Johnny Sundance


BRAD WARD

Complete and Unabridged
His gun had five notches on it already—and now it was leveled at the biggest rancher in Wyoming.

“Landsfell,” Johnny said, softly. “I’m trying to hold myself in. But don’t dare talk, don’t speak one word—not yet. I got two things to say to you, and I want to get them out. First—I warn you—leave the woman alone! If you don’t, I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you in the most terrible way I can.”

Johnny Sundance was just a saddle tramp and Simon Landsfell was a range baron, but a bullet would play no favorites. So when Johnny threw in with the Widow Talbee’s desperate effort to save what was left of her holdings, it wouldn’t be law and courts that’d make the settlement, it’d be gunsmoke and rangeland cunning—and Johnny figured he had plenty of that.
Quotations from the reviews:

"Those who like gunplay varied with sundry high crimes and misdemeanors will find in Brad Ward's Johnny Sundance a grand assortment of jailbreaks, arson, dynamiting and two-way cattle rustling . . ."

—Hoffman Birney
New York Times

“Our hero is a saddle tramp who is afoot when some rustler steals his horse. Johnny walks to the Rocking T ranch where Victoria Talbee is the owner and having plenty of trouble. One Simon Landsfell is trying to swindle the gal out of her land, so Sundance signs on and starts smoking his six-shooter. What you expected happens. . . ."

—Chuck Martin
Brewery Gulch Gazette (Bisbee, Ariz.)

“Johnny Sundance rode the Chuckwagon Trail seeking adventure and excitement on the open range. No ordinary saddle tramp, Sundance puts his fists and Colts to work saving the Rocking T spread. Prime stuff, pardner.”

—Boston Traveler

“When Johnny takes over the Widow Talbee's Wyoming ranch which has been dwindling from year to year, excitement is in the cards . . . A rip-roaring Western tale.”

—Nashville Banner
JOHNNY SUNDANCE

by Brad Ward

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To
ANNETTE NELSON PEEPLES
With Gratitude for Many Things
This Book is Dedicated

SOUTH TO SANTA FE
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FOREWORD

With the end of the Civil War in 1865, the cattle ranges of the West came into their own. The three decades between 1870 and 1900 were periods of raw, turbulent growth, with the tide of empire surging West and every man for himself. No matter the inherent honesty of a man, the harsh circumstances of his fight for survival more often than not dictated his choice of action. Strange alliances were commonplace, and a man was forced to strike back at the forces against him with any and every means at his disposal. It was the time of the great land steals, of the outlaw and renegade, the Ranger and Cattleman, and of that legendary figure, the itinerant cattle-hand. From Montana to Texas, from the snow-swept Dakotas to the evergreen ranges of the Pacific Northwest, the saddle tramp roamed. He worked when he felt like it, and moved on when he pleased. He rode the Chuckwagon Trail, with food and water his for the asking the length and breadth of the West, and always at his heels trouble followed like a hellhound on a leash. It was as much a part of his life as the faded Levi Straus and dirty Stetson he wore, or the discolored Bull Durham tag dangling from the pocket of his calico shirt. Most of them lived and died, many violently, in non-entity. The names they went by are still a bright, colorful bit of Americana. Slim and Powder River; Cheyenne and Dago; Weed and Joe; Arizona Jim and Wyoming Bill; and always and always, just “Tex”. They picked
their names and carried them until they died, and then the names went on with other men. Of all the tales of the saddle tramps I've heard, one stuck in my mind. Johnny Sundance was his name, and like all the others of his kind, he carried his troubles with him wherever he rode; in his case embodied in the sightless, triggerless, single-action Colt .44 he carried low over his right hip.

Brad Ward
CHAPTER ONE

The Mountain Desert

The lightning-quick rattling buzz sounded sharply, and the sense of danger so strong in Sundance caused him to jerk to one side. He felt the reins of his horse slacken as the animal pulled back in sudden fright. For a moment he didn’t see the dusty, coiled length of the diamondback, the glare still burning his eyes; then he made out the gray shape, close against the base of a ragweed to his right. He caught the movement as the snake struck, and the leftward tilt of his body brought his gun into his hand with a natural smoothness. The gun bucked and jumped, and the snake hurtled back, a bloody red pulp dangling at the end of the sinuous body. Sundance stood still a moment, his body still tilted awkwardly to the left, then slowly he straightened, sheathed his gun. The thunder of the shots were echoing from the dusty canyon walls through which he had been leading his horse.

"Close, Jube," he said. The horse, hearing its name, nudged him. He turned, rubbed the heat-dried muzzle. "Thirsty, boy?"

The horse pawed impatiently. Sundance frowned, staring down the long canyon. It crooked at the end, and dazzling lines of heat waves danced everywhere. He glanced once at the canteen dangling from the saddle horn, then shook his head. He had emptied it that morning. Three days without water. Either it had taken him longer to cross the mountains from Juniper, or
the storekeeper who had passed along the information about Rincon Wells had been a damned fool! Two days at most the man had told him; and two days of lonely discomfort were preferable to Sundance to a week following the wandering mountain road that went a hundred miles south of the direction he intended taking. He shook his head again, then moved on, walking stiffly in his run-over boots.

Johnny Sundance was thirty years old that morning in 1887, with a past he never talked about, and a future he didn’t like to consider. It sufficed him to take each day’s happenings as they occurred, dealing with them individually and as the mood might strike him. The winter before had been his first in Montana, and if he had his way, it would be his last. Even now, with the midsummer Wyoming sun smashing down from every side, his body sweated into rawhide thinness and the threat of fierce thirst already in his mouth, he could remember the cold hell of that winter range. Maybe he had ridden the southern ranges of Texas and New Mexico too long to enjoy the winter months of the North. At thirty, he’d spent seventeen years in the saddle as a cowhand, and there were too many enemies aware of him to chance the numbing cold that slowed his draw. Not that Johnny Sundance could be considered a gunman, for he was not. He lacked a certain vital substance that went far toward the makeup of a real gunfighter; the urge to kill was no motivation with Johnny Sundance. There were notches cut into the handle of his long-barrelled Colt’s revolver—four of them to be exact. For each of them a dead man lay on the trail behind him; and for each of them there was a ready nightmare to haunt Johnny’s sleep. It was not his conscience that bothered him, for to Johnny’s way of thinking, each killing had been justified. But the cold horror of a dead man’s sightless eyes staring upward, filmed with dust, accusing
him, would never leave him. And perhaps that was the
great secret of the gunfighter, the ability to forget the
men he killed. It was an ability Johnny Sundance could
never acquire.

The canyon he followed down was rock-walled, with
jagged upthrust crags he moved around. The mark of
cascading water was plain, and in early spring, when
the snows of winter melted on the higher peaks, these
canyons were gushing funnels to pour the water-wealth
down to the greedy desert sands below. The day before
he had topped the range, and started down, with the
white shine of the mountain desert far below. It had
seemed the merest jog to get down from that eagle height,
but in actuality it had been the hardest part of the ride.
Somewhere west of him, lay Rincon Wells, where he
could get water and supplies before he moved on south.
He had no immediate goal, but vaguely considered Col-
orado as his stopping place for the rest of the summer.
He might be able to save a few dollars—or be lucky
enough to win a few pots in bunkhouse poker—before
he moved on down into New Mexico for the winter.

If he made it through to Rincon Wells, he reminded
himself, fiercely. He shaded his eyes with his hand,
stared about. To either side the canyon walls shot up
more than a hundred feet, obscuring the sawtooth moun-
tain peaks above and beyond them. The sudden bend
of the canyon some hundreds of yards ahead of him cut
off further view downward. He felt the reins jerk as
he moved on. His horse had staggered, almost fallen.
Instantly Johnny was at the animal's head, his arms over
the drooping neck.

"Heah, now, Jube horse," he said, softly. "We cain't
let a little thing like these Wyomin' foothills get us, now
can we?"

The horse nudged at him, walked on. But the frown
between Johnny's eyes deepened. He had taken a long
time to find his horse, the horse he thought of as his. And big Jube had been worth every ounce of the love and affection Johnny gave him. There was a common bond between them, of the thousands of miles they had travelled together, of the years they had ridden through. Jube was a roping horse, range wise and capable of easing the rigors of a cowhand’s daily tasks. Not as fast as some, and certainly not as pretty, still Jube was Johnny’s and that made him something special. Someday Johnny would have a lucky streak, and he’d dress Jube up with a silver saddle and silver conchas on the halter as big as double-eagles. And Jube would know how Johnny saw him in his mind’s eye, and he’d act as proud as only a well-loved horse can act. It was an unspoken promise between them, of this big day that was coming, sometime. And for Johnny it took the place of bigger dreams.

They reached the sharp curve of the canyon walls, when suddenly the mountains ended and the desert began. There was no warning. The dead-white glare of the mountain desert began almost at their feet, and wandered on in every direction in silent immensity. Behind and above them loomed the great mountains they had crossed, and Johnny looked back once, and marvelled that the feat had been done at all. The mountains ended here, and a rutted road walked on the shoulder of them, along the edge of them as if on tiptoes away from the desert’s hungry maw, north and south. More important than this, though, was the gray-blue plume of smoke that edged up into the windless sky from a sunsilvered shack not a mile away, squatting sullenly on the desert’s edge. And wonder of wonders, the green of a tree swept up like smoke in that basin of empty grays and whites. Johnny’s hand moved to Jube’s quivering nostrils, and a laugh built in his dry throat.

“I smell water, too, boy,” he said. “In about another
minute we'll be letting it swell in our throats and bellies."

With a renewed strength they followed the road where it bent around the desert, and as they neared the wooden shack, details came clear. A rusty chimney hung by guy wires, and the smell of frying bacon was strong on the still air. The ground before the shack was littered with rusty tin cans and refuse, and the uncurtained windows were bare of glass. Behind the house was a watering trough with a muddy furrow where water seeped out into the alkali sands to vanish. Heat waves danced and shimmered from the roof of the house and from the galvanized iron sides and roof of a closed lean-to to one side. The water trough and the adobe-sided well-house were behind a fence that made an irregular enclosure reaching outward from the house in a crude square. There was a sign nailed to a fence post. RINCON WELLS—WATER FOUR BITS. Something twisted inside Johnny, and his eager smile faded. He had heard of such a thing, but this was the first experience he had with it. A man who sold water in an arid land. It made a meanness in Johnny's mind, and he hated the man before he ever saw him.

Then the door of the lean-to banged open, and a man came out. He was in shirt sleeves, and despite the heat of the desert sun, the dingy gray of flannel underwear showed below his rolled-up sleeves. He was a big man, with a belly-bulge that made him look as if he were teetering backward on his heels. A heavy belt sagged across his belly supporting the black-handled Frontier Model Colt's revolver. A dirty white stubble marred his cheeks and chin, streaked about his loose-lipped mouth with tobacco juice. He spat to the ground, then straightened as he saw Johnny, and slammed the door behind him. But Johnny caught one glance into the interior of the metal shack, and it startled him. In the dim shad-
ows of the interior he made out mounds of saddles, of
gun belts hung from racks, of bridles and saddle-blankets,
and tarpaulin-wrapped mounds.
The man fastened a well-oiled padlock of monstrous
size to the door, then came toward Johnny with a joggling
bouncing of his protruding belly. His face was ugly,
and meanness wrinkled the skin about his eyes.
“Where the hell did you come from?” he barked out.
Johnny hesitated. If there were any chance of getting
water further on—but Jube could go no further. He
frowned, dug into the pocket of his Levis. There was
one silver dollar there. And that was all Johnny owned.
“I want some water,” he said.
The fat man glanced back at the shack, then peered
closely at Johnny. He looked at Jube, at the thin pack
behind the saddle, at Johnny’s worn boots and faded
denims, then spat again.
“Cost you four bits; water for your horse, all you can
drink, an’ fill your canteens.” He rolled the words in
his mouth like they were coated with oil, sliding out
almost before he was ready to let them go.
There was a weather-beaten sign nailed over the front
of the wooden shack. SIMON LANDSFELL, PROPRIETOR. Across the front of the galvanized iron lean-
to red letters said SIMON LANDSFELL. Johnny saw
the signs. He squinted and the skin about the corners
of his eyes wrinkled up, giving a droll look so his lean
features.
“You Landsfell?” he asked.
The gross-bellied man grunted, spat once more. “Do
I look like the he billy goat o’ this whole mountain coun-
try? Do I look like I eat out o’ a gold spoon every meal,
and do I look like I wear diamonds on the front of my
vest as big as hen’s eggs?”
“I take it you ain’t Landsfell, but workin’ for him,”
Johnny put in as the bigger man's sarcasm threatened to run away with him.

"Me an' half the population atween here an' the state line. What Landsfell don't own ain't much an' it's a bet he's fixin' on grabbin' it." Admiration made the fat man's eyes water. He blinked. "I'm Joe Watters. I stick out here to hell an' gone keepin' lookout for Landsfell this side o' the desert. They's other waterin' holes north an' south along the mountains here. Thirty miles to the next. But I ain't goin' to be here very damn' long!" He wiped at his flabby mouth with one grimy hand. "I been here too damn long now." His voice was a bitter complaint.

Johnny dug into his Levi's, fished up the single dollar. He held it out. The fat man grunted, spat, then handed him back a half-dollar. "I'll open the gate for you," he said.

Jube drank first. Johnny watched him, rubbing his trembling withers, bringing some of the dust from his brown coat. Then it was Johnny's turn, and he drank in measured sips until the burning constriction of his throat let him drink long and deep. He washed his face and hands, soaking his whole head. The sun-warmed water felt good. The water from the well was sweet and cold. He felt the ache of it through the bridge of his nose. He rinsed his canteens, filled them. The fat man stood by, watching him. His eyes were sharp, calculating.

"Goin' far?" he asked, finally.

"Don't know," Johnny said. "Might be. Might stop in Beldon."

Joe Watters spat. The brown juice plopped in the alkali sand. His eyes went once more over Johnny, stopped at his gun, went quickly to his face. Johnny met the glance evenly.

"Maybe you'll know me next time?" he inquired. "Take a good look."
Watters shifted his eyes. His belly swayed as he moved his feet. "No offense," he said, quickly. "I ain't curious. I suppose you'll cut across the desert to Beldon? Saves three days."

Johnny lifted his eyes to the burning inferno that was the white wasteland. Then he looked back to the road that wandered along the base of the gray mountains. He frowned. Watters caught the expression, grunted.

"'Course the desert's tough goin'," he proffered. "But then the road ain't so hot. Landsfell's waterin' holes is plumb handy along the road, though."

At four-bits a stop, Johnny thought. And he had just fifty cents left. He looked back across the desert. Dimly, through heat haze, he could make out the blue of mountains. He rubbed at his jaw.

"Sixty miles across to Beldon," Watters said. He seemed eager to make up for his breach of manners. "But they's free water. Ridin' easy tonight, you can reach the first one just afore dawn. They's a wagon road straight across to it. Be in Beldon by tomorrow night without killin' your horse."

"Thanks," Johnny said. He used his kerchief to dry his face and hands. He settled his Stetson back on his head. The sun was lowering in the west. A slight breeze was stirring, the evening breath of the desert, sweeping out toward the mountains. It would be cooler within an hour. Shadows walked across the flat mountain desert, and he saw the shadow-marks of a wagon road moving straight west.

"How far's that first water hole?" he asked.

Watters' face moved in a grimace that might have been a smile. His teeth were yellow and brown snags. "About twenty-odd miles," he said. "You can make it in six hours, ridin' easy."

Jube lifted his head. His eyes were clear golden brown. His nostrils flared pinkly. He snorted once.
Johnny rubbed the long, soft nose. "Feel up to it, hoss?" he whispered. Jube pawed the ground, skittishly, rolling his eyes.

The same sense of uneasiness that disturbed the horse was strong in Johnny, too. The silence, the silver-gray boards of the shack, the fat man's bestiality, the shiny tin lean-to with the horde of supplies. Johnny felt in a sudden hurry to be gone. Watters watched him, and his voice was oily again, too quick.

"Reckon I can stretch the four-bits if you want to rest the night," he said. "You can have water in the mornin', an' start out fresh."

Johnny shook his head then. "Thanks," he said again. "I'll be ridin' on."

He led Jube out past the fence, swung up into the saddle. The fat man was watching him. His white-stubbled jaws moved rhythmically as he worked on the cud of tobacco. His eyes kept fixed to Johnny's face. Like a vulture studying a fallen steer, waiting. Johnny felt a thin shudder at the base of his spine. Then he headed Jube out into the desert, letting him pick his own pace.

Once, when the shack was a tiny spot, with a thin plume of smoke rising straight into the sky, Johnny looked back. The lean-to shone like a mirror, reflecting the setting sun. He couldn't see the big-bellied man, but felt as if his eyes were still upon him, sharp and bright—and somehow hungry.

When Jube seemed to tire, Johnny dismounted and walked. He knew the dangers of desert travel too well to chance stopping for a rest. It was too easy to fall asleep—and awaken to find a burning sun overhead. But once he reached the water hole, then he could delay, a whole day if he chose. And Jube had the strength to go that far.

When the sun finally dropped below the low-lying hills to the west, and the desert white changed to blood-
red for long minutes, it was as if he rode across a sea of intangible blood; the night wind began to blow, softly at first, then stronger, cooler. He paced Jube, never tired him, dismounted to walk for an hour at a time, and kept the twin ruts of the wagon road beneath him. At midnight he gave the last of his canteens of water to Jube, content to know that there would be ample water before morning. As Jube gained strength in the coolness of the evening, Johnny pushed him. It was two hours past midnight when he reined in at last, and dismounted. The night was close, the sky clear. The stars were tiny chunks of ice, too far away to give any chill. Off in the night he heard the lonesome wail of a coyote, answering by a sharp yap-yapping closer to him. Of the water hole he had seen no sign, and he knew he had travelled farther than Watters had said. But he didn’t start to worry, then.

When the first yellow-red limned the sky, and he felt the burning of the morning sun, doubt came. It wasn’t much more than that, for any moment he expected to come to the water hole. And for that reason he rode Jube, asking strength that the horse could produce only from some inner, limited source. But when noon came, he dismounted, and curses filled his mouth, and doubt was bitter certainty. For reasons of his own, Watters must have lied, for Johnny had passed no water hole in the night, and the rutted wagon tracks struck straight before him, and no sign of water ahead. Nothing moved, and the wind stilled, and the sun rested flatly atop Johnny’s head, burning in. Then Jube stopped. His head was down. His hide was dry, hot, his nostrils dust-covered. Johnny came up to him, talked to him. And Jube answered by moving again, and Johnny knew the mighty spirit of the animal, and it gave him strength.

