of a sweet dream when I stopped him."

Costigan glared at Eckart. "What were you talking about?"

Eckart was careful to keep the resentment out of his face and voice. "You're a reasonable man, Mr. Costigan. You understand about certain things."

"I don't," Costigan said bluntly. "Tell me."

"It's personal," Eckart said in feeble objection.

Lanos moved closer to him. "Mr. Costigan is interested in everything she does. Particularly after this morning."

His hand flashed out and fastened on Eckart's wrist. He whipped it around and up, behind his back, hammerlocking it in place between his shoulder blades.

Eckart yelped at the fierce stab of pain that started at his shoulder joint and traveled the length of his arm.

"Don't," he cried. He tried to keep erect, but the pressure was too great. Lanos forced him to his knees, and Eckart's mouth was open with his gasps against the pain.

"I'll let him break it," Costigan said coldly. "Then he'll start on the other one. What did you talk about?"

Eckart had never known such pain. It filled his head until he thought it would burst with it. Flashes of light shot at his eyes in cruel lances, and each carried its own, agonizing hurt. Blackness was a cloud hovering before him, threatening to overwhelm him. He couldn't take this pain. Nobody could expect him to. He clamped his teeth on his lower lip to keep his groan from slipping out.

"Didn't you hear Mr. Costigan?" Lanos asked. He put a vicious, upward jerk on the imprisoned hand, and Eckart screamed and fainted.

He came to with the glass of water thrown into his face. He lay on his back, and his eyes wouldn't focus properly. His arm was nothing but one long reach of ache.

Lanos said, "He can't take very much, can he?" He pounced on Eckart and turned him over. Eckart tried to jerk his wrist from his grasp, but the arm didn't respond well. He moaned as Lanos whipped it back to its original position. The pain was worse, much worse. All of the first hurt was still in the arm, and Lanos's pressure was compounding it.

"You're killing me," he whispered.

"It's an idea," Lanos said. "You can save yourself a lot of

trouble. I'm giving you one more chance, then you're going to be minus an arm."

Eckart knew how that sudden jerk would tear him apart. It would wash over him, and the pain would consume him.

"Wait," he cried. "She wanted me to take horses to them."

"Ah," Lanos said with satisfaction. "I kind of figured it was something like that." He eased up on the pressure. "Where did she want you to take them?"

Eckart hesitated before the final cave-in. *Martha*, he screamed silently. *You can't blame me. You can't.*

"You still stubborn?" Lanos sounded as though he were amazed. "I guess I can straighten that out."

"No," Eckart wailed. He described the old mine and the directions Martha had given him.

Lanos let go of his arm, and for a moment Eckart thought he couldn't move it. He sobbed openly. He couldn't help it.

"Do you know where it is, Kirby?" Costigan asked.

"I know it," Lanos answered. "It's halfway up a hill. We could go around the hill and come down over the top. I'll bet they'll be so damned surprised they'll forget to welcome us."

"You take it easy," Costigan warned. "I don't want any more men killed."

He looked at Eckart lying on the floor and said in disgust, "Get him out of here."

Lanos hauled Eckart to his feet. He turned and headed him towards the door. "Move," he ordered.

Eckart's arm dangled at his side. Even the little swaying motion caused by walking hurt him.

He heard Lanos say, "Now there goes a man for you."

If Costigan replied he didn't hear it. He stumbled blindly down the hallway, and tears streamed down his face.

XIV

EMERY TRUDGED UP the hill towards the mine. "Gard," he said in a cautious voice.

The relief was noticeable in Gard's voice as he answered, "I'm glad you're back, Dolph."

He whacked him on the shoulder and asked, "You run into any trouble?"

"A little. Skull had a guard posted behind the house. He didn't pay much attention to what he was doing. I stuck him in Wiltons' shed. They won't find him for a couple of days at least. Not with this kind of weather."

Gard said a soft oath, and Emery took it as criticism. "What else was I going to do with him? If I only knocked him out Skull would know I'd been there. Now they can only guess."

"You couldn't have done anything else, Dolph." But it was a damned unfortunate thing. Emery hoped the body wouldn't be found for a few days. But if it were found this morning, it would alert Skull towards Martha. They could use rough ways to make her talk.

He said in a worried tone, "I wish she wasn't in this."

"You can rely on her," Emery said. "She won't lose her head."

He opened the sack. "Let's see what she put in it." He named each item as he pulled it out, and his voice grew happier. "Boy, we're going to eat. We've got a cold roast and a slab of bacon. Here's dried prunes and apples. And a box of oatmeal. It won't be very tasty without cream and sugar, but it'll be filling. She put in a pan and spoons. We can make oatmeal. We've got water." He rummaged around in the sack, then looked at Gard. "She's as bad as you are. She

forgot the salt. If you're planning on eating you'd better get me some wood."

Gard planned on it. An empty belly didn't give a man a moment's rest.

He started to move and Dolph said, "This'll hold you for a little bit." He handed Gard a slice of the cold roast and a chunk of bread.

Gard wolfed down the first few bites, then grinned. "God that's good."

"Get me some wood, and I'll whip up a real meal."

Gard nodded and moved out of the tunnel. This wasn't timber country, and the wood gathering was poor. He brought in as big an armful of twigs and small branches as he could find. This light stuff would burn fast. So he went back for more.

Emery had the fire started when Gard returned. Gard broke up the branches and kept the fire going. Emery cooked the bacon first. Its sizzling and aroma watered Gard's mouth.

Emery fished out several strips and broke off a chunk of bread. "Try that," he said, handing it to Gard.

Gard chewed reflectively. "Outside of being burnt on one side and raw on the other, it's the best bacon I ever ate."

Emery said, "I always cook my bacon that way."

He moved to the puddle and dipped up a half panful. He stirred in the oatmeal, and the light of the small fire threw dancing highlights on his absorbed face. "I left the bacon grease in the pan. Maybe it'll add a little flavor."

The oatmeal was lumpy and decidedly flat, but the two spoons never hesitated in their dipping into the pans.

"For dessert you got a choice of prunes or dried apples."

Gard gave it some thought. "I'll take both."

Emery handed him both sacks. "I hate a finicky eater."

They finished the meal, and Gard kicked dirt over the dying fire. The smoke crawled along the ceiling and drifted out of the tunnel opening. He wasn't concerned about the

smoke being seen at night, but the glow of the fire could be spotted if somebody was lined up right.

He said, "I'll watch, Dolph."

"There's nothing to watch," Emery protested. "She can't possibly get here until after dawn. If she doesn't make it, then I don't look for her until after dark tomorrow night. You can bet she won't take any chances of being followed."

Gard knew that, but a restlessness was biting him like a swarm of hungry mosquitoes. And that queer, crawly feeling was moving along his spine again.

He said curtly, "I'll watch anyway."

He moved to the mouth of the tunnel and sat down. He heard Emery twisting and turning to find a more comfortable position. He wished he could be like Emery; he wished he had a placid nature that wasn't always poking and prying into the future. The stirring behind him stopped, and the soft snoring began. It took an untroubled mind to fall asleep that quickly. Gard wished his mind was as free.

But he wouldn't be free until he had Emery safely out of the country. And he probably faced another long, dragging day before that could happen.

Somewhere out in the distance a coyote wailed its perpetual woes. It had a lonely, unhappy sound.

Gard said, "That's the way I feel."

He watched the first gray flush of dawn strengthen and color. He kept straining his eyes hoping to see a lone rider approaching. Several times he was sure that a dot on the distant horizon would move towards him and grow in size—and each time he was disappointed as the dot remained stationary. An hour after the sun was riding high he knew he might as well face it. Martha wasn't going to get here this morning for she wouldn't pick broad daylight to start her trip. He had to resign himself to the fact she wouldn't get

here until after dark. He had a day ahead of him crowded with its itchy torment.

He sat there with his moody thoughts wondering if Emery was ever going to wake up. Several times he threw off the temptation to wake him. He wouldn't gain anything except conversation. It certainly wouldn't be sleep. He was tired, tired to the marrow of his bones, but he wasn't sleepy.

Emery finally awakened and sat up. He stretched and yawned then demanded, "Why didn't you wake me?"

"There wasn't any use." Gard wondered if the strain of waiting had increased his imagination, but he could swear the crawling along his spine was worse. He even swept the country again with a long, thorough search, though he had scanned it only seconds before.

Emery said, "I owe you something for letting me sleep. I'll get breakfast."

Gard turned and moved towards him a couple of steps. "Don't build a fire, Dolph. Somebody could see the smoke. I've got the damndest feeling somebody is out there, and I can't shake it."

"You're imagining things," Emery scoffed.

"Maybe," Gard said, but there was no real agreement in the word.

He heard a slight rolling, tumbling noise outside the opening, a noise such as a small cascade of pebbles might make. Pebbles didn't move themselves. Something had dislodged them.

He whipped his head towards the entrance, and a figure stepped just inside it, cutting off a good deal of the light. Lanos's bright, wicked grin was really the only thing he saw in the split-second left to him. He understood why the crawly feeling had persisted, why he hadn't seen anybody in his searching of the country. Lanos had come over the top, and his boot had dislodged the cascade of pebbles.

"Dolph," he yelled, "look out!" and turned clawing for his

gun. But he couldn't beat a gun already 'aimed at him. He thought he heard Emery's hoarse, startled yell, and that was the last conscious thing he knew. Something raw and hot burned its way across the side of his head, drawing a heavy, black veil behind it, a veil that instantly shut off all light.

The buzzing of a fly can be a persistent, annoying thing. He wanted to slap at it, but he couldn't lift his arm. He lay there thinking about this weakness that claimed him. The buzzing increased. One fly couldn't produce all that noise. And they must be crawling on him, for he was sure he felt the itching touch of their legs.

He swore at them listlessly. Flies were always a nuisance, but this was a plague of them.

He thought, *I didn't hear my voice*. And he was sure he had cursed those flies aloud. He tried to yell, and the noise that came out of him was a feeble whisper of sound.

That frightened him. What was wrong with him? He couldn't speak, and he couldn't move. He was aware of the pain then. It raced through his head in great, pounding strokes, and his left arm was a fiery reach of it.