For two hours Johnny kept them going by talking, by whispering promises, then a smudge of smokelike shrubs stood out ahead, and tears made twin streaks down
Johnny's alkali-white face. The waterhole. Somehow, somehow, he must have passed the first hole Watters had talked about, and this was the second. He was sure of that, now, and some of the bitterness left him.

The smudge came clearer. Johnny staggered as he walked, and Jube was no firmer afoot. Then the sun shone from water, and they both broke into a shambling run. Johnny let Jube go ahead, and followed as best he might. He came up to the water hole, with crystalline deposits about the edge, saw Jube nose aside the green algae, plunge his muzzle in. Then Johnny was at the water, ran out into the little pool a ways, dropped to his knees. He plunged his head in first, raised it dripping. Then he cleared away the murk with his hands, cupped them to bring water to his lips. Something white in the water, before his eyes. His hands stopped their movement; the water spilled from his hands. For a moment he could not see clearly, then he knew. The skeleton of a bird, half-buried in the white bottom of the pool. A dead bird. A bird, drinking, dying—Johnny surged to his feet.

"Jube! Jubel!" he cried. The water was a burning, searing agony on his sun-cracked lips. His horse stood on the bank, legs braced. Even as Johnny came up, he backed one step, then his legs locked, and he fell, heavily, and tiny spurts of alkali went up from beneath him.

"Jube!" the name was torn from Johnny's lips, and he flung himself across his horse. Jube tried to raise his head. Tiny white crystalline particles crusted his muzzle. The great brown eyes were agonized, terrified. As though he were calling to Johnny, begging him to help.

It was an hour before Jube was dead, and he bloated during that time. Johnny lay beside him, murder in his mind. Nothing else. No room for anything else. And when Jube was dead, Johnny got to his feet and ranted
curses until the dryness of his throat stopped them. But the echo of them seemed to come back to him from across the white wastelands. The sign he found some distance from the deadly pool, half-buried in sand where someone had thrown it, Joe Watters Johnny had no doubt. WARNING: THIS SPRING IS POISONED!!
GOOD WATER FIVE MILES ON.

Five miles further, but Jube was dead, and Johnny couldn’t save him now by walking those five burning miles. He wanted to cry, and because he wanted to, he couldn’t. He walked back and looked at the bloating animal, and wondered if a man would bloat that same way. It didn’t seem like that was Jube lying there, so grotesque and misshapen. No, Jube had gone on, and was waiting for him ahead—somewhere. Johnny shook his head, turned slowly to stare about him. The low-lying greasewood cluster. Nothing else. But the blue mountains to the west were higher, clearer. Something shining in the sand some distance away. He walked over, stumbling as he moved, stared down at a human hand, nothing left but bones and tatters of leather-like skin. Reaching up through the sand. A dead man, buried here, with nothing to mark his grave. And suddenly Johnny knew there were other unmarked graves there, too. Men who had drunk the water of the pool and died. He straightened, and something made him look back the way he had come, across the white glare of the alkali desert. The gray mountains were as low as the blue mountains to the west of him. And against that low horizon he saw a blossom of dust, growing larger as he watched. His mouth drew down, and his right hand went to his gun. Then he nodded. He went back to the pool, squatted beside it and watched the dust cloud grow, come closer. Then he could see a wagon and two horses, and a man atop it, a thick, heavy man. Joe Watters.

Johnny dropped to the hot sands, threw his left arm
forward, put his right beneath him, and in that hand he held his gun. His head was twisted to his left, and beneath lowered lids he watched the road.

Joe Watters drove up in the buckboard behind two tall, fine horses. His fat face was wet with sweat, and tobacco juice dribbled down his chin. He looped the reins over the brake rod, clambered down, his great belly heaving and quaking. His voice rumbled out liquidly, like greased sound.

"‘Maybe you’ll know me next time,’ he says. ‘Take a good look,’ he says!” Sarcasm dripped from the words. He spat, grunted. He stared at Johnny where he lay so still, his evil-wrinkled eyes narrowing. Then he hitched up his sagging gunbelt over his trembling belly, and walked to Jube. He bent to his work, quickly, loosening the girth, tugging the saddle away. He removed the halter, looked at the leather, spat once more.

“Lousy saddle tramp, talkin’ to me that way,” he said. He picked up the blanket, saddle and gear, and tossed them into the bed of the wagon. He mopped his sweat-streaming jowls, moved towards Johnny. Johnny closed his eyes. He thought of the tin warehouse beside the wooden shack, stuffed with saddles and riding gear. He thought of the poisoned springs, and of the dead man’s bones thrusting up through the sand, and then he sat up, and the gun in his hand was at Watters’ belly.

It seemed that Johnny could almost see the ebbing of blood from the fat, florid face. Veins stood out on the suddenly pallid forehead, and the shapeless throat was suddenly corded. Watters’ mouth dropped open, and brown spittle dripped down, staining his dirty shirt front.

“You dirty, scavenging bastard!” Johnny whispered through sun-cracked lips. Every word was agony, and he relished it, for it helped to keep him from emptying
the six slugs of the Colt’s .44 into Watters’ belly. “You filthy murdering scum!”

Watters stood stock still. But his belly surged, slowly, up and down, as he fought for breath. Then his lips contorted, and he screamed. “Don’t kill me!” he blabbered. “God, don’t kill me!”

Johnny rocked back and forth, fighting the crazy red haze that almost blinded him. Then he moved back, toward the wagon. Watters remained still, jerking, quivering. As he passed him, Johnny took his gun. Watters never moved. His eyes stared at nothing but the muzzle of Johnny’s gun.

“An easy night’s ride,” Johnny said. “How many men have you told that to, Watters? Ten—a hundred?”

“It’s not my fault—I’ve done nothing—” Watters stopped the babble of words. His voice was no longer oiled. It was rusty with fear, squeaking and grating.

“Turn around,” Johnny said. The fat man moved, half-fell to both knees, knelt there with his back to Johnny.

Johnny sheathed his gun. He found canteens in the buckboard. He raised one to his mouth, sipped it. The water was hot, the metal rim of the canteen seared his lips, but Johnny felt strength flowing back into him. He worked with a will then, cutting loose the two horses, putting Jube’s saddle and bridle on one. He tied on his bedding roll, hung two of the canteens from the wagon from the saddle horn, put the four others on the other horse. Watters still knelt there, blubbering, incoherent.

“I ought to shoot you dead,” Johnny said. “But that ain’t bad enough for a stinkin’ coyote like you. I’m takin’ your horses. You can walk back to your lousy four-bit waterin’ hole. Maybe you’ll be lucky an’ maybe not.”

Watters turned, still on his knees. He slobbered. “I got money,” he said. “I got plenty. You can have it. Give me one horse, two of the canteens. Give me a chance. You wouldn’t leave me here like that—”
"The hell I wouldn’t," Johnny grated. He saw Jube’s bloated body, and his fist lashed out, and Watters fell heavily to the sand. He lay there, and the brown saliva was streaked with red as it welled from his slack mouth.

Then Johnny stepped back, hastily, before he gave way to his feelings and beat the fat man to death. He climbed to the saddle, sat there. His face was strained, his eyes tormented. "Good-by, Jube," he said. Then he looked again at Watters. His face was cruel. "I’m ridin’ to the next waterhole. I’ll wait there three days. If I see you comin’, I’ll ride to meet you—and I’ll make you wish to God you were dead before I kill you. But I’ll do better than you did." He held up a canteen in one hand. Water gurgled in it. He tossed it to the sand beside Watters. "I’ll give you that."

He took the lead-rope he had fashioned for the second horse, urged the animal he rode off, down the rutted wagon trail. He looked back. Watters was still on his knees, his head bent forward on his chest. Johnny’s mouth tightened. . . .

The third dawn following, Johnny broke camp from beside the second water hole. He watched the sun come up, red and furious. The desert was bloody with the color. He rubbed at his chin, then drew his revolver. He looked at it, frowned. Fat-bellied Joe Watters, stumbling, falling, dying out there, and cherishing, fondling the single canteen that Johnny had thrown him. His eyes narrowed, and stared down at his gun. Then he dug out his clasp knife, opened it, and cut a fifth notch on the black wood of the handle.
CHAPTER TWO

Johnny Lends A Hand

The hate inside Johnny Sundance was not ended. He felt it as a small, low fire inside his head, and thinking about it made the flame grow taller. So he tried to take it out of his mind by concentrating on other things. The flat white of the desert began to change; thin dark ridges of brush and weed, and the irregular lines of coulees cut through sand during the spring thaws. The blue haze of the mountains began to lift shoulders into the steel-gray skies, and shadows made lines on the flatness, rounding them out. A darker shadow at the base of the mountains marked the limits of water and the growth of green brush and trees. He passed the last spring, a tiny spot of wet darkness on the off-white desert; he stopped long enough to obtain water and to eat, then rode on. But he did not reach the mountains that night. He made dry camp, and the night winds did not blow, leaving the warmth of the sun in the sands. He sprawled on his blankets and let the noises of the night seep in upon him. Faintly he caught the melancholy cry of a coyote, repeated again fainter as the animal moved away from him. Dry rustlings and whispers. And his mind refused to stay blank, but formed picture-bright images.

SIMON LANDSFELL, PROPRIETOR. The brand on the two horses he had taken from Watters, S-Bar-L. A big he billy goat gobbling up the whole end of Wyoming. Johnny tried to picture Landsfell, failed. Big or
small? It made no difference, for men like Watters rimmed the desert, and they were an extension of Landsfell’s personality. Tall or short, fat or lean, Simon Landsfell would have the soul of a scavenging hawk, of that Johnny was sure. It was like the story of the Mormon and the wolf, a giant gray lobo who ranged in one section of the Wasatch Mountains. The Mormon was rich, and the wolf began to strike at his sheep. He left his mark, the impression of pads as big as a man’s hand. And the Mormon made a devil of the beast, and beggar himself in a hunt that knew no parallel in the West. He wasted three years, and his flocks grew thin, but he persevered, and one day he came back from the mountains, a gaunt scarecrow of a man, and hung the hide of a monstrous wolf on his barn. Then with Mormon stubbornness he started again and rebuilt what he had lost, and laughed at the devil and bad luck for he had hung his hide on the wall of the barn and Old Nick could never get away again. Johnny Sundance could not escape the conviction that he had found his devil, and could not ride his way in peace again until he had nailed the hide to a wall.

To another man, the score might be considered paid in full, and he could ride his trail in peace. But Johnny’s mind would never let him forget. And there was the difference. Just what he could do about it, Johnny didn’t know. He never did very much about anything, or he wouldn’t be a homeless saddle tramp. Yet, as in the past, he was sure that something would happen.

He rolled a cigarette, lighted it, sucking the smoke deep into his lungs. The moon rose from the mountains to the east, and spread a silver blanket over the ground. The mountains to the west stood sharply out, black and solemn. A tiny yellow-red spot of light shone out, unmoving. It didn’t flicker as might a campfire, but held a steady pulsation as of lamplight seen from a distance.
It stood at the base of the mountains, where the shelving shoulder of the mountain edged out into the desert. A ranch? More likely a line camp for some big spread. But there would be water, and possibly a meal. Johnny nodded to himself. He finished the cigarette. The night was still, and a soft breeze sprang up. It carried the chill of snowfields in it, and he shrugged into his blankets. Unexpectedly, he fell at once into an untroubled sleep.

He was an hour on his way when dawn reddened the sky. The blue mountains grew before him, in tumbled disarray, with ugly slashes marking deep-shadowed canyons. Only the top half of the mountains were blue, for the base was streaked with yellow and red. While the sky was clear of clouds, a thin haze curtained the brassiness of the sun, and the continuing breeze was cooling. He let the horse pick its own pace, and rode with his eyes half-closed. He stopped once, shortly before noon, to rest the horses. For the last hour the sand had given way to an outcropping of reddish rock, and it was midway up the swelling rise of the swaleback ridge that he paused. He hunkered down in the shade of his horse and rolled a cigarette, and it was while he was lighting it that he first heard the shots.

There were two at first, close together, and the distance dimmed the sound, and the mountains blurred it, threw it back in muffled echo. Then a pattering of fire, shots irregularly spaced, cutting sharply through the reverberations from the mountains. More than one gun, probably three or four, firing at will. Johnny stood up, turned to face the mountains. The ridge cut off his view of the base of the mountains. The firing kept up, steadily.

“Somebody means business,” he said. Of course it was not his affair, and the thing to do would be to sit it out here, and then ride away from the sound of shooting. A crooked grin twisted his lips. But then who’d expect
a saddle tramp to have enough sense to avoid trouble? He swung up into the saddle, put the horse to the slope. He topped the rise within five minutes, and reined in.

This close, the mountains lost the deep blue color, appeared slate-gray, with darker stripes ending sharply where the reddish base began. A stand of cottonwoods stood like puffs of gray-green dust, and set back in them a clapboard line shack. The silver-white bars of corrals etched a rectangle to one side, and where the desert ended, a thin trickle of water made a dark stripe, blurring as it was lost in the sands. There were white curtains at the open windows, and in front of the long porch that crossed the width of the line house, brightly colored flowers looked like lost sunbeams. Even as Johnny looked, a rifle blasted from a ridge to his right, and a window broke and the white curtains ripped, hung half-in, half-out the window frame. Then from the broken window the dry snap of a revolver sounded in futile reply; the rifleman was beyond reasonable pistol shot.

The earliest lesson a saddle tramp learns is to mind his own business; in Johnny's case it had been impressed upon him by the hardness of a clenched fist, and the biting burn of a bullet. Curiosity was not an overly-strong trait with him, but something about the forlorn loneliness of the line house, the obvious attempts to make a home of the makeshift shack, stirred an answering emotion inside him. For that reason more than any other, he drew the horse back and dismounted. He tipped his battered flat-crowned Stetson back from his eyes, and rubbed at his lean jaws with one hand. His eyes were nondescript, but they darkened with the intensity of thought. He dug a hole in the sand with his boot, dropped the reins in, tamped sand back on them. Then he shifted his cartridge belt, settling it over his right hip, and his right hand made the easy sliding gesture while his body tilted sharply to the left. The gun was
out before him, and his thumb had erected the hammer, held it ready to drop. The draw and rise of the hammer were simultaneous, clipping a fraction of a second from the same action in a double-action gun. He nodded, returned the gun to his holster. He rubbed the horny callus ridge along the edge of his thumb with his left hand; it was the mark of the true gunman, the man who could not afford even the time spent for the pull of a trigger. With Johnny it was an affectation rather than a necessity; but it was a trick the full value of which he had had occasion to appreciate.

He returned to the crest of the ridge, sat down just below it. Since no shot had been fired at him, it was safe to assume his brief advent had not been seen. The rifleman fired again, and Johnny saw him, kneeling just over the edge of the ground swell to his right. Three horses were tethered in the coulee behind him; the distance was less than one hundred yards. Two nondescript saddle animals, and a blooded mare of sun-bright sorrel coat. The fine head was tossed, and Johnny caught the shine of silver conchas. As big as double-eagles they were. And a silver-mounted saddle dark with sweat and wear, but still a piece to catch the eye of a range rider. Just such a rig as he had promised big Jube. Johnny’s frown deepened, and his mouth drew down in harsh lines. By narrowing his eyes, he could make out the brand on the sorrel mare; S-Bar-L. Simon Landsfell’s brand.

The three Landsfell riders poured lead into the shack with renewed fury. The smash of breaking crockery sounded; glass tinkled and crashed. The ridiculous snap-snap of the revolver sounded again and again. Johnny picked out the location of the other two riflemen spaced up the ridge from him. By shifting down and to the right, he brought them into his line of vision, and narrowed the distance to them. The nearest rider was well under a hundred yards distant. As he gained his new
position, the rifle firing ceased. The sudden silence was unbroken until the grotesque squawking roar of a bullfrog echoed out from the earth-dammed pond behind the shack. A broomstick was thrust out through a broken window of the shack; a white cloth was tied to it. Johnny caught the sound of a woman crying. The forlorn sound struck at him, made his teeth feel on edge. The nearest rifleman stood up. He was small, lithe of figure, in dark Levi's, with a red-brown-and-white calfskin vest open over a white silk shirt. His Stetson was black, with a broad woven-horsehair band and a yellow and red sweet cactus blossom thrust in at a jaunty angle. His face was dark of skin, with gray-green eyes that glistened like volcanic glass. His mouth was a mocking slit as he pushed his hat back from black curls and cradled his rifle in his right arm.

"All right, Toomey!" he called out. "Come on out!"
Johnny heard the woman's voice distinctly, a deep-toned voice with sadness a natural part of it. "Don't go, Clay! They'll kill you—that's Denver out there."

"This ain't gittin' us nothin', Mrs. Talbee," a man's gruff voice answered. "Hell, we're licked a dozen ways from Sunday."

"That's sense, Toomey," the man in the calf-skin vest called out. "We're waitin' for you!"

The broomstick was withdrawn. Then the front door of the line shack burst open, a tall, heavy-shouldered man came out. He wore no gun, but he carried the broomstick in his right hand. He crossed the porch, stood in the hot sun for a moment; then his shoulders straightened, and he moved out into the yard.

"Okay, Denver," he called out. "We'll get out. Thell with this noise! I've had a bellyfull, an' I reckon Mrs. Talbee's licked afore she starts."

"Right you are, Toomey," the man called Denver answered. Johnny could see a grin split that dark face.
His teeth were a shining line of white in the sunlight. Then Denver twisted, his rifle came up—and the shot thundered.

Toomey straightened. His stride broke, and he came to a halt. His heavy face twisted with astonishment and shock. The front of his blue cotton shirt changed color, first darkening, then streaking with bright red. The rifle blazed again; the woman screamed from the shack. Then Toomey fell, face forward across the white flag of surrender he carried. Denver’s laughter was real, alive with humor.