It came back to him a disjointed piece at a time, until he remembered it all. Lanos! Lanos had been here, and Lanos had shot him.

He tried to sit up, and the pain and nausea drove him back. He waited for the waves of agony to diminish. He tried again to sit up, and by locking his teeth on the pain, he made it.

He looked curiously at the blood-stained left front of his shirt, then his right hand moved to the pounding in his head. He felt the shallow furrow running above his ear, and it was sticky. The whole left side of his face was stiff with dried blood. The flies buzzed angrily at being disturbed and tried to settle back.

He waved them away with his right hand,. His strength was returning, and it brought with it a new intensity of pain. The hole in his shoulder was still bleeding, and he should be doing something about it. He knew he had already lost a great deal of blood.

Up to now he had deliberately avoided looking back into the tunnel, knowing what he would see. Slowly, he turned his head.

Emery was sprawled face down, and the back of his shirt was a mass of dried blood. Gard didn't need another look to tell him Emery was dead, and the sour sickness of his failure filled his mouth. One part of his mind said he had done the best he could, and another said *it wasn't enough*.

He thought dully, *But how? How did he find us?* That question prompted a new thought. Marthal Somehow they had forced it out of her. He cursed at his impotence until his voice faded. That wasn't doing him any good, and he sat with head drooping until he regained some strength.

He stood and leaned against the tunnel wall, waiting until the floor stopped spinning and tilting. The first thing he should do was plug that hole in his shoulder. The major portion of the blood flow had stopped, but there was still some seepage, and he couldn't afford to lose more.

He hung onto the wall, needing it for support on the way to the puddle of water. He kept his eyes averted as he passed Emery's big, still form.

He pulled out his shirttail with his good hand, and using the hand and his teeth, tore off a good sized section of it. He tore that piece in two and plugged his wound front and back, grinding his teeth at the touch of the material against the raw hole. He was soaked with sweat before he was through. He had never realized before how difficult the simplest task was for a one-armed man.

He drank deeply, and the fever in him cooled a little. He sloshed water against his face and the stiffness on the left

side of it dissolved. He explored the furrow in his head, wincing at each touch. It didn't seem too bad, and there was nothing he could do about it anyway.

His head was clearer, but he wished he were stronger. He needed something to support his left arm, and he first thought of trying to use his shirt sleeves. Then another idea struck him, and he looked at Emery. Dolph wouldn't need his belt any longer.

It took a tremendous effort to turn him over so that he could unbuckle the belt. He tried to keep his mind occupied with two thoughts—he had to find Lanos, and he had to see if Martha was all right.

But that didn't stop the hard, inward crying—the crying that couldn't be put into words. But he didn't need words. Dolph would understand.

Emery was a thick-waisted man, and the loop his belt made was big enough. Gard let his right shoulder bear the weight of his left arm.

He stood in the entrance of the tunnel, turning the thoughts slowly in his mind. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious; probably well under an hour. But he could never catch up with Lanos. He thought he'd find Lanos in town. If he wasn't there, Gard would go to the ranch. He almost whimpered at the enormity of the distance ahead of him. He wiped the weakness aside. He could make it if he concentrated on the next step ahead of him and no more. He could always make one more step.

Before he started down the hill he said aloud, "Lanos, you should've checked to make sure."

His knees wanted to buckle with each step, and he pitted his determination against their looseness. He added up the steps one at a time, but it took so long to make the total amount up. He descended the hill, and the sun was a club in his face. It put fantasies in his head of cool water and shade, and the fantasies made him want to linger in this

restful place. He shook his head sharply. He could let go too easily, and he tightened his grip on his faculties.

He plodded on step after step, and he fought heat exhaustion and light-headedness and weakness. Some of his steps weaved, and some were broken, but still he pushed onward against the faltering. Four miles was no great distance to start with, and surely he had covered most of it. He kept peering ahead of him, hoping to see the first building.

He realized he was walking along smoother ground, and he couldn't understand it. He remembered the ground as being rougher, and this seemed almost like a road.

He made a brutal discovery. He had angled off, striking the west road into town. Instead of being almost there, he was better than half the distance away.

The shock of it stopped him. He had added at least two miles to his journey, and the thought of the enormous amount of steps it would take to cover that much ground was a crushing weight. It weakened his will, and he couldn't go on—at least, not right now.

He saw the meager shadow of a stunted tree at the road's edge, and he weaved towards it. He would rest in the shade of it for a few minutes. That was all he needed.

He sank to the ground, breathing hard. Things were getting fuzzy, and queer lights danced before his eyes. He couldn't grasp a rational thought and hold onto it, and he let all of the effort slip from him.

"My God," a voice said. "I saw you lying here and thought you was dead. Gard, do you hear me?"

Gard opened his eyes. He stared hard at the figure, trying to press it back into normal proportions. He should know that voice, and he kept picking at the problem.

He focused on the bearded face, and its details went into

proper perspective. He said, "Micajah! I'm glad to see you. Have you got any water?"

Micajah stepped to his sorry wagon and came back with a canteen. He supported Gard's head and shoulders while he drank. It wasn't cool water, but it was wet.

Micajah said, "I was on my way to town to get my monthly supplies. I'd better get you to a doctor quick."