From the clapboard shack a woman ran. She was tall, fine of figure, full bosomed and broad shouldered, with the heavy hands of the frontierswoman. Her stride was free and bold, and her gingham dress went high above long, slender legs. Her face was pale, strained, and her eyes reddened from much crying. Johnny saw that much, then Denver moved, bringing the rifle up to bear on her running figure. Surprise caught Johnny off-guard. But before the rifle could bark, he was on his feet, his gunhand extended, and a ringing cry on his lips. His shot beat the rifle’s roar by a fraction of an instant; his bullet, high because he was above his target, clipped Denver’s gayly flowered hat from his head. The rifleman jerked at the impact, and his shot went wide. Johnny saw dust spurt up a foot from the woman; then she reached the fallen Toomey, dropped to his side. Johnny had time for no more; Denver had swung about, fired again as he levered a bullet into the chamber of his rifle.

Johnny’s thumb moved, and the hammer rose and fell. He saw Denver spin about, fall. The other two men shouted, one stood up. Johnny’s fourth shot tripped that one over on his back. The third man broke and ran, dropping his rifle in his haste. Then Denver was running, too, bent close over. He reached the sorrel mare as
Johnny's fifth shot cut the air beside him. Johnny didn't fire his last shot. The three riflemen were mounted, and their horses broke into a gallop. Johnny stood still, watched them go, but his hands moved deftly. He filled the five empty chambers of his gun, grunted ruefully. Five shots. The .44 shells cost a nickle a piece; two-bits, and he was broke, and only a dozen shells left in his cartridge belt. He shook his head, then moved down towards the ranch yard. He detoured far enough to pick up the dropped rifle, then to cover the ground where Denver had fallen. He grunted again, in self-reproach. There were no blood-drops in the dirt. Denver had dummied on him, pretending to be hit, while the other two drew his fire. But beside the rifle he found a thick trail of blood; he had hit at least one. There were kneepints in the sand where Denver had dropped, and beside them lay the yellow-red flower of the sweet cactus from his hat. Johnny looked down at it for a moment, then crushed it into the dirt with the heel of his boot.

The woman looked up as he came near. She was older than he had thought. His fingers brought out tobacco, built a cigarette. He licked the edge of the brown paper, thrust the roll between his lips, tilted his head to light it. The woman's face was smooth, but lines were deep about her mouth and eyes; a light streak marred the black of her long hair braided up over the crown of her head.

"I want to cry," she said. "but I can't." Her voice was deep, bell-toned. For some reason, it made Johnny think of church. The last church he had been in was in Taos, New Mexico, and it had been a hundred-and-twenty in the shade, although it had been cool inside, and the six-foot thick walls of adobe made it seem like something eternal and good. As he had stood in the shade, blinking, a bell had peeled out. The woman's voice now reminded him of that.
"I can't cry any more," she said. "There are no tears left. I'm dry inside. Like a dead cactus when you break it open and find it hollow."

Toomey was dead. Johnny took the white cloth from the broomstick. It was streaked with dirt. He shook it, placed it over the man's face. The woman closed her eyes. Then she stood up. She opened her eyes and looked out at the white expanse of the desert, then turned, slowly, and looked up at the soaring gray-blue peaks behind them. "Has Denver gone?" she asked.

Johnny nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Did you shoot him?"

"At him, ma'am," Johnny said. "Reckon I ain't much of a shot. Missed him. I tried to hit him, though."

She nodded, bitterly. "Many men have tried to kill Denver," she said. It was a flat statement of defeat. As though killing Denver was like killing a demon; it couldn't be done. "He'll be back. He'll look for you. You'd better go."

Johnny held still. Blue cigarette smoke moved up past his face, hiding his eyes. "I wouldn't want to put Denver to no trouble lookin' for me, ma'am," he said, gently. "I'll just stick around here where he can find me just any old time."

Her eyes moved to his face, as if she were seeing him for the first time. She looked down his faded checked shirt, to the gunbelt at his waist. She saw the five notches. She saw the smokiness of his eyes, the hard lines about his jaw. Stubbornness was in his face, and something more. There was a light in his eyes like that she had seen in the eyes of a newly-caught stallion.

"You'll stay," she said. "And there won't be any tears inside me when you die." A shudder moved her shoulders. "I know better than to argue with a man. Clay Toomey was sensible only when it was too late. That's one more for Denver. One more." She paused, looked
at Johnny again. "My name's Victoria Talbee. This is my land—what's left of it. Clay Toomey was the last of my riders. The others are gone—or dead like Toomey and John Talbee. I think you saved my life. Denver would have killed me. He would have written 'The End' to this whole thing right then, but you prevented him. He'll hate you for that—and no other man in the world hates like Denver, unless it's Simon Landsfell who owns him. I won't give you my thanks, because Denver is going to kill you—soon I think."

"Reckon yo're sick, ma'am," Johnny said. "You better git inside."

"Yes, I'm sick!" she cried out, bitterly. "I'm sick of death and killing. The smell of men's blood—I wear it like other women wear perfume. Gunsmoke and blood. Like a slaughter house." Her voice didn't shear off into hysteria, but it was there, in the glazed look of pain-darkened eyes. Then a baby's sudden cries made it vanish. She blinked, and suddenly tears moved down her face. She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, God, forgive me!"

Johnny's arm went over her shoulders. But there was strength inside her. She lifted her head. Her face was sadly beautiful in that moment. "Thank you, young man," she said. "I do thank you. If you want to carry Clay into the barn, I'll show you later where to bury him. You look tired and hungry and thirsty. Wash up—give me a few minutes alone. I'll be all right. Then come in."

Johnny Sundance carried the dead man gently around the house. Clay Toomey had been a big man in life, and Johnny felt a tightness at the base of his spine as he laid him carefully down on a mound of straw in the shade of the barn. The white rag fell away from his face, and a sunbeam shot between warped boards, like a living finger of light, alive with dancing sun motes,
to outline the harshness of death on his white-drained face. Johnny recovered the face. He was perspiring; he felt a wet patch on his back, and he was breathing hard, and it wasn’t alone because of Clay Toomey’s weight.

Death was something Johnny couldn’t stand to think about. Dead men haunted him; he could see their faces in his lonely campfires, in the blue mist of desert dawns, hear their voices in the whispering breath of the desert as it sucked in and out across the waste places. What was it Victoria Talbee had said? The smell of death? A thick sweetness that made a man gag and sweat cold sweat? He shivered, despite the heat of the day.

Wear and age were stamped indelibly on everything about the line shack and the barn. Apparently Clay Toomey had been an industrious man, for some outbuilding had been torn down, and the boards carefully stacked against one light-ruptured wall of the barn. An ancient stall sagged wearily at the rear, oddly ragged bits of moldy hay thrust out from the broken ribs of a manger. Decay and death; it was strong here. Johnny moved out into the sunlight, and welcomed the dry, burning heat of the sun. He walked to the ridge behind which he had left the two horses. He scanned the mountains and the desert edge as he returned leading them, but nothing moved. One black shape twisted and bent high overhead, a vulture, circling endlessly.

He watered his horses, rubbed dirt and grit from them, sorted out good hay from a moldy stack and tethered them at the rear of the shadowy barn. Then he returned to the lumber. A tall glass jar held nails, rusted but straight, evidently straightened after being withdrawn from the wood of the old building. He found a hammer and saw. He dragged boards and a sawhorse out into the sunshine, bent to his task. He didn’t pause, but made a coffin. He fitted the lid, drove the nails partly through, straightened up. He was sweating, but the chill
nausea had left his stomach. Mrs. Talbee hadn’t called. The sun was moving lower in the molten brass sky. The weather-blackened boards of the coffin contrasted with the gray ragged ends, and the pile of gray sawdust at the end of the sawhorse. Then the woman called to him, and he walked stiffly back toward the clapboard shack.

He paused at the adobe well-house. On a sun-silvered wooden bench sat a tin washpan and a bucket of water warmed by the sun. A big bar of homemade yellow soap had split with the heat of the day. It crumbled in his fingers, and the lather was thin, greasy. He worked methodically, scrubbing dirt from his hands and face. Then he threw the soapy water from the basin into the dirt where other pans of dirty water had given a bluish crust to the earth. He refilled the pan, doused his head. The water felt good. He used his fingers to comb his hair, then dried his hands and face on a gray cloth that was stiff with dried soap and dirt. He worked the pulley, brought up a fresh bucket of water from the well. He refilled the tin bucket, used the tin cup to drink from. The water was cold, but held a brackish flavor to it. A soured well. He’d seen them before. It would get worse until it became undrinkable. The woman called again.

She was standing on the porch when he came up. The heat of the stove had made little beads of perspiration form across her brow and upper lip. She smiled when she saw him but didn’t speak. Behind her stood a little boy, not over three. His eyes were big, still red from crying. He put his fist up to his mouth, but the woman reached down and gently drew it away. She came in behind him, moved to the big handmade table set in one end of the room. A rope partitioned off the other end, and a ragged quilt, sun-faded, hung across it. The house was clean. The rough board floor had been scrubbed
until it was white. The broken glass from the windows had been swept to one side. Bits of white crockery lay with it. The chimney over the black stove was canted crazily, and little puffs of smoke came from a jagged hole made by a bullet. The pipe and the black of the stove were marred by red rust streaks. Johnny left his hat on the bench on the porch, and sat down on a backless stool. The woman set a platter of browned steaks and potatoes in the middle of the table. She used a crocheted holder to handle the big black coffeepot. The coffee was boiled strong, and Johnny could hear the rattle of the egg shells against the sides of the pot. Egg shells made the grounds settle. The woman glanced quickly at Johnny’s face, then used her hand to bend the little boy’s head forward, and whispered a hurried grace. Johnny closed his eyes. The smell of the steak was strong and good.

He took a steak, scooped off potatoes. They were cooked whole, with onions. Browned just right. The smell was warm, homey. Funny thing, Johnny thought, how a woman’s cooking beat anything a man could do. The woman cut a small piece of meat for the boy, put a whole browned onion and a small potato on his plate. The boy went to work. Johnny poured condensed milk from a can into his cup until it welled back up through the brown fluid whitely. Then he stirred in sugar. The woman was watching him, her eyes big like the eyes of the boy. Sadness made them shine wetly.

“You’ll want to know all about it,” she said. Her deep tones were soft. “You have a right to know. I married John Talbee eight years ago. The Rocking T was the biggest ranch in this end of the state; John always said they measured Wyoming by the fences of the Rocking T. Then Simon Landsfell came. He’s from Nebraska. He bought land. Everything he could grab. He hired men; men like Denver. He gave no one a
chance. They sold out to him, or he drove them out. He didn’t antagonize John Talbee; not at first. He asked John for advice; they had business together again and again, and somehow it always went wrong, but John couldn’t blame Landsfell. At least he didn’t, not then. John sold him land to tide him over, and Landsfell lent him money. Then one day Landsfell was ready. He owned the Rocking T. It was as simple as that. John saw the whole thing too late, that Landsfell had tricked him, cheated him. John went into Beldon, called Landsfell into the street; but Landsfell laughed at him. And then Denver came out; John didn’t have a chance. Denver shot him twice, but didn’t kill him. I don’t think he wanted to kill him, then.”

She stopped. Johnny chewed the steak. Suddenly it had no taste. He sipped the coffee, savoring the syrupy sweetness of it.

“This was all we had left, a few hundred acres edging the desert. But it’s the only water for forty miles. The Rocking T winter grazing land is just north of here. The pond back of the house is where they watered the herds. The Rocking T water tanks used to be filled here, then carried through the pass to winter range. John swore that Landsfell would not get the water. He fenced in the pass—it’s on this land. At first Landsfell kept up a show of friendship; that it was all a mistake. But John wasn’t fooled twice. He and my brother Allen and Clay Toomey kept the pass closed. I think Landsfell realized then that John had outsmarted him. He killed Allen first. That was two years ago. Denver fired the shot, but it was Landsfell who used him as another man might use his own gun. Landsfell’s gun—that’s Denver. Three of the Rocking T men stayed with us—they are all buried here with Allen and John. John was killed eight months ago. It happened one night. I didn’t know John was hurt until after Landsfell’s men had been driven
off. He died in my arms, telling me he wasn’t hurt bad. Only Clay was left, and now he’s gone.”

The woman fell silent. Johnny finished the steak and potatoes in silence. The little boy kept his eyes on Johnny. He shifted them once to a quart jar, made of bluish glass, with a thick topping of white wax, holding pale yellow peaches. Victoria Talbee reached for the jar, used the point of a knife to break the wax, spooned it out into a dish. She dug two flaccid peach halves out, laid them on the boy’s plate. He began to eat them. Johnny ate one. They were pickled with vinegar and spices, and he remembered spiced peaches his mother had made. It was the first time he had thought of his mother in years.

“The tank is all I’ve got left,” she said. “If I had money I could go home to Missouri. I’ve got folks there, my mother and father. They’ve got a farm. I wish to God John had been a farmer in Missouri.”

A farmer would be still alive, not buried in shifting sand with bullet holes through and through him. That’s what she meant, Johnny thought. She met his eyes. Her olive-skinned face was set. She managed a smile.

“That’s how it is,” she said, speaking softly. “Davie—go play on the bed.” The little boy got up, flashed his big eyes at Johnny again, disappeared behind the faded quilt hung across the room. “You can smoke if you like.”

She didn’t even know his name, Johnny realized. And yet how close he had become in those few hours. She had talked to him as she might have talked to her brother. He felt a part of what had happened here, the tragedy of her life.

“Thanks, ma’am,” Johnny said. “My name’s Sundance—John Sundance. I’m a rider—at least I am when I’m workin’. Seems like that ain’t often or for very long. A better word’d be saddle tramp.” He rolled a cigarette,
shaped it carefully, lighted it. "When I reached this end o' Wyomin', I had me a horse I liked fine. I'd made promises to that horse I can't keep now, because he's dead. One o' Landsfell's crew had a neat little game. They's a poisoned spring out in the desert; he'd tell a rider where to find it—an' then come out across the desert after his gear. He ain't goin' to do it no more. That's shore." He stood up, slowly. "It ain't just what happened here that makes me feel kind a like I got a stake in this game. My horse died drinkin' poisoned water. I hold that agin Landsfell. I'm goin' to do what I can to make him pay for it." He broke off. His hand was suddenly trembling. He didn't trust his voice. "But I better get out an'—an' 'tend to Clay Toomey."

The woman stood up, too. She bent forward. "In the morning I'll show you where to bury him," she said. That was all, but it signified a bond between them. Johnny felt it too. He didn't know what he could do, but it would be something. He felt the gun at his hip swing as he stepped towards the door.
CHAPTER THREE

Denver

The day was hot for digging. Johnny Sundance straightened, put his weight on the shovel, and mopped his streaming face with a blue bandanna. He blew his nose, wriggled his shoulders to relieve the itchy patch of sweat under his shirt. At his feet he had outlined a rectangular hole, roughly three by six feet. The loam was heavy with sand, easy digging, but crumbling at the edges. He had lowered the grave some two feet in the half hour he'd been working, but he was slow since he had to keep an eye out for riders. He had spent the night uneventfully in the barn, and had seen nothing moving since dawn.

The cottonwoods were thick here, and tiny puffs of white like frail ghosts danced in the windless air. Clumps of greasewood and black sage stood below the shoulder of the mountain, and the phantom gray fuzz of Eaton sage lay like puffy shadows. From where he stood at rest, his gaze fell past the cottonwoods to the crimson border of firewood that grew profusely over the mountain base. He made a mental note of a clump of serviceberry, just beyond the white flowered hawthornes that stood behind the house. There'd be wild gooseberrys, too, for the hunting. Normally the thought of wild gooseberry pie would interest him. but his mood was not normal. Depression rode his shoulders like a tiresome weight. Like the gaunt skeleton of the alkali desert rode the bosom of the mountains. It was cattle country, with clumps of
wheatgrass scattered through most of the valleys and plains; the promise of fertility was in the soil, but it would never come to fruition because of the scarcity of water. Around the line shack and the earth-banked tank of water, there was avid, turbulent growth. It might be possible to develop such a spot, and a man like John Talbee would have known it. It had been the last ace in his game against Landsfell—and it hadn’t been good enough because a bullet from Denver’s gun had trumped the trick.

Johnny let a frown mar his brow. Victoria Talbee; her darkly haunted eyes, the quivering of her mouth at unexpected moments. And little David Talbee, big of eye, round of mouth, watching him in silence. He shook his head. You didn’t talk about things right out; you said it was a good morning, that the sun was hot; you didn’t mention the dead man in the barn, or the grave you had to dig. You didn’t talk about the woman’s task of washing and cleaning the dead man’s body, of dressing him in his best; nor did you let your mind think too long about being dead. At least Johnny didn’t. Because he had something else to take his thoughts. He would stay, and carry on the fight that John Talbee had started, and had almost ended with the death of Clay Toomey. Of course, Johnny could have trotted out reasons to make sense in his head, but he didn’t have to. Things happened to Johnny, and he let them happen, and it was his way of life.

He put weight on his right foot, used his left to sink the shovel in; he bent, lifted the moist earth out with a grunt. He piled it atop the low dark mound that was growing higher. And because he didn’t want to think about the grave he was digging, he thought about the places he had been. Like in the mountains to the north and east. The deep drop-off canyons filled with the yellow-green waves of lacy topped lodgepole pines. And
in the light-mottled depths of the canyons, working between the boles of the pines, smelling the moist richness of rotting foliage under foot, and hearing the whispering of the wind through the top high overhead. Then the change in color of the feathery tree tops where the Engelmann spruce crowds out the alpine fir and lodgepole pines. Especially in spring when the crimson cones stand out in the midst of purple clusters of flowers. Or in winter when the heavy branches are sagged strangely with the weight of white snow, like tired soldiers standing to their post. And riding through a stand of quaking aspen with the dark green leaves rustling, whispering, singing overhead. He found an affinity for the mountain reaches; and yet he moved on, always on. Like a man hunting for something, always bragging about the last place he’d been, all the time thinking about the next place he’d go. . . .

He was knee-deep in the grave, and the effort to lift each heavy shovelful out and over the bank made him sweat anew. Suddenly he paused, left foot extended, the shovel half-sunk into the loose dirt at the bottom of the narrow hole. A chill struck along his back, and he lifted his eyes. A man stood some ten feet away, back against the bole of a cottonwood, his brown, red and white calf-skin vest open, and a yellow-red sweet cactus blossom thrust into the braided horsehair band of his black Stetson. He held a gun at the end of long, thin fingers, and his hat was pushed back from a boyish, curl-topped face. He was smiling.

“Howdy, Mister,” Denver said. “Nice seein’ you again.”

Shock thrust at Johnny. He blinked, then wiped at the sweat on his face. Even as his hand moved, the gun levelled.