Micajah Forest lived far back in the hills, exactly where, Gard didn't know. All his life he had been searching those hills in the hope of finding the strike that would take him out of his poverty. His happening along now was the first small break since Gard had heard the falling pebbles. Maybe things were turning a little.

The old man said, "You're shot all to hell. What happened to you?"

It seemed to Gard that he had lived with this trouble all his life. It was odd that Micajah had heard nothing of it.

He said, "Help me to the wagon. I'll tell you about it."

He drew heavily on Forest's strength in getting to his feet. He asked for more of it in the short walk to the wagon and in climbing up into it. He sat with his chin on his chest. The weakness assaulted him, but it didn't scatter his thoughts as it had done earlier.

Forest got the old horse started. "I'll get you to the doctor," he said.

"No. Take me to Emery's house." Gard was stubborn about that. He said it again, and Forest said, "I heard you."

The wagon didn't move as fast as he could walk, Gard thought fretfully. He sat there gripping the seat, and each jolt slammed through his body. He'd make it, though. He'd make it now.

Forest's voice kept fading, and he couldn't understand that. A moment ago he had been thinking so well, and now his thoughts were breaking up on him again.

XV

FOREST WAS INSISTENT with his questions, and they kept pulling Gard back and holding him together. He talked in disjointed phrases and incomplete sentences, but Forest got the picture.

Forest said, "And the dirty bastards just shot Emery down?"

"I guess so," Gard said wearily. They hadn't given him a chance. What reason was there to believe they had given Emery one?

"You're crazy, Gard. You can't fight the whole Goddamned outfit."

The objection was a keen knife sharpening Gard's attention again. He was going to fight just one of them at first—Kirby Lanos. When he finished that, he'd move on to whatever came up.

The outlying buildings came into view, and this was no imagination, no mirage.

The end was here before him, and he faced it with a rock-hard determination. Nothing could dent it, not his weakness or the odds he faced—or the very distinct possibility of failure. He didn't have to shut his eyes to see Emery's face, the shock and agony forever etched into it. But first he had to check to see what had happened to Martha. Lanos came after that. He wished he knew whether or not Skull was still in town, but that could be found out later. But on the strong chance they were, he didn't want Forest driving him through the heart of the town. He didn't want them seeing him until he was ready.

He said, "Micajah, do you mind making a swing around to Emery's house?"

Forest nodded approval. "That's damned smart. I'll bet

those bastards are in the saloons right now, liquoring up. Gard, is anybody going to stop them?"

Gard was grimly amused. Forest thought he was sneaking back into town like a whipped dog.

"Why, I think so," he answered in a detached voice.

Emery's house was less than a block away, and he stared at it. His throat was tight with dread. Martha had to be all right. Even this town had enough conscience not to let Skull harm her. But some vital part of this puzzle was missing. She was the only one who had known where he and Emery were, and Skull had learned of it. He knew how hard it would be for anybody to drag that information out of her, and that was what worried him.

She must have seen him coming, for she came flying out of the house, reaching the street before the wagon pulled to a stop. Lucas Clay followed her, his face haggard with concern.

She stared up at Gard, and her eyes filled with tears and horror as she saw the blood-stained clothes and the arm supported by the belt.

"Gard, what have they done to you?" New horror crept into her face. "You shouldn't be out here. If they see you—" She jammed her knuckles into her mouth as the realization hit her. "Dolph?" she asked, and her voice was barely audible.

He nodded, a slow, infinitely weary gesture. It was as gentle a way as he knew how to tell her. "They're not looking for me," he said.

Her face went deathly white, and she swayed. Clay must have thought she was going to crumple, for his arm went out in support of her.

She had a will of iron, for she shook off Clay's arm and said, "I'm all right." Her face remained white, and the tears glistened in her eyes, but her voice was steady enough.

"Help him down," she said. "And get him into the house."

Gard needed Clay's and Forest's help in getting down. And he was willing to lean on them as he went up the walk and into the house.

Martha wanted him to lie down, and he shook his head. She read something hard and implacable in his eyes and didn't press the point.

Forest helped lower him into a chair in the kitchen and said, "If there's anything else I can do? Do you want me to go after the doctor?"

Gard said a flat "No."

Clay shrugged helplessly and said, "I guess that's it, Micajah. I'd appreciate your not saying anything to anybody about this."

Forest's snort said how unnecessary the request was.

Martha cut away the blood-stained sleeve with a scissors. Gard wasn't sure, but he thought he heard her force a sob back in her throat.

She pulled out the material he had used to plug up the holes in his shoulder, her eyes begging him to forgive the hurt she was causing him.

"Go ahead," he said. "It doesn't hurt now." At least it didn't hurt any more than the rest of him. There wasn't any screaming agony in his head or shoulder now. Everything had blended into one dull, grinding background of pain.

Clay peered at the wound. "I'm no doctor, Gard. But I think it went clear through without doing too much damage. I don't see any broken bones, but Klepper should look at it."

"Later," Gard said, and his eyes were far away.

She bathed and cleansed the wound, and he kept insisting she bind it tighter, wanting the support of the bandage. She wanted to put one on his head, and he wouldn't have it.