“Don’t move quick like that, Mister,” Denver said. “I’m nervous. I’m nervous as hell. I don’t want to make a mistake like blowin’ you in half.”
“That’s nice of you,” Johnny said. “Don’t many people call me ‘mister’ so polite like. The name’s Johnny Sundance.”

“I’m Denver,” the smiling youth said. His face was regular of feature, with oddly pale gray eyes that set off the straight black brow, the black curls that glistened below the brim of his hat. Like a woman he was beautiful, Johnny thought. But it wasn’t a weak beauty, because the eyes were gray agate, and the mouth was cruel. As though God had set out to make a perfect man and then quit with just the outside finished. Inside—somebody else had taken a hand.

“But don’t let me keep you from your work, Johnny Sundance,” Denver went on. “Clay ain’t goin’ to keep good in this hot weather.” His smile widened. “An’ while you’re at it, go on down a couple feet further.”

Denver’s laugh was ready, a bubbling, happy sound. But his eyes didn’t laugh, and his mouth was hooked at the corners. A couple of feet further. Far enough to dump a man on top of Clay’s pine coffin. Johnny felt the chill on his back again.

Johnny sank the shovel into the yielding earth, dumped the shovelful on the growing pile. He worked slowly, rhythmically. Denver watched him. After a while he started talking.

“Mrs. Talbee’s asleep. I come by the shack. I seen her inside, like she was dead. I reckon she is, inside. A woman ain’t like a man; she can’t get used to the idea of killin’, of maybe bein’ dead. A man can fool hisself into thinkin’ maybe it ain’t as bad as he thinks. Like Clay Toomey walkin’ out into the sunlight yesterday when he knowed almost certain I was goin’ to put a slug in him. Like you diggin’ away so hearty, sweatin’ over that hole as if you liked doin’ it, an’ all the time knowin’ I’m goin’ to plant you in there right on top of Toomey.”
Johnny straightened, met Denver's smiling face. "I'm sorry I didn't kill you yesterday," he said, flatly.

"Don't tell me!" Denver said. His mouth moved, in and out, like he was sucking something sweet. "But I can see how you'd feel like that. I think I'd feel like that if I was you. But you got to look at it the way I see it. Here you come ridin' in. You ain't nobody, you ain't got no stake in this deal. But you got to take a hand just the same. You don't think about maybe gettin' killed for it; oh, no! You just think, here's somethin' that needs doin', an' I'm goin' to do it. So you do. You sit up on a hill an' scare hell out of me an' the others. You put a slug into Jimmy Sykes, and he'll be gimpy the rest of his life because of it. But you ain't thinkin' about that. You're too damned busy bein' Mister Big. You look down at us, an' you think, I'm God, an' you start takin' a hand in things that ain't none of your business. Now it's my turn. I'm playin' God, an' I'm lookin' down at you through the sights of a gun."

He laughed again. The merry, tinkling sound echoed. Tiny fluffs of white danced between them, like a faery curtain. A tiny wind stirred the cottonwoods. The puffs were like feather-snow. Falling, settling, fuzzing the ground. And Johnny covered the false frost of them with the dirt he threw from the grave.

"I seen Toomey in the coffin," Denver said. "He looked right nice. As nice as I ever seen Toomey, an' twice as peaceful. He looked so nice I didn't want to bother him none. I figger maybe a man has the right to lay in his grave as purty as might be. Maybe I'll comb your hair and wash your bloody face before I throw dirt on you." He blinked. "Where did the slug catch Toomey?"

Johnny frowned, paused. He thrust the shovel halfway into the loose dirt in one corner of the grave. "Over his heart," he said. "High."
“Ahuh, I figgered that gun shot a little high,” Denver said. “I took my time with that shot, too. Goes to show a guy can’t be too careful.”

“That’s right, Denver,” Johnny said, and his back arched like a bow. The shovel of dirt bounced up. As it moved, Johnny moved. Denver’s Colt roared, and lead sang into the bottom of the grave. But the dirt from the shovel flew into Denver’s face, and behind it the flat blade of the long-handled spade. Johnny felt the clang through the wooden handle, and Denver exploded backward, his gun flying from his hand. Johnny stepped after him, and the shovel clanged against Denver’s skull, even as he was falling against the base of a tree. He lay inertly. His face was reddened on one side, skin torn and shredded and dirtstreaked. Then the raw place began to bleed, a welling of dark blood, oozing out in giant drops to merge, drip to the ground.

Johnny stood over him, shovel raised. This blow would not glance. He’d feel the crushing of the man’s skull. He felt his shoulders tense. Then a woman screamed.

“Don’t kill him, Johnny!” Victoria Talbee cried. She was running up the slope. Her face was beaded with sweat. She stopped, stared down at the fallen Denver.

“Reckon I should, ma’am,” Johnny said. But he knew he couldn’t, now. In that first full minute he could have. He meant to. But her scream broke the tension inside him. He dropped the shovel. His hands were suddenly trembling. He’d never known a man who deserved to die as Denver did—but he couldn’t kill him now. He moved over, got Denver’s gun. He unloaded it, threw it to one side.

The woman was watching him. Johnny nodded. “He came alone. I reckon he was too smart to ride in close. Came down through the spruce, workin’ down slow. I didn’t hear him or see him comin’. I will next time.”

He had brought a bucket of well water up with him.
He walked over, dipped up a tin cup full. He drank it. His hands stopped trembling. Then he picked up the bucket, crossed over to Denver. He emptied it over the unconscious man. Denver groaned. His eyes opened. For an instant they were crossed. Little veins of red marred the whites. Then they focused, and he sat up. His hands went to his face and head. He pushed at his head, gently, moving it on his shoulders.

"I'm tired of diggin', Denver," Johnny said. His voice was colorless. "I'm goin' to let you do the rest of it."

The gray agate eyes of Denver blinked, slowly. Then he smiled again. "I had to talk," he said, bitterly. "I had to shoot off my mouth. Like a sucker I stood there an' let you take me in by that dead pan of yours. I'll remember that, Johnny. Next time—"

"There won't be a next time, Denver," Johnny said. Denver came up, awkwardly, stood with his back against the tree. He shook his head, and tiny drops of blood hurtled from the side of his skinned face. He dug a white handkerchief from his hip pocket, pressed it against his face. The white cloth was red with blood and brown from dirt when he removed it. The tiny beads of red reformed as soon as the cloth was removed from his dark skin.

"I think there will be, Johnny," Denver said. "Because now you got me—what are you goin' to do with me?"

It was Johnny's turn to blink. He saw the pale, strained face of Victoria Talbee. Bits of white fluff danced crazily on sun motes between the trees. He frowned. "Right now I reckon I'm makin' you do a little diggin', Denver."

Denver pushed himself away from the tree. He staggered as he bent to get the shovel. He got it, stepped down into the grave. Johnny stood back too far to be reached by a sudden move. Denver grinned, stepped on
the shovel. His strength seemed to flow back into him from some invisible source, and the mound of loose earth grew beside the grave.

"It's all right now, Mrs. Talbee," Johnny said. "You'd better go back to the house an' rest. I'll call you when everything's ready. I reckon you'd like to say a few words over Toomey."

"Yes." She half-turned, then moved back. Her dark eyes were wide, bright. Her deep voice became a whisper. "What are you going to do with him, Johnny?"

Johnny shrugged. He had no answer. His mind had gone blank. The killing rage had spent itself. It would not be renewed without more cause. "I don't know now," he said. "You shouldn't have stopped me."

"I guess I shouldn't," she whispered. "God, I don't know! I just don't know."

"Funny how things work out sometimes," Johnny said. "About two minutes ago I wouldn't have give much for my chances. Now things look as good as ever. Just happened."

Just what he meant, Johnny wasn't sure, but it seemed to turn the trick. The woman studied him, and her eyes were strange. Then she nodded.

"I guess things always happen to men like you, Johnny," she said. She moved away, the sunlight dancing on her slim form as she went between the trees.

Denver had stopped digging. His keen grey eyes were like bits of dull stone in darkness of his face. "I heard about guys like you, Johnny," he said. "I never believed what I heard. A man rides in, an' a woman looks at him an' finds what she sees just to damned good to be true. But I seen it happen. I seen it with my own eyes." He spat and rubbed at his injured face. "That's something more we'll settle, Johnny, when the time comes. I used to like Victoria Talbee—maybe that's why I was thinkin' about killin' her yesterday. But I wasn't goin' to
shoot, Johnny. At least I don’t think so now. It was just seein’ her run out to Toomey an’ fall beside him like nothin’ else in the world meant anythin’ to her. But she never looked at Toomey like she just looked at you. I’m goin’ to have to kill you, that’s for sure.”

Johnny hunkered down on his heels, a safe distance away. He slipped the gun into his holster. But the holster was across the meaty part of his thighs, and his hand was close.

“I was goin’ to beat your head in,” Johnny said. “I was goin’ to pop it open like a dropped watermelon. She stopped me. That was afore you woke up. You owe her that, Denver. If it makes any difference.”

“I don’t know,” Denver said. “It might. Sometimes I get crazy ideas an’ do things I’m sorry about. But I don’t let it worry me.”

Johnny leaned his head back against the tree. “I’m glad you ain’t squeamish, Denver. Buryin’ a man ain’t pleasant. I didn’t like the idea. But you shot him—an’ you can finish the job by buryin’ him.”

Denver dug for a while in silence. He scraped loose dirt into a pile, heaved it out. He was almost shoulder deep in the rectangular hole. He straightened. “Since Toomey’s going to be alone in this hole after all, I reckon this’s deep enough.”

They returned to the barn, Denver in the lead. Johnny watched while the gunman loaded the crude pine box on a buckboard and fitted the lid in place. He drove in the nails. His battered head and face must be agonizing, Johnny thought, but Denver kept a thin smile frozen on his lips.

Victoria Talbee came out, in a black dress and a heavy black bonnet. Little David walked at her side, silent and reserved.

“You an’ Davey take the buckboard up, Mrs. Talbee,”
Johnny said. "Me an' Denver will walk along ahind you."

She said nothing, but climbed to the spring seat. Johnny lifted Davey in his left arm, set him on the seat. Denver didn't move. The woman clucked to the horse, and it moved on at a walk. The hind wheels of the buckboard revolved with a grating screech of rusty metal. The sound kept up, steadily, all the way to the grove of trees. The mound of earth didn't seem raw and ugly now; it was filmed with white fluff from the cottonwoods.

Johnny helped Victoria down. He gave her his gun. "If Denver moves toward you or me—kill him," he ordered. Then he picked David up, set him on the ground. He took one side of the coffin, Denver the other. They staggered with it to the grave. It thudded heavily as it dropped into the hole. Across the rough-edged maw in the earth, the men faced each other. A film of sweat lay across Denver's brow, and his raw face was darkening as a scab formed over it.

"I brought my Bible," Victoria Talbee said, tonelessly. Her deep voice was almost a whisper.

Some perversity stirred inside Johnny. He saw the weak sickness that Denver held inside himself, despite his boast of callousness.

"Give the book to Denver," he ordered. "I want to hear him read the service. I think Toomey'd like that. I think he'd like that right well."

Johnny took the gun from Victoria's lax fingers. He held it steadily. The woman stared at him, then she looked down at the thick black book she carried.

"God damn your rotten soul, Johnny Sundance!" Denver shrilled. "I'll see you rot in hell before I do!"

"You'll read it—or Toomey won't be alone in that hole," Johnny said. His voice betrayed the high pitch of his emotions, trembled. Denver caught the tone, and
his eyes widened. Victoria held out the Bible, and Denver took it. His hands shook like the leaves of an aspen.

Silence thickened about the three adult figures. The woman in black, her hands up to her face, Johnny Sundance a gun levelled across the gaping maw of a fresh grave, and Denver with his bright calfskin vest open and his face raw misery. Then Denver started to speak, and the words were not familiar to Johnny, and were whispered. With something of a start he saw that Denver was not reading from the book which he held closed in one hand at his sides. That hand was clenched so tight the tendons stood out like ropes under canvas taut to breaking.

"'For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,'" Denver spoke slowly, and his voice was like the sigh of the wind. He knelt, scooped up a handful of dirt, spilled it into the grave. "Amen," he said.

Two fresh lines were engraved down Denver’s cheeks, as he raised his head, for tears wash away dirt. His eyes were almost green, dark, turbulent. "I won’t forget this, Johnny Sundance," he said. "I swear to God I’ll make you pay for this."

He dropped the Bible into the dirt. Victoria knelt, retrieved it. She was crying, softly. She put an arm around David, moved back. The little boy looked up at her without understanding, then back to the grave. He didn’t speak, but why, why, was unanswered in his mind. And in Johnny’s, too.

"I’ll go back now," Victoria said. "There’ll be coffee and something to eat—after you’re done."

She climbed to the buckboard, reached down for the boy, and the wagon moved back down the slope, the wheels screeching and protesting shrilly. The two men stood still, waited until the sound was gone. Tiny fluffs of white shimmering between them.

"I’ll remember Clay Toomey, now," Denver said, slow-
ly. His eyes were staring into the grave. "I'll never be able to forget him." Horror edged his voice. "That's why you did it, damn you! That's why you did it."

"You ain't done yet, Denver," Johnny said. He gestured at the shovel, the mound of earth. Denver stared at him a moment longer, then bent to the task. He worked steadily, and when the grave was filled, he scraped dirt up into a rectangular mound, pounding it firmly down with the flat of the shovel blade.

"There's a marker over there I made last night," Johnny said. "Get it, pound it in at the head of the grave."

Denver got the board Johnny had made from the end of a dynamite case he had found in the barn. Burned in the solid plank on one side was ATLAS POWDER. On the other he had used a red hot running iron to carve a brief legend.

CLAY TOOMEY
Shot Down By a Mad Dog named Denver
June 20, 1887
R.I.P.

Denver lifted the board, and the stake nailed to it dangled below. He set it against the ground at the head of the grave, then drove it down with the shovel. He was breathing hard when he finished. He looked up at Johnny.

"You've had a fine day of it," he said. "Like I never thought a man would have with me as his dog to do his biddin'. Got anythin' else you want done?"

Johnny shook his head, then stopped. "Sure. One thing more. There ought to be some flowers on the grave. Get some."

Denver hesitated a moment, then stepped back. Johnny followed him, watched him bend to pick wild
flowers. They returned to the grave. Denver knelt, arranged the flowers across the head of the grave.

"I guess that's all," Johnny said, finally. "We'll go down now."

Silence held through a cold meal, and then it was like the snapping of cords that held them, for all three felt a release. As if the burial of Clay Toomey signified the ending of a time of silence and brooding thoughts, and a new time was begun when things might happen again.

"What are we going to do, Johnny?" Victoria Talbee asked. She ignored Denver, and Johnny sensed one more the thing that was between them, the unspoken acceptance of a mutual bond.

"Takes money to do anything," Johnny said. He rolled a cigarette carefully. He felt the weight of his gun in the holster across his lap. Denver sat with his head slightly bowed, silent. "That's first. But do you want to talk about it now?"

"Now's as good as any time," the woman replied. She got up. She wore a yellow apron over her black dress. She cleared the table, piled dishes in the tin pan that sat on one cast-iron wing of the stove. "And then Landsfell won't wait."

"Is there anything of a herd left—anything we can raise money on?"

She nodded, slowly. "Yes. About two hundred head. That's all that's left. They're in a draw about five miles north. There's a small spring above the draw, and John ran a trench down for the cattle. They've been there for a year now. Clay never had time to work them." Her voice was bitter. "But you can't sell them in Beldon. You'd have to drive south to Larribee. One man couldn't make the drive."

"The bank—"

"Is Landsfell's," she finished for him. "I've thought until my head ached, and there's nothing. Nothing for
me, nothing for us. Maybe if I talked to Landsfell, begged him on my knees—"

"He'd laugh in your face," Denver put in. "He's good at that. He'd like to see you crawl to him."

"He's right," Victoria said, suddenly. "It's no use. Nothing's of use."

Denver laughed, the mellow laughter of a boy. "I don't see what's worryin' you. You got Johnny, here. Johnny can do anything. Anything at all. He can make Denver bury his dead, an' better than that, he can make him quote the Scriptures. He's good, Johnny Sundance is. Maybe good enough to make Simon Landsfell kick through with the money he owed John Talbee."

Johnny tensed. He shot a glance at Victoria. "What is he sayin'?"

"The truth, for once," the woman answered. She brushed a strand of dark hair from her face. Her face seemed thinner. "Yes, Simon Landsfell owes us three thousand dollars. That was left over when John died. It's for water rights here at the tank. Landsfell used to run a herd west of here. Beyond the pass."

"He will again—after Johnny's gone," Denver said.

Johnny smiled. He had no reason for it. But it did something to Victoria Talbee's face, changed it. Like hope trying to break through the mask of despair. Tiny cracks of hope, peeping through.

"Then I'll see Landsfell," Johnny said. "An' it won't be on my knees."

"No!" The woman was tense. Her face broke, suddenly. "Stay away from him."

"Sure, Johnny," Denver whispered. "Stay away from him, 'cause you wouldn't be comin' back again if you rode into the S-Bar-L."

"Not even if I took you with me, Denver?" Johnny's turn to laugh. "I think that would be good. How much does Landsfell think of your hide?"
“Not that much, I can tell you!” Denver said. “Wise up, sucker! There isn’t a chance for you. An’ sure as hell there’s no chance for the woman. Take her with you. I’ll let you go. I won’t say nothin’.”

“You couldn’t stop us, Denver, if we wanted to go.” Johnny stood up. “You need rest, Mrs. Talbee. We’ll bunk out in the barn tonight. In the morning we’ll talk some more. Get up, Denver.”

The gunman got to his feet. His face was beginning to puff up. He bowed to Victoria, and the woman turned her back on him. Then his grin came again, and his agate eyes seemed to melt into grey slag with hate. Johnny could hear the rattle of dishes as they walked toward the barn. The day was ending. Purple shadows rode down from the peaks to the west like a herd of running elk, blotting out the ground.

“Johnny, did you ever own ten thousand dollars all at once?” Denver spoke slowly, carefully. “I mean in one chunk. To rattle in your pocket, and jingle in your head. To buy yourself an outfit like nobody ever had before? Did you see my saddle, Johnny? I got that when I first went to work for Landsfell. Just after I killed Al Colby, Mrs. Talbee’s brother. It cost me fifteen hundred iron men, Johnny, and worth every cent of it. I see people watchin’ me when I ride. I see my horse prancin’ like he’s somethin’ special wearin’ that rig, and I know I’m somebody. It beats bein’ dead. It’s better to hell an’ gone than bein’ dead.”

“I don’t hear it rattlin’ in your Levis, Denver,” Johnny said. “Maybe I ain’t hearin’ so good. But I can hear the rattle of gold plain an’ nice.”

“Landsfell’s got it. He could use you, Johnny. An’ you wouldn’t be losin’ nothin’. Not even Victoria Talbee, if you want her. An’ I reckon you do, or you wouldn’t be stayin’ here like this. Landsfell would call
it quits if he gets these tanks. That’s all he wants. He
don’t give a damn about Victoria Talbee.”

“What about you, Denver?”

“Me?” Denver walked on, slowly. “I don’t know. I
hate your guts for what you did to me today. I hate
your guts for the way Victoria Talbee looks at you. But
maybe I can forget that. I don’t know. There’s a chance.
That’s better than no chance at all.”

“I don’t see it that way at all,” Johnny said. “I see it
like this: I see a lone woman who’s just about beat into
the ground. I see her tears everywhere I look. And I see
the dirty bastards who’ve done it to her. And when I
hear her cryin’ I can’t hear the tinkle of money at all. I
don’t think I can. Maybe I’m licked before I start, maybe
it’s not good sense to try. But I got to. I don’t think
you’ll understand that, Denver.”

The gunman shrugged. “No. I don’t understand it
at all. I don’t want to. Too many things I can under-
stand without tryin’. Like killin’ you. I seen you shoot.
You’re fast. Fast as a lot of men. But it ain’t in you.
You got to stop an’ think before you shoot. You got to ask
yourself, do I want to kill this man? An’ by then it’s
goin’ to be too late for you, Johnny. Remember that.”

“I get hunches, sometimes,” Johnny said, oddly sure
of his words. “I think I’d know it when I met the man
who was goin’ to kill me, Denver. It ain’t you.”

Denver shook his head in wonder. They were near
the barn. Purple-bottomed clouds striped the sky over-
head. Like the sky, the puffy flesh on the side of Denver’s
head was darkening. “I hate your guts, Sundance,” he
said. “I don’t know why. It ain’t for any good reasons
like what you done to me. It’s because I can’t figure
the way your head works. You’re a tramp, a lousy range
tramp; you ain’t et regular in fifteen years. You got
nothin’, an’ you’ll never have nothin’. But you don’t
care. You don’t care at all. Maybe you don’t want nothin’, maybe nothin’ shines when you look at it. Is that it?”

“Maybe.” Johnny shrugged. Without really taking his eyes from Denver, he studied the skies. It looked like a storm brewing over the mountains. In another hour he’d be seeing the lightning flashes, hearing the echoing rumble of thunder through the mountain gorges.

“Maybe.” Denver blinked. His face was solemn. His eyes were shining like wet agate now. “That’s all, just maybe. That’s what I mean. It don’t make sense.”

“Maybe not to you.”

“Not to me nor nobody else. It ain’t no use talkin’ to you.” Denver entered the barn.

“I ain’t goin’ to hogtie you, Denver,” Johnny said. I’ll make it as easy as I can. You’ll need what rest you can get tonight. Tomorrow we’ll ride over to see your boss.”

Denver maintained silence while Johnny slipped rawhide cords over his wrists, drawing them behind his back. He looped two heavy strands about Denver’s knees, cinched them tight, but not tight enough to cut off circulation. Denver dropped to the pile of straw to one side. Johnny tied his feet together. Denver’s boots were diamond-tops, with the tooing sharp and clean and enameled in brown and red and white. Johnny’s fingers touched the rich leather, lightly. He’d never owned a pair of boots like that. Ten thousand dollars. A tall horse rigged in a silver saddle, and a cowhide vest with the fur still on, and boots like Denver’s, and a fifty dollar Stetson like Denver’s—He stopped the thought. In the gloom of the barn he felt Denver’s cold gaze on his face.

“It’s too late, Johnny Sundance,” Denver whispered. “You had your chance.”

Johnny dropped to the straw some distance from Denver, closer to the door. A light wind moved in, carrying with it the heavy coolness of rain and wet
earth. Far away over the mountains came the bass thumping of thunder, muffled, blurred. Through the open door he could see the darkening sky. The wind stirred little whorls of dust, sent them dancing. Somewhere in the barn a timber groaned. Then the steady rhythm of a man’s heavy breathing. Denver, asleep already. Like a cat curled up, sleeping yet every nerve awake. Simon Landsfell’s gun, blasting death through the mountains.

His eyes closed against his will, and Johnny’s body relaxed. He sat up, suddenly. It had started to rain, the first heavy drops beating down into the dust. He saw a figure in the thick purplish dusk, moving toward the barn. His hand was on his gun before he recognized Victoria Talbee, in a yellow slicker that made her appear heavy, a bundle in her arms. She came into the darkness of the barn, stood hesitantly. Johnny felt the fresh smell of rain and earth enter with her.

“Johnny?” she called.

“Here.” He stood up. She started back a step, then came close. In the dim light he could see her face, her eyes.

“I brought some blankets. It’s starting to rain.”

“Thanks.” She dropped the blankets on the straw, stood still. Johnny felt her physical presence. He felt an answering stir inside her. Then she stepped back.

“I don’t want to leave Davey alone. He’s afraid of thunder.

She’s afraid, too, Johnny thought. Not of thunder. Of herself, and me. Like Denver said. He felt a thin tremor in his back. The woman stood there a moment longer, then backed away. “G’night!” she called. He didn’t answer. The yellow slicker blurred, then was gone. Johnny remained in the same place until the wind whipped in raindrops, spilling them into his face. Then he bent, picked up the blankets. Two of them. He dropped one,
moved toward the dimly outlined form of Denver. The
gunman sat up with some effort.

"Now there's somethin' I can understand," he said.
"Maybe what you're doin' is goin' to be worth it, con-
siderin' what you're gettin' out of it."

Johnny dropped the blanket across Denver's legs. He
moved back. He went to the door, stood there while
the rain blew against him. He felt as though his face
had been burned by the sun, and the raindrops were
cooling. Lightning flared, cracked, followed an instant
later by the thudding pound of thunder. He closed the
door with an effort, the overhead rollers screeching as
they moved along the rusted channel bar. He dug out
papers for a cigarette, but as his fingers were wet the
first one tore. He dried them on his Levi's, rolled a ciga-
rette. He drank the smoke like a thirsty man would water.
Each drawing of the smoke into his lungs sending a red
flare over his face, shortening the length of the cigarette
perceptibly. Denver began to breathe heavily again in
sleep. Johnny ground out the cigarette, laid down. But
his eyes didn't close. He watched the lightning through
the cracks in the barn wall. Somewhere the rain began
to drip, drip through a hole in the roof. He wasn't aware
of closing his eyes, but suddenly warmth and drowsi-
ness closed in about him, and he slept.

Something awakened him. He came up from the depths
of sleep, his mind blurred. Then lightning flashed, and
his mind was clear and sharp. Against the light-striped
wall as the lightning flared, he saw a man's body, tensed,
moving forward. It was Denver, free of his bond, and in
his hand shone the dull gleam of naked steel.
CHAPTER FOUR

“Leave the Woman Alone!”

The jarring reverberation of thunder blasted overhead, and the wind sang mourning through the cracked walls. Rain lashed and beat against the building, and the hollow drumming was a steady roar. Blackness had followed the lightning flash, and Johnny lay still. He rolled, slowly, carefully, to one side, his gun in his hand, his thumb taut on the hammer and waited.

Lightning crackled and flared. He saw the dim shadow of Denver, moving silently toward him. Then Denver sprang, and Johnny rolled backwards. He heard the thud of Denver’s weight behind the blow of his shining knife, then Johnny’s gun blasted red flames. But Denver was gone. The blackness was complete.

“Luck,” Denver hissed. “Your damned luck again. But it cost you a shot. You’ll have an empty under the hammer, so you’ve got four left, Johnny. I can wait. I can be lucky, too.”

The man’s voice blurred into the drumming of rain, the rumble of distant thunder. Blackness, almost shining it was so complete. I can wait. I can wait. The words seem to echo and resound. Johnny crawled away, silently. He lay low, offering no silhouette to the lightning flash. When it flared again, he was ready, gun up. He saw a dark, moving shadow; his gun burst the blackness, ripped it to red shreds—and Denver laughed.

“Three, Johnny. That’s all, now.”

Sweat. Johnny felt it bursting out upon his face. But
Denver was wrong. He never carried an empty under the hammer of his gun. He’d rather have the certainty of an extra shot than the chance of an accident. A man with a knife against a man with a gun. The odds didn’t seem even. Nobody’d think they were. But a man with a knife could wait his chance. He couldn’t risk anything, just wait. And the man with the gun couldn’t risk not firing at any chance opportunity. And when the bullets were gone, there’d be no chance to reload. The audible click of the cylinder opening would betray him, and the knifer could spring, ripping and slashing.

Johnny crawled on. He wedged his back against the wall. Sweat made the palm of his hand slippery. He felt the gun twist, slip. He tightened his grip. Lightning. White flash, spinning in parallel lines through the blackness, edging between the cracks of the board walls. And against that stripped whiteness, a dark, bulky shape, moving—Johnny fired twice, saw the shape lurch. Then the blackness welled in, once more, and Denver laughed, his voice coming from everywhere, muffled inflectionless.

“That’s three holes you’ve put in Mrs. Talbee’s blanket, Johnny,” he whispered. “Just one shot left. Then we’ll see. Then we’ll see.”

Johnny couldn’t get his breath. Hay dust seemed to swell in the dampness of the storm, to clog his nostrils. He opened his mouth, sucked in air. He had one more shot than Denver counted on. Two left. Waste one, then wait. His body tensed. The flash came, accompanied by a rocking, jarring crash of sound. He saw the dim, lurching shape, and fired low, carefully low and to the right.

“Close, Johnny! Close!” Denver whispered mockingly. “But not close enough.”

Johnny moved back the way he had come. He felt the thickness of his blanket, rugged at it. It came freely into his hand. He wrapped it around his left arm, then stood up, waited.
He heard nothing, saw nothing, but suddenly it was as if the barn fell upon him. Denver's full weight, in a cat-like spring. The blanket shredded and ripped in the frenzy of Denver's slashing, then Johnny balanced, brought the barrel of his gun down. He felt it collide with Denver's body, and the gunman fell heavily, twisted away. Something struck the floor at Johnny's feet, he bent, and his finger touched cold steel. He had the knife.

"God damn you!" came Denver's hissed whisper. "You win. But I'll be back!"

Then the door screeched on the overhead rollers, and the lighter darkness of the night framed it. Lightning crashed and flared—the rigid, dark-faced form of Denver, poised there. Johnny snapped the gun up, aligned it—and even as it roared and bucked in his hand, the flare died and Denver was gone. The door jumped and rocked banging against the wall under the impact of the shot. He had missed his last shot.

He made sure by striking a match, kneeling in the doorway. No blood. Just the ragged hole ripped by his bullet in the door frame. And Denver was gone in the night. Johnny stood still, with the rain beating into his face, and he cursed slowly, without desperation, without real meaning, for one long minute. Then he heard the woman's voice from the shack, almost lost in the rain, calling his name.

"Johnny, Johnny!" Urgent, compelling. He sloshed through the muck of the yard. He came to the porch. She was standing there, in her night clothes. The wind had whipped rain against her body, making the muslin garments cling to her. Her face was wet, shining, as she looked at him.

"It's Denver," he said. "He got away."

"Oh." That was all. An acceptance of the fact without regret, only fear.

Johnny reloaded his revolver, slipped it into his holster.
He thrust the knife through his belt. "I'm ridin' after him," he said. "I won't catch him, but if I'm goin' to see Landsfell, I'll have a better chance to do it if I can beat Denver there. Get those waterin' bills, mark 'em paid. I'll take 'em with me."

He turned to go, but she put a hand on his arm. "Don't go, Johnny!" she whispered. "Stay here—with me."

She meant it. It was in her face, the loneliness, the fright. She wanted him to stay, to put a claim on him he could never break. He felt a weakness in the small of his back. The touch of her hand was warm, gentle. He pulled free, slowly.

"You'll be all right here," he said. His voice was flat, toneless. "I got to go."

She said nothing more. Her hand dropped to her side. He backed into the rain, then half-ran back to the barn. He saddled the better of the two horses, shrugged into his black slicker, pulled his hat low over his face. He led the horse back to the shack. Yellow light spilled across the porch from a window. He went in. She had a robe on, and held an envelope in her hand. Her eyes were dark, her face anxious.

"Be careful, Johnny," she said.

"I will." He took the envelope. He wanted to say something more, and could think of no words that fit. There was defeat in the slump of her shoulders. She watched him go in silence.

The S-Bar-L was fifteen miles west and north. The desert road went north, then angled through a pass that ended in a broad valley. The S-Bar-L lay on a bench north of the pass. Johnny urged his horse down the muddy lane to the desert road. The night was black and silver. Black of night and silver of lightning. The rain was a drenching wall through which he forced his way. And Johnny rode without thinking. He was afraid to think, for fear it would weaken him and he would turn
back. . . . Back to the warmth of the woman who would be waiting for him.

The storm continued unabated. The wind grew as the road cut back toward the mountains, and it became colder. The chill of it struck through the slicker, through the damp clothes Johnny wore beneath it, and he shivered. His teeth almost chattered, and he knew his face and hands would be purpling. That winter in Montana had thickened his blood so much, even this summer storm of the mountain country affected him. He bunched his shoulders, huddled down, his head tipped forward, the water running from the brim of his Stetson. It would be hot in New Mexico now. Dry, baking heat, with only a whisper of coolness in the night winds. Down around Taos, maybe. The queer flat-topped Indian pueblos, the gaudy splash of serapes on bunkhouse walls, the blue-gray wastelands stretching on to queerly flattened mountains that were colored like faded Indian weaving. Or maybe the piercing heat of southern Arizona, this winter. Down around Nogales. He’d ridden through that country one year—how long ago had it been? Time seemed to have lost its meaning for him. He shivered again, pulled the neck of the slicker tighter about his throat.

He rode steadily for over three hours. The rain stopped twice, then seemed to settle down as if the black clouds had found a comfortable resting place atop the mountain peaks and meant to stay. Behind him, to the east, the first thin grayness was leaking into the black pot of night. He passed through the mountain range, and the wind grew sharper, colder, and he knew the S-Bar-L was close. Then the gaunt shape of fence poles started their march to his right, and he slowed his horse to a walk. If Denver were ahead of him this far, he couldn’t catch him now. He thought of the great sorrel mare Denver had been riding the first time he had seen him,
and remembered the speed in the animal’s lines. But Denver wouldn’t expect him to be following this soon—or would he?

A side road was almost lost in the darkness, and Johnny rode past it before he saw it, the heavy gate with the board sign nailed over it. SIMON LANDSFELL. S-Bar-L. Johnny climbed down, opened the gate, rode through, then closed the gate behind him. He left the side road, urged the horse to the right. The sky was lightening, and the mountain range stood sharply clear now. Straight ahead a mile or so, he saw yellow stars of light, flickering, blinking. That would be the ranch house. Then he reined in, sat still, as he heard the sudden pound of hoofs coming toward him. Two horses. He stopped beside a thicket of brush, reached forward to pinch the nostrils of his horse. He wanted no whinny to betray his presence now!

Two riders on the ranch road. They eased up as they neared the gate. One man’s voice came, thickened by the rain.

"This’s a helluva night fer it!" he protested. "Thet goddamn Denver—always stirrin’ up trouble."

"Shut up an’ stick by thet gate!" came the barked reply. "You heerd the boss. Me, I gotta get my butt wet back on the bench—just on account o’ Denver muffin’ his work."

Johnny felt a thin pulse in his right temple begin to pound. Tic, tic, tic. Steady for a minute, then stopping. Beneath the slicker his hand was on his gun. Then one horse moved off past him. The sound of its progress was clear, unhurried. Johnny waited a minute, then eased his horse into a walk. He headed for the fence, kept along it at a steady pace. He stopped twice to listen, but heard nothing. He urged the horse at a faster pace until the dark outline of the first rise loomed ahead. He topped it, reined in, and dismounted. A heavy growth
of serviceberry bush lined a coulee, and he made his way in deep. Using his slicker as a shield, he made a cigarette, cupped it against the rain, got it lighted. Shielding the telltale glow, he smoked slowly. In an hour the gray light of morning was diffused behind the storm clouds, and the rain had settled down to a steady drizzle. Johnny was chilled through, and his legs were stiff as he led the horse back down the coulee. For a half hour he climbed steadily up the brush covered bench, until finally he gained a height from which he could see the whole valley beneath him.

The mountain benchland shelved in rounded steps up the shoulder of the hills, and far below where the level roll of the valley floor spread out, he marked the narrow black line of the road with the S-Bar-L fence close beside it. He followed the bend of the ranch road where it forked from the main road to Beldon. Three or so miles from the fence he saw the scattered outbuildings of a working ranch, and the oddly tan rectangle of a breaking corral with a snubbing post thrusting up in the center of it, the ground about it strangely darker. Simon Landsfell had done himself proud in his house. It was built of fieldstone, low against the earth, shaped in a hollow square. Smoke poured from chimneys scattered along its walls, and the green of vines clung close against it. Shrubs and bushes dotted the rolling lawns that spread beneath the house, and behind it a clump of cottonwoods stood like green clouds. They came close to the house at one point, and Johnny’s eyes narrowed. It was an approach to the house proper—but how to reach the trees? A thousand yards of open land lay on all sides, and he dared not risk coming close to the outbuildings spread out below the ranch house. He frowned, and his eyes moved on, intently. Suddenly his head tipped sharp, and his frown vanished. Slowly he began to smile.
For a half hour he studied the ranch. He spotted the guard a half-mile from him along the bench; he saw no others. Directly beneath the shelving benchland where the yellow-slickered figure of the guard squatted hunkered down against a massive outcropping of sliderock, spread the horse pasture. More than a hundred animals stood there, heads down into the rain, tails drooping disconsolately. The corral itself was of heavy timbers, undoubtedly lashed together with heavy rawhide thongs in lieu of precious nails. As far as he could see, there was no activity about the ranch proper. The rain would keep inside those who were not on guard. Johnny nodded, and returned to his horse. He stripped the saddle and halter from the animal, hurriedly cached them in the shelter of a tree beneath heavy brush. He made a rope hackamore, slipped it on. Then he led the animal forward.