She cleansed that too and put some kind of medication on it. It stung at first, then he thought he felt a soothing coolness. He kept staring at something distant, and he answered her with grunts or not at all.

She said, "Gard, this shirt—"

"Take it off," he answered.

He pulled the ruined tail out with his right hand and unbuttoned the shirt. She cut the left shoulder seam to the collar, then slipped the wrecked garment off of him, making a sling out of a dish towel. He wanted it pulled tight so his arm would ride high and not hamper him.

She said, "Are you hungry? I've got some soup."

He wasn't really hungry, but decided that something like soup might drown some of his weakness.

He nodded, and she moved to the stove. "It'll take a few minutes to warm it."

Clay was bursting with impatience, and he finally said, "Gard, what happened?"

He had wanted to avoid the telling now, but she turned her head and looked at him. Her eyes begged him for the knowledge.

"I want to know," she said. Her voice was barely audible, but there was no quaver in it.

"Lanos," he said savagely. "How he found out, I don't know. He came down over the top of the hill, and he was in the tunnel before I knew he was anywhere around. We never had a chance. He's going to be damned sorry he didn't make sure I was dead."

"My God," Clay exploded. "You can't go up against him now."

Gard's eyes burned into him. "Is there anybody else who will?" he asked harshly. "Is he still in town?"

"They're all here," Clay answered in a shaky voice. "I came out here to see that Martha was all right. When I passed the Golden Eagle it was full of them. Gard, listen to reason. Gard—"

"You mean, just turn my head the other way like the town's doing? Just forget everything that's happened?"

Clay reddened under those accusing eyes and looked away.

"What I'd like to know is how he found out where we were," Gard said. "How did—"

He stopped as he realized that Martha was trying to choke back sobs, and failing. Her face had crumbled, and in a moment she was going to go all to pieces.

"Martha," he said sharply.

"I told them," she cried. "It was me."

He stared at her. This had unhinged her reason. She didn't know what she was saying.

"I did, I did," she insisted over and over. "I tried to take horses to you, but they followed me. They made me turn back and warned me to stay in the house." Her sobbing was tearing her voice to shreds, making her words almost incoherent.

"Easy," he said. "Easy," and reached for her with his good arm. He had never seen her break up like this, and he was afraid she was going into hysterics.

"I'm to blame. I knew I couldn't go anyplace without them following. I asked Dan Eckart to take the horses to you. I thought he cared enough to—" She hid her face in her hands, and the wild sobbing racked her.

"Ah," he said in a toneless voice. The missing part of the puzzle was found. Eckart was the betrayer. He had gone straight to Costigan with the information.

He pulled her head down until his lips could reach her ear. "Martha, listen to me. You did everything you could. You went the only way you could go. All of us did." All except Dan Eckart, he thought somberly. He had had a choice.

His good arm was around her, holding her tight. He said softly, "Dolph wouldn't like all this self-blaming."

Little by little her sobs quieted. She looked at him with tear-dimmed eyes and said, "But don't you see, if I hadn't—"

He wouldn't let her finish the sentence. "If you hadn't

told Eckart it might've turned out just the same." Some things seemed slated to run a certain course, and nothing a man could do would change it.

She must have smelled something, for she cried out, "Your soup."

He didn't try to stop her from moving to the stove. The little, ordinary tasks were the things she needed most now.

He looked at Clay with tired eyes. He wished the man would go. He had momentarily forgotten about him, and now his presence was big in his mind again. Once, he had felt close to this man, and now there was no common ground for them anymore.

Martha brought him a bowl of soup, and he ate absently, hardly realizing what he was tasting. But it set well on his stomach, and he could almost think he was stronger.

He finished the bowl and said, "Martha, get me one of Dolph's shirts."

Her eyes searched his face, then went wide with terror. "Gard, you can't—"

"Wear it," he interrupted. "I know it'll be too big. Maybe I can grow up to it." His voice lowered. "Martha, I know what I have to do."

Clay stared at them with puzzled eyes. He didn't understand this interchange between them at all.

Martha came back with one of Emery's shirts. She buttoned it over the arm in the sling, and still Gard didn't fill it out. He tucked in the shirt tails, and he had to fold them over.

He said, "Pin my badge on, Martha."

Clay understood then. "My God, Gard," he shouted. "Are you completely crazy? You can't go up against them. Haven't you had enough?"

Gard looked at him with frozen eyes. "Don't you think it ought to be done, Lucas? Or would you rather spend the rest of your life bowing and scraping?"

Every word was barbed and brought additional color to Clay's face. But he still pleaded, "Gard, be reasonable."

"I'm reasonable. I'm looking at it the only way it is. You name somebody else to take my place, Lucas, and I'll step aside."

Clay could no longer face those eyes, and he looked at the floor.

Gard said, "Martha," and stopped. There really wasn't anything more to say. Everything was understood between them.

She walked to the door with him and pressed a kiss upon his lips.

The door opened and closed, and he was gone, not quite steady on his feet, but steady enough.

"Martha," Clay accused, "you didn't even try to stop him."

She looked at him with eyes brimming with tears. "I couldn't have stopped him, Lucas. Anything I said would only have weakened him—not stopped him." The tears were spilling out of her eyes and crawling down her cheeks. "He's a very rare person, Lucas. He does what he has to, regardless. And that 'regardless' makes him bigger than all the rest of us."