Fifteen minutes brought him to a point above the guard, and there he left the horse, worked his way carefully down the slippery rock slope. The out-jutting crag of slide-rock was striated, gray with wetness, but showing ocher striping where it was newly crumbled. Once his high-heeled boots refused to hold to the slippery surface, and he fell heavily. But his scrambling hands found purchase, and he lay still. Despite the cold and rain, he felt sweat forming on his body. Below him a tiny slide of rubble rattled down. Johnny lay still, waited. But the yellow-slickered figure of the guard didn’t move or turn. Rock falls were too common to gain his attention. On his feet again, Johnny moved hurriedly. He gained a ledge that marked a fault in the rock mass, worked his way out along it. Ten feet below him the guard faced down the valley. His back was to Johnny, the rain forming little stream off his hat, down the oily surface of his slicker. Johnny gathered his feet beneath him—and leaped. For one dizzying minute he was in
the air, and rock, broken by his leaping feet, crashed beside the guard. He saw the man half-turn, startled, then his feet struck the guard's back, pitched him head-long to the ground.

Johnny rolled heavily, came up to his feet. The guard lay still, but Johnny didn't chance it. He straddled the man, jerked him up with his left hand, brought the barrel of his gun down across the rain-tousled head. He felt the jarring impact, and the man was jerked from his grasp. He found his horse, took the rope, and tied the guard securely. He lay as though dead. Then Johnny went back for his own animal.

It took a half hour to make the descent down to the corral, and then he had to slide the last of the way, the horse, forelegs braced, sliding after him. He lead the horse along the corral fence, aware that any moment might bring discovery from some guard he had not seen. At a point nearest the grove of trees behind the ranch house, he slashed the rawhide bindings. They were age-toughened into a mass almost as hard as the wood itself, but the wetness helped. One bar gave way, fell to the muddy ground, then another below it. He worked hurriedly, but without panic. In a matter of seconds three sections were down, and he made his way into the corral. He was breathing hard, but a sense of elation filled him. Excitement had a way of doing that to him. He made his way through the herd of horses; they stood quietly. Using his hat, then, he started them toward the break in the fence. They moved a short distance, halted. He had to start them again. What would have been normally a task of only a minute began to eat up the time. If he were caught here, in the corral, there wouldn't be a chance for him. He gripped his hat tightly, then slapped it as hard as he could against his wet slicker. The resulting crack was audible sharply, the horses stirred nervously. He repeated the sound, and they began to move.
He slapped one on the rump, and it began to run. As if it were a signal, the whole herd began to move. There'd be no stopping, now!

Johnny swung up on his horse, dug fingers into mane, and wrapped legs about the horse’s barrel. He hung sideways, along the neck, and shouted once. The animal began to run. Johnny grinned. His gamble was paying off; it would take sharp eyes to spot him in the midst of an unexpected stampede.

The horses surged across the corral. One stumbled, went down. Others shied clear, whinnying. It added to the fright of the herd, and they began to run. Johnny’s horse was in the midst of a central group as it tore past the broken fence, surged away in a bucking, racing mass toward the ranch buildings.

Then a man saw them. Johnny caught a startled yelp, then a man’s angry voice raised in shouts. Men poured from the bunkhouse, some in ponchos, others half-dressed. Shouts, yells. Someone fired a shot, and the leaders of the running herd veered away. Then the woods came close, and Johnny urged his horse yet closer. He saw the gray rock of the ranch house through the cottonwoods. Abreast of the woods, Johnny dropped from the side of his racing mount. He lit running, and his legs seemed almost to burst from his body, as he sought to keep his balance. Horses were to either side of him, and to fall meant being trampled. His stride broke, he half-fell forward, got his feet under him, and at a crazy stagger, gained the trees. He fell, and a horse tore past, the pounding hoofs threw mud into his face. But then he was clear of the herd, and bent low, gained the shelter of the trees. He worked his way deeply into a clump of brush, hugged the earth. He was barely in time; feet pounded past his hiding place, and he saw three men coming through the woods.
“What in hell’s happened, anyways?” somebody protested loudly. Then the men raced past.

Johnny Sundance was on his feet, running. He kept away from any clearings, made use of all the cover he could find. In minutes the ranch crew would be thronging around, and the chance of discovery would be heightened. The cotton woods thinned suddenly, and he saw the vine-shrouded gray hulk of the ranch house. The wall visible ahead was blank except for two small windows high up blanked out by frosted glass. He lunged across the open space, fell panting behind a hedge that edged close around the wall of the house. Even as he dropped from sight, a man ran around the corner of the building, stood there, staring through the cottonwoods, a rifle in his hand. Johnny caught his breath, lay motionless. For a long minute the man stood stiffly there, then he ran toward the trees, disappearing among them.

It took Johnny three full minutes of sucking air into his lungs to catch his breath, and by then his heart had slowed its wild palpitation. Water dripped off the eaves of the house into a rutted line along the building, and the cold wetness squished beneath his hands and knees. Keeping on all fours, Johnny began to crawl along the wall, in a direction opposite the one from which the running man had appeared. He reached the corner, crept behind a tall evergreen that shot up like a round knife-blade above him. Then he saw a window directly ahead of him, a broad, low window that opened onto the rolling lawns—and in that same moment a man’s head and shoulders were thrust out, and Johnny dropped flat on his face. The man was Denver, and he was holding a gun ready in his hand.

“What is it, Denver?” A man’s voice was chipped ice. It rasped and grated, each tone struggling for ascendancy with the next. It was a voice like the screech of a nail hitting a rotary saw at high speed.
Denver’s face was dark, haggard. A certain wildness was there, alien to the man. Like the questing head of a diamond-back he hung there, eyes fixed to the lawns and beyond. Then something of the tenseless left him, and he laughed, the little boy laughter Johnny had learned to hate.

“Nothin’, boss,” Denver said. “That damned corral busted. Half the layout’ll be workin’ ’em until dark. I told you them rawhides wouldn’t keep holdin’. That should have been fixed.”

“A man can’t do everything, Denver,” the strange discordant voice creaked. “Now it will be fixed. Is it still raining?”

“Yes. Regular drizzler. Won’t let up for two-three hours, if then.” Denver withdrew his head. But he didn’t shut the window. Their voices came clearly to Johnny where he crouched in the soft wet muck of the flower bed.

“Denver—I’m not pleased with you,” the screeching voice said, softly. “I’m not pleased at all.”

Denver’s boyish laughter rang out. “Now ain’t that too damned bad?” he grunted. “Landsfell—I just don’t give a damn what you think.”

“You don’t mean that, Denver.”

“Damn’ tootin’ I mean it! Where would you be without me? Maybe you’d like to try to finish this deal without me? They’s a hundred men would like nothin’ better to spill your guts in the street of Beldon. Supposin’ I quit an’ give ’em their chance at you?”

“You wouldn’t do that, Denver.” It was Landsfell with the voice like the grating screech of a rusty hinge. Landsfell who parlayed murder by gun and poisoned spring into an empire. The big he billy goat who nibbled on half of Wyoming.

“Wouldn’t I?” Denver’s voice hardened. “No, I guess I wouldn’t. You pay too damned well. If it ain’t me
gettin' it, it'll be somebody else. You're safe, Landsfell. Chew my tail if you want to—but I'm tellin' you it broke wrong."

"Was it that, Denver, that kept you from killing Victoria Talbee—or was it something else that stopped you?"

For an instant silence fell between the two men inside the house. Then Denver spoke, slowly. "I dropped Clay Toomey. I pumped another shot into the chamber of my rifle and waited. I saw the woman come out. She ran to Toomey—I brought the gun up—and then all hell broke loose. Sundance had ridden up the ridge behind us. We were sittin' ducks. I don't know why he broke it up, but he sure'n hell broke it up. His first shot took off my hat and an inch of my hair. I dropped. Who wouldn't? By luck I got away. Maybe he wasn't aimin' to kill, just stop the party. An' all the way back here I kept thinkin', was I goin' to kill Victoria Talbee? I didn't have the answer. I think so. I'm not sure. I never had it come up before—but then I ain't never killed a woman before. Anyway, that's why I went back yesterday. I tell you, Sundance is all luck—an' he ain't no stranger to trouble. Maybe he's slow witted and don't think too straight. But that makes it all the worse to stop him. You'll have to kill him to stop him, because he's in with Victoria Talbee now all the way."

"It's your fault, Denver," Landsfell grated.

"I don't see it that way," Denver grunted. "Maybe I rubbed him on a raw spot, but I meant to finish him. That way it wouldn't have mattered. But his mind was made up before I got there—that's for sure."

"The woman?" Landsfell made it sound vile.

Denver waited an instant, then groaned: "Yes, damn it!"

"You still want her?"

"No! By God, no!"
“Then kill her for me, Denver,” Landsfell said. “Kill Sundance too. That will end this game. Finally and for all time.”

Suddenly Denver laughed again. “Yeah? Don’t make me laugh. You mean that ends it for awhile—until you decide to take over another chunk of Wyoming—or will it be Utah next? Them Mormons are hard buggers to buck.” Denver broke off. “No! This is one time I ain’t goin’ to do what you say. The woman goes free. You’ll promise me that Landsfell, right now! I’ll get the tanks for you, and I’ll get Sundance for myself—but Victoria Talbee goes free.”

Rain dripped into Johnny’s face. The tightness in his legs was stiffening. The warmth of his body from running was gone, and he shivered again and again. It seemed a wet eternity before Landsfell replied. His voice was a rasping keening.

“I said kill her, Denver,” Landsfell said. “I don’t care how—but soon, and definitely. Kill her. You offered Sundance ten thousand dollars. It’s yours, Denver for pulling the trigger twice—once for Sundance, and once for the woman. Five thousand dollars a shot.”

Like a man filing a saw loose in the vice; like the metallic scrape of a fork over false teeth. The sound of Landsfell’s voice set Johnny’s nerves on edge, made him gasp for breath.

“Damn your eyes, Landsfell!” Denver’s voice was a groan. “It’s done, I tell you. The woman’s as good as dead. That’s what your money buys you, Landsfell—and I hope to hell you never sleep nights again as long as you live! All I can hear is the jingle of gold, all I can see is dollar signs, an’ what’s the difference if the gold’s slippery with blood, or the dollar sign’s dripping it? I’m your man. But God help your soul if I ever change, if I ever get the strength to resist you—for I’ll kill you like I’d step on a toad.”
“Talk, Denver,” Landsfell said. “It’s all right with me.” A volley of shots, distant, rattling with echoes, sounded, and Johnny heard the scrape of a chair.

“See what those fools are doing!” Landsfell ordered.

Johnny bunched his legs under him. He held his gun in his hand. He saw the long-fingered hand of Denver grasp the wet sill, then the gunman’s head and shoulders were thrust out into the rain. A mountain lion, stretched at length, gathering itself, then catapulting upward to a ledge to strike, to kill—Johnny’s leap was like that. In one motion he struck Denver’s head with the barrel of his gun, and burst through the window, his shoulder sending Denver hurtling across the room.

Then Johnny was on his feet, back against a wall, breathing hard. His eyes were narrowed slits, and his mouth was twisted awry. The gun in his hand was levelled at the other man in the room.

“Don’t move, Landsfell!” he grated through clenched teeth. “Don’t look at me, don’t even breathe—or I’ll drop you dead on the floor!”

Minutes passed. Silence throbbed in the room, broken only by the steady drip-drip of water from the eaves of the house. A red film seemed to stand between Johnny and Landsfell, his gun hand trembled, and his thumb threatened to slip on the lifted hammer. Landsfell stood as though frozen. He read death in Johnny’s face, and the shock of it stiffened him.

For a moment Johnny could make out no distinguishing features of Landsfell, then his breathing slowed, and the killing rage left him. He felt cold, calm. He let his eyes absorb the picture Landsfell made, leaning half-forward across a broad desk top. He was not a large man, no larger than Johnny. He might have been forty-five—or seventy. His hair was graying, a thin mat flat against the bone of his head. It was his face that held Johnny’s attention. The features were nondescript, but the skin
was gray, a seamed, wrinkled parchment. Every inch of
his face was crisscrossed with an intricate pattern of fine
lines, as though a mad etcher had worked on gray leather.

Denver groaned, audibly, stirred on the floor by the
window. Johnny glanced at him. The sound broke a
tension in the room. Johnny's muddy boots had left a
trail across the deep pile rug that must have cost a for-
tune, and the water still dripped from his slicker-clad
body.

"Landsfell," Johnny said, softly. "I'm trying to hold
myself in. I think I can. But don't talk, don't speak one
word—not yet. I got two things to say to you, and I
want to get them out. First—I warn you—leave the wom-
an alone! If you don't—I'll kill you. I'll kill you in the
most terrible way I can. Nothing will stop me—not Den-
ver, not all the hired gunman you can buy. Fight me,
any way you want to, and I'll pay you back. I expect
that. But—leave the woman alone!" His voice trembled
and broke.

Landsfell stared at him from the gray mask of his
face. He didn't move. He still held the strained posture
across the desk.

Then, without warning, a knock, loud, peremptory,
rang out at the door; and in the same instant Denver
groaned again and sat up.
CHAPTER FIVE

Hired Guns

There are moments when a man’s mind works so fast that what he sees seems slowed, a man running in water, or fighting the strangely resistant air in a dream; and Johnny Sundance felt like that now. He saw Landsfell his seamed face suddenly set, his gray eyes flaring at the corners; he saw Denver roll to one side, and then sit up; and at the same time the insistent tattoo rang out at the door. And in the moment of strange clarity, he reacted instantly. He crossed to Denver, clapped his left hand over the fallen man’s face to prevent sound, and levelled the gun in his right at Landsfell. With his lips he formed all but silent words: “Ask who it is!”

Landsfell swallowed visibly, and his palely pink tongue stroked his gray lips. The discordant voice screeched slowly like a gramophone almost unwound.

“What do you want?”

From outside the door a man’s voice came clearly: “It’s me, Jacobs, boss! Somebody cut the rawhide thongs holdin’ the corral bars. That’s how them horses got loose.”

Landsfell stared at the muzzle of Johnny’s gun. Johnny whispered: “Tell him to search the ranch—send him away. But tell him you’ll want your horse in fifteen minutes. You’re ridin’ in to Beldon.”

The ranch owner’s face wrinkled, but the expression was lost in the leather skin. Johnny saw that Landsfell’s hands were moving nervously on the desk top. As if his
strength were failing him, and his arms were trembling.

“All right, Jacobs,” Landsfell said. “Get all the men out—search the ranch—do it right! And Jacobs—I’ll want my horse. See that it’s outside in a quarter of an hour. I’m riding in to Beldon.”

“What’ll we do with the guy if we catch him?” Jacobs questioned.

Beads of sweat suddenly burst out on Landsfell’s face. “Damn it, Jacobs, I’m busy! You know what to do—hold him until I get back. Now get away from there!”

Footsteps moved away from the door. Johnny stood up, releasing Denver. The gunman fell back against the floor, then sat up again. His eyes were blurred. He couldn’t seem to focus them. He bent forward, got to his knees—then crumpled suddenly to the floor. He didn’t move. His breathing came raspingly, deep in his throat.

Johnny reached inside his slicker, pulled out the envelope, tossed it on the desk. He kept the gun thrust out before him. “I want the money you owe Victoria Talbee for water rights,” he said. “I want it now.”

Landsfell straightened, slowly. His arms dropped to his sides. Something flickered behind the glassiness of his eyes.

“Get it,” Johnny said. “Maybe you’ve got a gun handy. I don’t care, Landsfell. It’s your neck. But all that’s holdin’ this hammer up is my thumb—you’re a dead man, even if you shoot first. Now get the money!”

“You can’t get away with this, Sundance,” Landsfell said. But his voice broke, quavered, and he pulled open the middle drawer of his desk. His lean hand hesitated, then dropped down—and came out with a sheaf of bills. He counted them out into a stack. He put the rest of the money back in the drawer, dropped the envelope in, closed the drawer. His mouth started to tremble at the corners.
Johnny picked up the money with his left hand. Denver still lay as though dead. This second blow had hurt him, how seriously Johnny didn’t know and didn’t care. He tucked the money into a pocket, moved the gun.

“Thanks. Up until now you’ve played this game without any rules at all. That’s over. I came in once—and I can do it again. Remember that. You can keep Denver away from the woman. I think you will. If you don’t—well I saw a Mexican once after an Apache got through with him. He’d burned his arms and legs off in a fire before he was dead. Every time I smelled cooked meat after that for a month I’d vomit. But that wouldn’t stop me from giving you the Apache treatment, Landsfell. That’s a promise.” Johnny’s voice sank to a muttered whisper. The sound of it rocked and jarred the seam-faced man like the strokes of a blacksnake whip. He shuddered, and the gray skin slipped down over his shining eyes.

“Now I’m leavin’,” Johnny went on, slowly. “You’ll go to the front door with me, get your slicker an’ hat. Then I’ll take your horse an’ ride out. Get goin’!”

Landsfell led the way. Johnny looked once more at Denver. The gunman still lay prone. His deep breathing had slowed, taken an uneven rhythm. It would be a long time before Denver would be himself again. Then they entered the hall and Johnny closed the door behind him. Landsfell walked with a jerky stride. The hall was empty. The walls were panelled, and the dim light of the gray day shone dully on the wood. Close beside the windowed front door Landsfell paused. He opened a door to one side, pulled out a black raincoat, and a gray narrow-brimmed hat. Johnny pulled them from his trembling grasp, then whispered, sharply: “Who’s that?”

As he expected, Landsfell whirled—Johnny brought the gun down sharply across Landsfell’s head, and the man fell heavily to the floor. Johnny used his feet to roll him
into the closet. He wasn’t gentle. He closed the door, locked it.

Wearing Landsfell’s hat and coat, he opened the door. He dropped the closet key, kicked it away. He saw it spin into the bushes that rimmed the broad porch. A man stood on the steps, just coming up. He was broad, wearing a poncho that rounded his figure absurdly. Johnny bent his head, moved down the steps. A tall man waited below.

“Got the men out, Boss—” the fat man began.

“Get out and look yourself!” Johnny croaked. He let his voice rise and fall, tearing at the muscles of his throat. The sound was not unlike Landsfell’s voice.

“Shore, boss!” the fat man muttered, and turned back. He went down the steps ahead of Johnny, moved out across the broad dawns that slanted down. Johnny went down the steps jerkily, trying to emulate Landsfell’s awkward gait. He reached the horse, pulled the reins free of the ring on the hitching post, swung up into the saddle. He saw the fat man stopped, looking back at him. Johnny realized he had lifted his head, exposing his face. Then the fat man shouted, began to run toward him, tugging at his poncho, trying to lift it over his gun. Johnny’s spurs dug in. The roan gelding jerked back under the biting of the steel spurs, then jumped forward. The fat man saw Johnny coming. He still couldn’t get his gun free of the clinging rubber poncho. Then the horse’s shoulders struck him, bowled him over. Johnny put the horse to the softness of the lawns, knowing what the racing hoofs would do to the soft turf, and gaining satisfaction even from this minor destruction of something that belonged to Landsfell. He glanced back. The fat man was still prone, but he had his gun out. A shot roared out, then another, then Johnny reached the sheltering cottonwoods, raced through them.

A vague figure shot up ahead; a mounted man, then
another, a group of riders, working back toward the house. They saw him, and a shout went up. Johnny lowered his head, shouted out in the screeching tones of Landsfell, "Get up to the house—quick! Hell's broke loose!" Then he was past them, racing away. He looked back, saw them hesitate, then ride on toward the house. The roan was running now, and in a moment broke free of the cottonwoods.

Rain smashed and beat into his face, but Johnny urged the big gelding on. Once he heard a pattering of shots some distance behind him, but the big roan horse ate up miles. They reached the fence, and the gelding cleared it without effort. Then the harder surface of the road to Beldon was underfoot, and the tall horse stretched out. For a half hour, Johnny let him run, then he reined in, listened. The day was gray with rain, but to the west a clearing of blue shone through the pall. As far as he could see, the road lay empty both behind and ahead of him. Once away from the S-Bar-L, Johnny doubted that Landsfell would instigate open pursuit. Rule by force, such as the sway Landsfell held over this corner of Wyoming, must be held within certain limitations imposed by fear; and Denver had said enough that Johnny had caught through the open window to know that Landsfell feared the enemies his activities had made. He let the roan pick his own pace, then, and relaxed in the saddle.

He became aware, suddenly, that he was grinning, without reason. Just the excitement of the past hours had built a growing pressure inside him that was fading now. But Landsfell would know him, that was sure. Whether or not Landsfell would heed his warning, Johnny didn't know. He would guard against a strike at the woman and boy. And if Landsfell dared to strike at him through them—his smile faded and his mouth thinned, dangerously....
Beldon was just another mountain town, prosperous because of the ranches and the growing mining interests. It lay in the center of a broad valley that sloped to the west where a pass made way through the mountains for the road on into Utah. The streets were packed clay and boardwalks; the buildings false-fronted frame structures. But near the plaza that occupied a square in the center of the town with the red-brick city hall looming up three stories high, newer brick buildings were replacing the time-worn frame shacks. A cluster of trees dotted the park-like plaza, and some effort had been made to run them along the streets. It was an hour past noon when Johnny Sundance rode down the road that arrowed straight toward the plaza where it bent around that square. The rain had stopped an hour before, and the sky was clear. The sun was beginning to burn down, and the mud-rutted street was starting to steam, sending tiny tendrils of mist into the air.

Johnny tied Landsfell's horse after watering him at a trough, and crossed the boardwalk to a cafe. He took his time eating, paid his bill, and returned to the street. A new brick building across the street housed a general store, and the keeper was out front, busily rolling up an awning of striped white and green. He nodded as Johnny entered the store, and followed a minute later. Johnny studied the man as he waited at the counter. The storekeeper was small, nervous-faced, with enormous mustaches that drooped sadly to either side of his small mouth. He wiped his hands on his dirty apron, cleared his throat raucously.

"Howdy, stranger. Passin' through?"

"Nope." Johnny saw the store was well-stocked, prosperous. The shelves bulged with brightly colored labels, and to the rear stacks of burlap sacks held flour and sugar. Behind the counter on smaller shelves were stacks of ammunition boxes. Shotgun shells, rifle shells,
cleaners. A Winchester .30-.30 stood in a rack along-
side a double-barrelled shotgun with engraved plates in
the butt.

"Give me a box of .44 shells," he said. The store-
keeper nodded, reached behind him, brought up a box
of center-fire shells, laid it on the counter.

"Two six-bits," he said. "Anythin' else?"

Johnny picked up the box, stuffed it into his pocket.
He laid a ten-dollar bill from the money that Landsfell
had paid him on the counter. "A lot of other stuff,"
his said. "I'll make a list later an' bring it in."

The storekeeper made change, squinted at Johnny.
"A lot of stuff," he said. "A list o' stuff. Ahuh. You're
new aroun' here. One o' Landsfell's new boys?"

"No." Johnny waited. He'd expected something like
this. "Does that make any difference?"

"Might," the store man answered. He started to drum
on the counter with his fingers. "Depends on just who
you are workin' for."

Johnny smiled. "Victoria Talbee," he said. "I'm workin'
for her down at the tanks. She sent me in for supplies."

The grocer shook his head, slowly. He tugged at his
mustaches. "No, siree!" he said. "Not from me. Not
even if she's got the dough to pay for it. An' I got my
doubts thot she has."

Johnny pulled the wad of bills from his pocket, opened
them. "Reckon we'd need about five hundred dollars
worth o' stuff," he said.

The grocer's mouth moved, and his mustache danced
up and down at the ends. "No. Can't be done." He
blinked, rapidly. "You're in the wrong town, Mister.
You can't buy nothin' for Victoria Talbee—an' a lot o'
others—in this town. Not one damned thing."

"That's too bad," Johnny said. "Especially since we
need stuff so bad an' might be willin' to pay, say, double
for everything."
The words struck at the small man. He winced under them. But stubbornness moved into his face. "No, damn it!"

"Never seen a feller so anxious to pass up five hundred iron men," Johnny said.

The storekeeper grunted. "Fat lot o' good it'd do me with Denver's slug in my belly! You cain't buy nothin' from me. Just lettin' you have them shells is liable to get me in dutch. I ain't got nothin' to sell to you—an' I got work to do—get out!"

Like a fussy little bantam rooster, the storekeeper shooed Johnny out of the store. Johnny knew he was being watched as he moved on down the boardwalk. In the next hour he tried three other stores; in every case no goods would be sold without an answer as to whom they were for, and when Victoria Talbee's name was spoken, the matter ended. Abruptly. After the rain the day was hot and humid, and Johnny began to sweat, not alone from heat, but also from the low flame that blazed inside him. He needed a drink, he decided, before he did something he'd be sorry for. Open conflict could gain him nothing but a closer look at the adobe jail-house behind the new city hall. He found a saloon, walked into the cool interior, stood to the shining bar. His mood was ugly, and his voice was pitched low, but carried through the almost-empty room.

"I work for Victoria Talbee," he said, clearly. "All I need is for a bar-keep to tell me my money won't buy me a drink. That's all I need."

His eyes met those of the man behind the bar, and that individual grinned, set a bottle up on the bar. "I ain't particular who drinks my rotgut," he answered. He took the silver dollar Johnny spun on the polished wood, moved away.

Johnny picked up the bottle and a glass, and moved back from the bar. He found an empty table at the
back of the room, close against a wall, and there he settled down. Anger, with Johnny Sundance, could have one of two effects. He could let a sort of madness overcome him, and strike back blindly, or he could hold it back, deep inside him, and then he drank. Not with the intent of forgetting his anger, for Johnny never got drunk. A sort of cold calmness would settle over him after awhile, and then he’d stop drinking.

The saloon was quiet. Men came and went, and the swinging doors whispered in and out behind them. An hour passed, two, and the level of the amber liquid in the bottle on Johnny’s table lowered, slowly. The anger inside him was gone. Resentment against a town that would set itself against a lone woman still held inside him, but he had it under control. He poured a drink from the bottle, and decided it would be the last. As he raised it to his lips, he saw the swinging doors part, and a man come into the saloon. He was big, roughly dressed in woolen pants tucked into the scuffed tops of his boots, and his face was ugly, with a brutal expression stamped clearly into it. A heavy Navy Colt swung at his hip, and he walked as if he were used to packing it. Johnny saw him speak to the barkeep, who nodded toward Johnny.

Johnny set the glass on the table untouched. His right hand dropped below the table to his gun, and he used his toes to tip his chair back a trifle. The big man stomped across the room, came up to the table, stood there. His eyes were evil; like a brand it was burned into him. A flabby-lipped mouth that held sullenness in it, and eyes that seemed like yellow smoke. For one long minute he stood there, and Johnny waited, his pulse beginning to beat a little faster, the tiny tic-tic above his right temple starting its work. Then the big man spoke.

“Your name Sundance?” he asked. His voice was low. Johnny nodded, slowly. “What’s it to you?”
“Nothin’ to me—but maybe a helluva lot to you!” the big man hissed. “I’m Hame Mitchell. Word’s got into town you raided Landsfell’s spread, robbed Simon hisself—an’ then rode out on his private nag. Reckon I wouldn’t put much stock in such talk usually—but Landsfell’s nag has been found here in town, an’ you was seen ridin’ it in. The town marshal’s lookin’ for you. But I found you first.”

“So you did,” Johnny said. “So what?” The whiskey inside him was hot metal, searing him. He didn’t want to be reasonable, suddenly. A blind urge to kill was close upon him.

The man grimaced. “Hell, yo’re drunk!” he said. He half-turned, then swung back. His face moved. His eyes went hungrily over Johnny’s face again. “It’s been said you’re lookin’ for riders for the Talbee spread down at the tanks. It’s been said you ain’t havin’ no luck findin’ ’em—or nothin’ else. Most every body’s fraid o’ Simon Landsfell, no matter how they might hate him. For that reason you got trouble. You got Big Trouble. But maybe I got an answer. Maybe I know where you can get the hardest damn bunch o’ riders Wyomin’ ever saw—just hard enough to bust Landsfell flat on his face—an’ maybe their just achin’ to do the job. What do you say then?”

Johnny was sober. Just like that. The fire emptied inside him as if it had found a drain. His head cleared, and the tic-tic in his right temple slowed, stopped. He settled the chair back on its four legs, and his hand dropped away from his gun.

“I say—keep talkin’,” Johnny said.

The big man shook his head. “Nope. Not here. Get outta this joint. I found you ’cause I seen you ride up on Landsfell’s horse an’ wondered howcome. I been askin’ for you aroun’ the town, an’ Jay Sheen’s smart enough to get wise. He’s the marshal—an’ harder’n the
hinges o' hell. I'll be at the Cattleman's Rest in half an hour. Get out an' walk—get some black coffee. Cause what I'm goin' to tell you is gonna take some savvyin'!

The ugly face turned, and the big man moved away. He didn't glance back. The swinging doors moved behind him. For a moment longer Johnny sat still, then he got up. He carried the bottle back to the bar, set it down. He laid a five dollar bill beside it, walked out into the street again.

He kept moving. The sun was still hot, although thin clouds had spread like oil over water in the sky. He felt sweat bursting out on his body, but he kept walking. He stopped after a half hour, entered a cafe. He ate a sandwich, washed it down with two cups of black coffee. His mouth felt raw, and there was a hollowness inside him, like a tiny trembling of his legs, but he was sober. He found the Cattleman's Rest at the end of the main drag, a frame two-storied building with paint-peeled letters spelling the name on a black sign over the street. One man sat alone on the broad veranda. It was the big man from the saloon. He sat still, didn't look at Johnny. Johnny climbed the steps, pulled a straight-back chair out from the wall beside the man, tilted it back. He began to roll a cigarette. The other waited until he had lighted it, then he spoke softly.

"I kept thinkin' Jay Sheen might pick you up," he said. "But then I figured maybe the feller who stuck up Landsfell an' Denver an' got away again might jist not let Jay Sheen run him in. I was kind o' hopin' you might lay Sheen dead in the street, even though that might mean spoelin' everythin'."

"You said you had somethin' to say," Johnny prompted. "I'm listenin'."

Hame Mitchell rubbed one furry paw over his beard-stubbled cheek. His evil little eye flickered and moved. His ugly mouth tightened. "First off, I'm goin' to ask
you—did you ever hear of Bert Sanderson—him the papers call The Bat?"

Bat Sanderson. Johnny’s face went blank. A man with fifteen notches in his gun, and twenty-thousand dollars on his head. The Rangers had run his gang out of Texas, and their blood trail covered half the west. Banks, trains, once a whole town had fallen prey to them. Bat Sander-
son and Hame Mitchell—he knew the ugly man now, knew the murderous past behind him.

"I’ve heard of him. He’s dead."

"Not yet—not for fourteen hours an’ some minutes yet," Mitchell said, tensely. "He’s not a mile from yuh, sittin’ in Jay Sheen’s lousy jail, waitin’ to break in that new gallows they built behind the jail. For a month half of Wyomin’s been waitin’ for that hangin’—an’ it comes off tomorrow—unless you stop it!"

Unless he stopped it! Johnny blinked. But he waited in silence.

Hame Mitchell spat over the porch railing. "Funny thing about Bat—he’s meaner’n six-bits, but he ain’t never broke his word. Maybe you heard that?"

Johnny had heard it. There was a story of a horse Sanderson had borrowed from a poor squatter in Colorado. He’d been six months getting free of the chase that had sent him into hiding—and then he’d ridden back a thousand miles to return the man’s horse and to pay him. About every great outlaw of the West there were legends. Things that weren’t true, maybe, but bandied about, built upon. It was a part of the growth of the man himself, and as such might effect his actions as much as the truth itself. For no man can destroy his own legend.

"I’ve heard that," Johnny said.

"Then the rest is easy," Mitchell said. "Me an’ four o’ the boys are jist sittin’ it out, waitin’ for the hangin’ to be over with. There ain’t been a chance to do nothin’,
an' we figger, maybe, we owed Bat at least that much, to watch his hangin'. He's filled our bellies with booze and our pockets with gold for a long time, an' we maybe owe him that much. At first we thought maybe we could get a chance at Landsfell. Or maybe at springin' Bat. But Jay Sheen's too smart. Bat's goin' to hang tomorrow mornin', come hell or high water—unless the feller that rode into Landsfell's spread an' stuck him up, can work the same miracle an' get him out. If that feller could swing the trick—an' the chances are against it—why I reckon Bat'd give his promise to help that feller in jest about anythin' he might want to do. And since Bat's in the can because o' Landsfell's dirty dealin' in the first place—why he'd jist naturally jump at the chance to skin two skunks at one whack."

Six men, men who'd strewn carnage across six states. Men who had laughed at death as it spewed from their spitting guns. Men like that could buck Landsfell. Men like that could do what no other kind of men could possibly do. For there would be no restraint to their actions. And Bat would hate Landsfell's guts. Johnny closed his eyes. The word of a murderer. The word of a legend of the West. Which would it be? Could he chance it? His mouth tightened. There was no other choice; he'd learned that today. He nodded, slowly.

"I don't know," he said finally. "Maybe it could be done."

Mitchell turned to look at him for the first time. The smoke-yellow eyes shifted from side to side. "Got any ideas?"

"I'd have to see the jail," Johnny said. "I'd have to see Sanderson—let him talk for himself. Then I'd know."

Hame Mitchell spat again. He rubbed at his jaw. "If you was anybody else, if you hadn't done what I'd a swore was impossible, I'd tell you to go to hell for a lousy bluffin' tramp," he said. "But there's a chance—"
maybe so damned slim yuh cain’t see it. But a chance—that you could pull at off. I got to take that chance. I’ll get you in to see Bat—put it plain to him. He’ll give you his word. Then it’s up to you—and Mister, you better not fail!” Death hummed in his ugly voice.
CHAPTER SIX

Short Fuse

A half hour later Johnny Sundance approached the jail. He walked boldly, like a man with a purpose. He was wearing a coat that belonged to Bat Sanderson, and a hat that Hame Mitchell carried for "best." In a pocket of the coat reposed letters and papers that identified him as Michael Sanderson, Bat's younger brother. Mike had been a member of Sanderson's band, without a price on his head; only a month before he had stopped a bullet in an attempted holdup. Like so many others, Mike Sanderson had not been hard enough, or fast enough, to last as an outlaw; he had been buried in the mountains of Wyoming.

The building that was now the Beldon jail had been the city hall before the new red brick structure had been erected in front of it, facing the plaza. It was two stories tall, of weathered adobe that had melted in the winter rains, giving it a queerly ragged appearance. The lower story had broad windows, unbarred; over the central door was a sign with gilt letters: Town Marshal. The second story was windowed, but with newly added iron bars that were only now beginning to rust, sending probing red streaks down the gray adobe. Johnny didn't hesitate, but entered the office. A low railing divided the room. A rack of rifles stood against one wall, a locked chain running through the trigger-guards. Fly-specked Wanted notices were nailed in fat sheafs to a broad bulletin board. Back of the rail stood two long tables,
and flat against one wall a heavy roll-top desk squatted. The man who swung around in the swivel chair at Johnny's approach was frowning as he labored to write something on a piece of letter paper.

"Yeah?" he queried sharply. His eyes were dark blue, penetrating, and a thin mustache hung over his upper lip. He wore a checked woolen shirt open at the throat, and his light hair was thinning in front.

"I'm Mike Sanderson," Johnny said. "I—I just heard about Bat. I know I'm late—but we don't keep in touch—" He stopped.

The man at the desk stood up. He was tall, strongly built. His frown deepened. "Jay Sheen," he said. "Town Marshal. I don't know about lettin' you see Bat."

Johnny nodded quickly. "I understand. It's just that I—I haven't seen Bat in ten years. I was a kid when he left home."

"Where'd you say you was from, Mr. Sanderson?" Sheen queried sharply.

"I didn't say, Marshal," Johnny replied. He forced a thin smile. "I'm in business in Kaycee. I happened to be in Larribee. I heard about Bat there, and rode over. Just got in town. I came right here."

"Ahuh." Sheen ran a finger along the black line of mustache. "You know that Bat's hangin' in the mornin'?"

"I heard that." Johnny nodded. "In a way it's just as well. Bat's been a problem to the family, Mister Marshal. Guess you understand. Still, blood's thicker than water—I'd like to say good-by to him."

"Yeah." Sheen seemed dubious. He studied Johnny. "Don't look much like him."

"We're half-brothers, Marshal." Johnny frowned. "Well, I tried."