He looked at her with shame flaming in his face. Then he turned and plunged out of the house without another word.

XVI

GARD TURNED INTO the main street. He could hear the whooping and yelling coming from the Golden Eagle two blocks away. The street was deserted. Most of the townspeople would stay indoors until after Skull left.

He passed the blasted building where the marshal's office had been. He thought with grim humor, now the Town Council would have to approve money for a new jail.

He walked slowly, as though each step took infinite effort, but the rhythm of his steps was constant. If anybody saw him pass they didn't try to speak to him. Even hailing him would mean some kind of contamination.

He was a block from the saloon when he glanced up at the second-story window of Eckart's office. He thought he caught a glimpse of a frightened face hastily withdrawn. He pondered only a moment. He had two things to do, and this might as well come first. By the volume of the revelry ahead of him Skull wouldn't be leaving town soon.

He crossed to the outside stairs and plodded up them. He tried the door, and it was locked. It was a flimsy door, and he drove his boot heel just under the lock. The door panel shattered, but the lock still held. It took another kick to knock it loose.

He stepped inside, and Eckart's face was shiny with fear.

"No," Eckart said, and with his hands held out, retreated behind the desk.

"Why no?" Gard asked softly. "You got something gnawing on you?"

He stood with his remorseless eyes biting at Eckart.

Eckart made a visible effort at recovery. He gulped a couple of times before he could find his voice. When he spoke his voice was pitched too high.

"I'm glad to see you're all right, Gard. I'm glad to see you got out—" He chopped off the words as he realized what he was saying.

"Got out of what, Dan? You didn't think it possible that Lanos wouldn't do a thorough job?"

Eckart's trembling lips distorted his words. "I—I don't know what you're talking about."

"Why, Goddamn you," Gard said with sudden violence. "You promised to help her, and you ran straight to Costigan."

Eckart looked as though he were going to faint. The im-

pact of the accusation hit him too hard for him to be prepared to deny it.

"No, no," he moaned. "It wasn't like that. I tried to help her. Lanos stopped me after I left her house. He took me to Costigan. He tortured me. I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to tell them. It hurts me to try and use my arm even now."

Gard looked at him with sick disgust. He suspected Lanos had twisted Eckart's arm, and it had hurt him. Eckart had said as much.

He moved at Eckart with slow strides, and Eckart retreated into a corner.

"You're going to kill me," he squalled.

That had been Gard's intention when he had come in here. But looking at this craven thing changed his mind. He pulled out his gun and let Eckart die a thousand times in that moment.

But that wasn't enough. Gard wanted to give him a physical remembrance of his weakness. He chopped suddenly with the gun barrel, and the sight tore through flesh. The white bone of the cheek showed a moment before it was blotted by the rushing curtain of blood.

Eckart screamed and leaned forward. His eyes were turning senseless with the pain, and he slobbered at the mouth.

Gard struck him again, completing the ruin of his face. Eckart would carry the visible evidence of his part in this for the rest of his life. The blow opened the flesh along the jaw, and the bone and base of the teeth flashed white through the gash. Eckart screamed again, but it was an unknowing sound, for his eyes were rolling up into his head.

He fell on his face and lay on the carpet, the blood from the two wounds joining and puddling there.

Gard's face showed no remorse. The man was lucky to have his life. Gard wondered if Eckart would want to keep

that, when he tried to shave over the terrible scars the wounds would leave on his face.

He slipped the gun back into its holster and turned and left the office.

He went back to the street, and the weariness rode him cruelly. Each step was now a dragging effort. But his mind still burned with a white-hot flame. It wasn't much farther. It would be over one way or the other in a few more minutes.

He stopped in the middle of the street before the saloon and yelled, "Lanos!"

A man stuck his head out of the doors and stared in disbelief.

"Tell Lanos I'm waiting."

The man's head popped back like a frightened rabbit diving for its hole.

Gard didn't have long to wait. Costigan came through the doors, followed by Lanos. The rest of Skull trooped after them.

Gard thought dully, *There's a damned lot of them.*

Costigan stopped on the walk, and the same disbelief was in his face. "I told you once you were a damned fool. You should've run when you had the chance."

"Maybe," Gard acknowledged.

Lanos wore that bright, wolfish grin. The grin lessened when Costigan said, "Kirby, you're doing sloppy work lately."

Gard glanced out of the corner of his eyes as he heard the pound of running feet. Stella stood on the porch of the Drover's Hotel, and Dane was running across the street to join his father.

Costigan said, "Stay on the walk, Dane." He looked at the disappointment in his son's face, and his tone sharpened. "You heard me."

He stepped out into the street with Lanos right behind him. Their lack of haste was an obscene thing. It was almost

as though their deliberateness was a ritual that must be gone through before the sudden, violent explosion.

Costigan lined himself up opposite Gard in the middle of the street, and Lanos stood beside him, his eyes gleaming in that dark face.

The rest of Skull was on the walk, their faces shining with anticipation.

"Blow his head off, Paw," Dane yelled with shrill excitement. He stood in the front row, literally hopping with his eagerness.

"Any time, Deputy," Costigan said.

He wore his holster too high. He would have to lift his hand higher and put an additional crook in his elbow to get at the gun butt, and it would cost him a split-second. Lanos would be the faster, and Gard would take him first.

Three hands moved in concerted action as though at a given signal. Lanos's gun was swinging up when Gard pulled the trigger. The bullet tore out Lanos's throat, and Lanos stayed erect long enough to let the bright, red blood spurt. His face grayed, and he was dead before he hit the street.

It was one of those flashing scenes that a man photographs on his mind without realizing it. Gard's attention was riveted to Costigan as he swung the gun muzzle to cover the man. Costigan's gun was leveled, and Gard expected the slam of a bullet. He pulled the trigger without conscious aim, and the bullet whacked into Costigan's breastbone, slewing him half about in the street.

Costigan's finger completed its pressure on the trigger and his gun roared. The wild shot tore into the watching men, and Dane Costigan yelled hoarsely and took two broken steps into the street. He bent lower and lower, his hands trying to stop the bleeding at the arched juncture of his ribs. He reached for another step, and his leg collapsed. He plunged on his face, and one arm was stretched out towards Costigan.

Some tremendous vitality let Costigan hang there, half

erect. He stared at Dane, and his face was twisted. He swung his head back towards Gard, and he knew what had happened. It was in the awful hating in his eyes. His mouth worked spasmodically, and red-tinged saliva dribbled out of its corners. He tried to bring the gun back to bear on Gard, and the agony of his efforts was written on his face.

The gun barrel sagged. He tried to force it up by sheer will alone, but the will couldn't stop the loss of strength. The gun hand sagged, and it seemed to be a great weight pulling Costigan's body with it. He fell hard, and dust blew up and settled back, coating him.

That tremendous fatigue, a combined fatigue of mind, body, and spirit, hauled at Gard. It had a downward drag, and it took all his will to combat it. It was done and not done. The driving power of Skull was dead, but the fringes still lived. It depended upon what those fringes did.

The riders were still in shock at the sudden and totally unexpected ending. But they were beginning to throw it off, and Gard heard the mutterings strengthening among them. It was an angry sound, and it would swell.

A new sound turned his head, a sound that was hardly human. Stella ran from the hotel porch, her face contorted into an ugly mask. She kept up a moaning keen, and if there were words in it, Gard couldn't identify them.

She stopped and looked at Gard, then at her father and Dane. If her eyes flicked over Lanos, Gard couldn't catch it.

She looked at Gard again, and the wildness in her eyes was madness. She lifted and swiveled her head to the watching men.

"Kill him," she shrieked. "Kill him!" She said it over and over, and the lack of rational thought in her face held them motionless for a moment.

Gard faced them on wide-braced legs, willing the bones in them not to buckle. There were at least a dozen of them, and that awed trance couldn't hold long. First one of them

would stir, then the others would follow. He might stop one or two of them, but the rest would blast him down.

"Hold it," a voice said, and its authoritative ring froze all action.

Lucas Clay came across the street, a shotgun held at hip level. They followed him in a wide-shaped fan, coming from every door along both sides of the street. It looked as though every man in town was there holding some kind of weapon on Skull. Gard looked wonderingly from face to face. Jed Parnell was there holding a rifle, and Bargaen trudged beside him with a leveled pistol. He saw Hardin, the man who had been so frightened, and Pat Greeley and Wyatt. They made a formidable array, and they were as hard-faced a bunch of men as Gard had ever seen.

He had been facing something that was inevitable, and now it wasn't going to happen. His eyes felt a stinging hotness, and he blinked it back. Once he had called all of them chicken-hearted, and he was wrong.

"Kill him," Stella shrieked again.

Clay put a brief glance on her. He looked at a woman ugly with her excess emotion and aged by the stress of the last few minutes.

He looked back at Gard and shook his head.

He said to the remnants of Skull, "All of you clear out of town. And don't come back. Not for any reason. We don't want your business."

Gard looked quizzically at him, and Clay's ghost of a grin had bleak humor and embarrassment in it. "We changed our minds about a lot of things," he said. "We decided to crawl out from the hard rock we were hiding behind."

He turned his head and yelled, "Move," and the massed riders broke into individual units concerned only with their own safety.

"Take them with you," Clay ordered. He jerked his head towards the three forms in the street. "And her."

They moved away with a shuffling step as they carried Costigan, his son and Lanos away. Two of them escorted Stella down the street, and that same beaten attitude was in their walk. Skull wasn't only broken. It was shattered physically and spiritually. Its pride was scattered to the high winds, and Gard doubted that anybody would ever mold it into the force it had once been.

His knees were buckling, and he couldn't stop them. He had gone too long, and now his bones were in open rebellion. He wanted to turn and stride away with his shoulders squared, and he wasn't going to make it. He gave them a foolish, apologetic grin, then folded up quietly. The blackness enveloped him, and he made no struggle against it. Now it was only a relief to just let go and slide far beyond the reach of pain.

He didn't hear the concerned cries as men rushed towards him, he didn't see the worry twisting their faces.

Clay said, "Carry him to Martha's. I think that'll do him more good than anything else." He answered a question impatiently. "Hell no, he's not dead. Do you think Skull could kill his kind?"

His face set in angry lines as he watched them pick up Gard. He yelled, "Handle him carefully, you idiots. That's the man who gave this town its conscience back."

XVII

VOICES AND HANDS kept trying to pull him back out of the darkness, and he didn't want to return. He didn't want to come back to the world of reality with its pain and its pressures.

He felt fingers working on his shoulder, and they were much rougher than he remembered Martha's fingers. The fingers probed again, and he had another problem to un-

ravel. Why was Martha so rough with him? Was she displeased because of something?

He felt something liquid poured on his shoulder, then it turned to fire. He howled and tried to sit up, and capable hands pushed him back.

"Lie still, you hardhead," Doc Klepper said.

Gard glared at him. Martha stood at the side of the bed, and her face was anxious.

Gard grumbled, "I might've known they'd call in the butcher."

Klepper said cheerfully, "See, Martha. I told you, you couldn't kill him with a meat axe. His kind are too mean to die."

"Take that stuff off my shoulder. It's burning."

"You want a clean wound, don't you? Or would you rather I left the dirt in it?"

The room seemed filled with people, and Gard thought about it. Then he realized everybody on the Town Council was here, and they kept staring at him. Did he look that funny, he wondered irritably.

Martha said, "Gard, when they carried you in, I thought—I—" She couldn't continue.

Gard grinned faintly. "Didn't you hear Doc? I'll be up tomorrow."

"You will not," Klepper said shortly. "You lost a lot of blood. It's a wonder you lasted as long as you did."

The mention of blood brought back the memory of the mine tunnel. Gard looked at Clay and said, "Lucas, Dolph—"

"We've already sent for him," Clay said.

Gard turned his head towards Martha. "I couldn't let him stay out there any longer than I had to."

"I know," she said steadily. Just the faintest sheen of tears was in her eyes. She would weep some more, but she wouldn't break.

"Eckart's leaving town," Clay said. "He says he will not live in a barbaric town like this one."

Gard looked for censure in Clay's eyes and found none. "He earned it," he said, and Eckart was gone from his mind.

He heard a stir at the front door, and Mason Norman pushed into the room. He looked easy and assured, and his pink face was glowing.

"Gard, boy," he said reaching for Gard's right hand. "Am I glad you came through that all right. I wish I'd have been in town to help you. I saw some time ago that Skull was going to have to be handled that way."

Gard ignored the outstretched hand, and Norman finally withdrew it. He glanced from face to face, and he couldn't stay long on any one of those grave faces. Behind those shifting eyes was a scared, old man, and if Gard was inclined to pity him, all he had to do was to think of Dolph.

"Get back on the job, boy," Norman said. "I need you." A late afternoon ray of sun flashed on the badge pinned to his shirt and made a mockery of it.

His harried eyes swept around the faces again. "Well, I'd better be getting on with my duties. Oh, I forgot, Lucas. You sent for me?"

"We sent for you," Clay said woodenly.

"I imagine you want to talk about building the new jail," Norman said. "Can't we talk about it some other time? Gard's a sick man."

A sickness was in the room, but it wasn't in Gard. It was in Norman, and he was frantically trying to stave off what he must have known was inevitable.

"Mason," Clay said and stopped. The pause wasn't cruelty, only a searching for an easier way to say what he had to. There was no easy way, and he went on. "We decided to pay you off for the rest of your term. You've been wanting to retire for a long time."

Norman's face went white, and his breathing was ragged.

His eyes touched each face, and he realized the finality of the moment.

"I guess you're blaming me for all of this," he said bitterly.

Clay shook his head. "We know where the blame lies, Mason. We've each taken our piece of it." He held out his hand, palm up.

Norman stared at the palm, then he crumbled before their eyes. He was suddenly an old, tired man, and every man in the room knew shame at his dissolution.

He unpinned the badge and laid it in Clay's hand. His eyes were unseeing as he turned and plunged towards the door.

"Will you take it, Gard?" Clay asked.

Jed Parnell said eagerly, "You won't have to worry about Skull. If Stella tries to pull them together and come back—" He broke off at the weighing in Gard's eyes. He finished lamely, "We don't think they'll ever come back. In fact, we don't think she'll even stay in the country. We think this is the end of Skull."

"We want this town to start growing again," Clay said. "And only pride in it will let it do that. We need the man who gave us our pride back. We want him around so we can never forget the hard rock that stood in the middle of the street and broke Skull. Gard, don't turn us down."

Gard's delay in accepting wasn't intended as punishment for any of them. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do.

He looked at Martha and said, "I'd have to talk it over with her. I'll have to find out what she wants to do."

He saw the pride of him glowing in her eyes, and the little smile moving her lips. They would talk it over, but whatever he wanted would be her course.

Clay sighed, and there was no unhappiness in the sound. This was Martha's town, and he thought he knew what her decision would be.

"Clear out of here," he said. "All of you. Give them a chance to talk it over."

He followed the others to the door and looked back. Martha was moving towards Gard's outstretched hand, and there was a glory in her face. Clay glanced at the badge in his hand. He should have left it with Gard, but then, it could be pinned on him at any time.