Sheen shook his head. "Guess it's all right. For a minute or so. Hell, I don't like to have to kill a man—"
but it’s my duty, an’ it’s shore that Bat’s earned it twice over. “I’ll have to search you.”

Johnny managed a look of surprise. “Of course. I never carry a gun.” He raised his arms, and Jay Sheen ran practised hands over him. The Marshal grunted.

“Okay, come along.” He led the way down a long corridor. An iron door barred a stairway. The Marshal unlocked it. A lamp turned low lighted a dark stairway. They went up. A row of jail cells occupied that section of the second floor. There were two or three men in one large cell. They looked up, jeered as Johnny followed the Marshal down the hall. At a second iron-barred door, the Marshal stopped. He took his time unlocking it.

“We keep Bat private,” he said, thoughtfully.

“I see that,” Johnny agreed. “Small chance of escape. Makes an honest man feel more secure, Marshal.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” something like contempt edged Sheen’s voice. “Here we are.”

This second half of the jail was smaller. One cell on either side. The cell to the right had a window, the other was blank-walled. In the darker cell a man sat on the edge of a chain-hung bunk. He looked up. He was smoking a stogie, puffing slowly. Seeing Bat Sanderson was something of a surprise to Johnny. What he had expected he didn’t know. But not what Bat was. A tall, lithe man, of striking appearance, with an arrogant, hawklike cast to his face, and palely blue eyes. How he had come by the name of “Bat” Johnny could not guess.

“Howdy, Marshall,” Sanderson called out, cheerfully. “Don’t tell me it’s time already. They’re still hammerin’ on that damn’ scaffold out back. I can hear them.”

“Nerves, Bat,” Sheen answered. “That scaffold’s been done for a week. You got a visitor. Reckon you know him?”
Johnny didn’t dare to nod, but he closed one eye, quickly. Sanderson caught the movement. He stood up. "Well I be goddamned!" he said. He pretended to stare at Johnny. "It’s you."

"Me, Bat," Johnny said. He found a smile, forced it to his lips, aware of Sheen’s keen scrutiny. "Took you long enough to recognize your brother Mike."

"Sure, Mike, reckon I was thinkin’ of something’ else." Bat’s face drew down. His blue eyes held nothing friendly behind them. Not even a ray of hope. If the man had any nerves, any feelings, he kept them hidden, even from the windows of his eyes.

"That’s right," Johnny agreed. He turned and looked steadily at Sheen. The Marshal looked from one to the other. His frown deepened, and his finger traced his black line of mustache again. He coughed.

"I’ll be out in the hall. Give you five minutes." He moved down the corridor, closed the iron-barred door behind him.

Bat Sanderson puffed slowly on his stogie. He blew blue smoke out into the corridor. "What’s the game, fella?" he asked.

"Hame sent me," Johnny said. He stood ill at ease. He felt a nervous twitch over his right temple. A steady rhythmic beat. "There might be a chance to get you out of here before mornin’.

Bat’s face remained expressionless, but his right hand curled around the bars of his cell. "If that’s a joke, I hope you roast in hell until the marrow splits your bones!"

"It’s no joke, Bat," Johnny replied. "Hame sent me. But there’s a condition."

Bat Sanderson’s eyes seemed to burn, his stare was so intense. "Name it— I’ll kill any man on earth you don’t like—I’ll dump gold in your lap until you can’t carry it—name it!"
Johnny waited an instant, then pitched his voice cautiously low. "You know Victoria Talbee—John Talbee's widow. You know what Landsfell's tryin' to do?"

"I know every dirty trick in his pack," Bat snarled. His hand tightened on the cell bar.

"Then you know he owns Beldon. I got money to help her—but it won't buy anything. I need a crew—a hard nut outfit that Landsfell can't scare. I want men who'll stick it out for three months at least. For that crew—I'd get you out of here tonight."

Bat Sanderson's face moved, then. "What can you do that Hame an' the boys can't do?"

Johnny smiled. "I don't know. But I'd risk more, maybe."

Bat's eyes closed. "Three months," he said. "I'd make it three years. Or thirty years. What do I care? But you're a damned fool—an' so am I for listenin' to you!"

"Three years—or thirty—you wouldn't keep a promise like that," Johnny said. "But three months—you'd keep that promise. I'll ask you again."

The doomed man opened his eyes. "I'm your man—for three months. Me and Hame and the others. All of us. I swear it. You name it—and we'll do it."

The heavy iron door banged as Sheen stepped in. "Time's up," he announced.

"Good-by, Bat," Johnny said. The outlaw moved back from the cell bars, sat down on the bunk as if his legs gave way beneath him. Johnny turned away. He walked without haste. Sheen followed, locking the doors. Downstairs once more, Johnny thanked him, and gained the street. He was breathing hard.

"My God!" he thought. "What have I let myself in for? I've got a crew—if I can get Bat out—an' if I don't—" He thought of the yellow-smoke eyes of Hame Mitchell, and shuddered...

At ten o'clock that night, Johnny led four men down
the alley behind the main street of Beldon, avoiding boxes and littered refuse more by instinct than anything else. They had gone warily past the single lighted window that opened onto the alleyway, that of the saloon, and some distance farther on. Finally Johnny stopped. He heard Hame Mitchell breathing heavily behind him.

"Okay, Sundance," he said, "it's your show."

Johnny nodded. The hours of the afternoon he had spent resting, making the plan he would follow. In the dim light of the alley he could make out a back door, locked with a heavy padlock on a chain that went through staples on the door and frame.

"Padlocked," Johnny whispered.

"Geeter, come 'ere!" Hame said. A tall, thin individual moved up silently. Geeter Vane had made little impression on Johnny, aside from the marked cruelty of his watery blue eyes. Bat Sanderson's whole crew had struck Johnny decidedly as bad—not one of the four of them would he have trusted alone. But it was clear that they feared and respected Bat as only the lawless can fear one more terrible than themselves.

Johnny moved to one side. He saw Geeter pick at the padlock with a slender bit of steel; then came a dry click and the lock sprung apart.

"Heck, thet was easy—oiled up all nice an' easy." Geeter moved back.

Johnny slipped the lock off, let it dangle from the link chain. The door opened silently, and the multitude of smells common only to a general store of the period struck at him. The smell of a keg of pickles, of strong cheese, of saddle polish and meat; all blended into one smell that was common to every store of the type. In the winter months, when the potbellied stove was cherry-red and hissing from the brown spittle of tobacco chewers gathered about it, it would be almost overpowering.
“All right, Hame,” he said. “Tell one of them to bring up the buckboard. It won’t take long—and we’ll need all the supplies we can haul. Get busy.”

“Shore.” The outlaw passed word back. “You name it—we’ll drag it out to the alley.”

They worked swiftly, and for the most part in silence. Bags of flour, of sugar, canned goods; everything Johnny could think of, including bolts of cloth and thread and needles, was packed out to the waiting buckboard. He found a locked cabinet of rifles, broke into it. He took three Winchesters, and cases of shells. He got Levis and boots and a new hat. He grinned as he tried on the hat. The first one fit. Then Hame Mitchell came up.

“Reckon that’s a load,” he said. “I’ll tell Geeter to take it on out o’ town.”

“Okay,” Johnny agreed. “Then come back here. There’s a back room off here—I saw what we want in there this morning.”

It took a half hour to get the supplies the storekeeper had refused to sell, and Johnny grinned as he counted out five hundred dollars and laid it on the counter. Maybe it was not enough, but he didn’t think the storekeeper would protest too loud. Then, with Hame Mitchell gingerly carrying a heavy wooden box in his arms, they left the store, and Johnny stopped long enough to run the chain back through the staples and to snap the lock. Ahead of them, down the alleyway moved the buckboard they’d rented that afternoon. Geeter would drive on toward the tanks. With luck they’d overtake him before morning—and Bat Sanderson would be with them.

Hame was grunting with effort as he moved through the blackness of the night. “Damn!” he whispered. “All I need now is to stumble over something!”

Johnny thought of the case of Hercules powder and fuses and said nothing. But he felt a nervousness along his spine.
“Okay, this is it,” he said as they reached the end of the alley. “Give me twenty minutes. Then let it go!”

He caught Hame’s nod, then the big outlaw moved off ahead of him, his two companions at his heels. Johnny waited a moment, then took a deep breath. Here it was! In his right hand he held a crowbar he had taken from the general store. Over his shoulder was looped a large coil of rope. He made his way carefully across the street into the darkness of the rest of the alley. He saw no one. Only a few lights were visible in the dark hulk of the city hall; behind it the lighter shape of the jail stood out clearly. He saw the faintly lighted rectangles of the barred windows of the upper story; probably one lamp burning at one end of the long corridor. Below the office windows dumped yellow light haphazardly across the dirt street. Johnny walked fast, stopped at the back of the adobe jail. Between the adobe wall of the jail and the next building, the rear of a structure facing on the opposite street, was a space some two feet wide. Dirt and litter had filled it up a good way, and Johnny had to scramble up to gain the narrow aperture. He was breathing hard, and sweat made his hands slippery. It all depended now on the strength of the crumbling adobe. Using his back as a sliding brace, he brought his knees and hands into play, and beetle-like began the ascent. His boots scraped softly over the flaking adobe bricks, and the sound in the narrow quarters was loud. But Johnny kept moving. He had gained perhaps eight feet upward when it happened. Without warning one knee moved from him; he felt the adobe giving, gave an upward surge, then was perched ten feet above the ground as the section of adobe directly below him crashed inward!

Clogging dirt boiled up into his face, stinging his eyes. He scrambled on, as fast as his numbed arms and legs could move, then paused as above the sudden crash of
the falling adobe he heard a man’s startled curse. Moving again, he crept upward. His hands seemed raw, and he felt the denim cloth over his knees strain and part; then he froze as a light flickered into the narrow space between the two buildings. By twisting his head he could see downward to the alley side; a man stood at the opening, a lantern held high, peering in. With a start, Johnny recognized Jay Sheen, the town Marshal.

“I knew this goddamn ol’ relic would cave in someday!” Sheen growled. “I’ll never be the same after that scare!”

“What made it give way like that?” came a second voice.

“How’n’hell should I know?” The Marshal’s voice was plaintive. “The first time in a week I held a poker hand worth two-bits, an’ the damn’ building had to fall down!”

“What’s back o’ that wall, Marshal?”

“Storeroom,” Sheen answered. He raised the lantern higher, thrust his head into the area. He looked up and down the wall, but not as high as Johnny. The light of the lantern failed to reach Johnny by a matter of inches. He hung, frog-like, legs and arms drawn up before him, holding him between the two walls. His back was scraped raw, and his arms and legs ached throbbingly. If Sheen raised the lantern higher, or stepped into the space between the buildings—but he didn’t. The lantern dropped lower, moved back. He heard the men’s voices die away, and once more he moved upward.

His head topped the flat-roofed jail building, then his hands found purchase, and he tumbled inertly over the parapet and lay still. His breath came in great panting gasps, and his head throbbed and ached. Close! God, how close it had been! After a moment he dug out his watch, made out the hands; the twenty minutes were up. Almost as he tuck the watch back into his vest, the whole world seemed to explode in his face!

There is no sound like exploding dynamite when be-
tween echoing buildings. The sound was a shock wave that burst windows, rocked buildings. The adobe jail swayed, jarred, trembled. Johnny heard the thudding of falling bits of masonry and adobe. Then before his ears could clear of the tremendous burst of sound, a second explosion followed. He saw the red flash over the edge of the building, dirt and debris hurled upward. He saw a hitching rail, intact, sail upward in the blinding glare. Then rifles roared and bounced dry, snapping sound into the street. Hame Mitchell and his men were doing the job!

Johnny staggered to his feet, half-ran to the far end of the jail, over the private cell block housing Bat Sanderson. He heard men shouting, doors slamming, the tinkle of more breaking glass, then guns barked and thundered—drowned out by a third stick of dynamite hurled into the street by Hame Mitchell on the building across the street from the jail.

The roof sheets of galvanized metal gave way beneath Johnny’s working with crowbar; then he reached the wooden frame beneath. He got the sharp edge of the tool between two boards, pried up. There was no time to hunt for joints; the steel seemed to quiver, almost to bend under his full weight, then dry lumber snapped and broke, and Johnny fell to the roof. He worked swiftly, the sound of his battering drowned by the thunderous tumult on the street outside the jail. He made a passage large enough for his body; working in mad haste, he tide the rope to a projecting ventilation pipe, and swung down through the opening. He dropped swiftly into the dimly lighted area—and found himself in the corridor outside Bat’s cell. A lantern hung against the wall beside the door, swaying and banging as a fourth stick of dynamite went off, rocking the building. Yells and frightened screams comingled with gunfire. Bat Sanderson stared at Johnny.
“My God!” he cried. “I thought the world was endin’!”

Johnny was breathing too hard to reply. He tried the pry bar on the cell lock. He got his feet up against the bars, his whole weight off the floor. He felt the tremendous surge of force through the metal; but the lock held. Johnny let go his hold, sprawled on the floor. He gained the door in long bounds. His gun roared twice as he worked his thumb on the hammer; then the crowbar ripped at the battered lock. The door swung wide. Johnny dropped the bar, and ran for the stairs. Men in the cells beyond saw him, yelled. He ignored them, gained the head of the stairs. As he shot down them, the metal door burst open at the bottom. He saw Jay Sheen’s startled face, then he hurled himself forward. The Marshal fired one shot upward at him—then Johnny’s hurtling body struck the Marshal, and they fell together beyond the iron door. Johnny was up first, drove his left fist into the Marshal’s face, and covered the room beyond with his gun. But the office was empty. He saw a man’s back through the open door to the street.

Jay Sheen sat up, shaking his head. A trickle of blood dripped down one side of his mouth. Johnny kicked his gun away. He grasped the Marshal, dragged him to his feet. “Get up them stairs!” Johnny roared.

Sheen stumbled, half fell into the stairway. Johnny heard a man’s surprised yell—slammed the iron door just as a gun roared and lead slammed against the iron. He twisted the key in the lock, and dangling the huge ring in his left hand, urged the Marshal up the stairs. Down the long corridor they ran, and prisoners shouted at them. They burst into the end cell block—and Johnny held the gun on Sheen, tossed him the keys.

“Let Bat out!” he commanded.

The Marshal hesitated. His eyes were wild. “My God! You’ll pay for this night’s work!” he blurted.
“Get it open!” Johnny shouted. He raised the gun. He heard men hammering on the iron door. Great, jarring blows. Probably using a desk for a battering ram. Then a sharp staccato burst of shots, trying to damage the lock as he had done with the inner door.

Jay Sheen got the door open. Bat Sanderson burst from the cell. His right fist swung viciously, caught the Marshal alongside his head. He fell heavily, and Bat dragged him into the cell. He slammed the barred door, twisted the key in the lock.

“Okay—it’s your deal, Mister!” The outlaw faced Johnny. Sundance nodded.

“Up the rope—we’ll try to get away across the roofs—jump!”

Bat Sanderson went up the rope like a monkey, feet and arms working in unison. Then Johnny followed, more slowly. Before he topped the roof, more dynamite exploded. He felt the concussion hurl him flat against the roof, got his knees up in time to prevent being jarred from the rope. Then the building rocked crazily. In a mad burst of energy, he got to the tin roof, stood there, the building quaking, rocking beneath his feet.

A man’s voice rang out in sudden fear. “Look out! The whole damn’ buildin’s goin’! It’s comin’ down!”

With a sliding motion, the whole front of the adobe structure swayed out, crashed into the street. Johnny had one mad vision of jumbled men and horses, of red gunshots, then everything was swallowed, lost in the great welling burst of sound and dust that hurtled upwards into the night.

The whole front of the jail was down, and men were undoubtedly hurt; but the building stood, and Bat Sanderson was free. . . . Johnny saw him standing at the edge of the roof, joined him at a run. He paused only long enough to get the rope free, then they were gone, racing over roofs. They gained the far end of the street,
looped the rope over a beam, swung down into the black street below. Nothing moved there. Silence had fallen suddenly.

They ran away from the scene of nightmare destruction, and sound and tumult grew behind them. Then racing hoofs sounded, and Hame Mitchell came up, leading two horses. He was grinning broadly.

"Howdy, boss!" he called out. "Let's get movin'! Man alive, we really messed up Simon Landsfell's jail. I didn't expect the whole damn thing to fall down!"

Then Johnny was mounted. He felt the horse running beneath him. There was no pursuit. Not yet. But it would be inevitable. He mopped at his sweat-streaming face. Simon Landsfell would strike at him with all his strength—only now he had a crew for the Talbee ranch. He glanced at his companions. He saw that Bat had strapped a gun around his waist. The outlaw leader rode like an Indian, with a wild intensity that seemed to lift his horse along.

Beyond the town they joined the remaining three members of the gang. Then Johnny was stunned to see Geeter Vane sitting on the spring seat of the buckboard to one side. He reined in, turned to look at Bat Sanders. He surprised a very strange look on the outlaw's face. He was frowning, uncertain.

This is it, Johnny thought. Now I'll know the bargain I made! In another minute he might be blasted from the saddle, and the outlaws free to run with unlimited supplies. The doubt that swelled into his mind was strong, compelling—all he had was the word of a murdering renegade. And suddenly he realized that was not enough.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Outlaw Ranch

Perhaps a half a minute of silence went by. Johnny felt tension building up in his head, starting the strange little tic-tic in his temple. Then Hame Mitchell spoke. “Thet was some bust-out! Me’n the boys left the rest o’ the dynamite back o’ a chimney on top of Simon Landsfell’s nice new buildin’. Kinda wanted to lay a fuse to it, but didn’t. I hope she blows, though!” He waited a minute. “I told Geeter to pull off here an’ wait until you’d had your say, Bat.”

The outlaw leader’s hawklike face was hatchet sharp, his eyes pinched almost closed. Johnny could see how his nostrils flared under tension, making tiny white lines just above his mouth. “Three months,” he said. Then he nodded. “Three months it is. I got nothin’ better to do than hassle with Landsfell. Before I leave this country I’m gonna put a slug between his eyes for luck.”

It came like a blow to Johnny. He sagged in the saddle. The stiffness seemed to melt away from the other men. Hame grinned. “Okay, Geeter—get ’em movin’!”

The buckboard moved on. It was ended. The matter was closed. Bat Sanderson would keep his word—for three months. Johnny rolled a cigarette with trembling fingers, got it lighted. Bat and Hame and the other two were watching him, waiting.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s get goin’.”

Five hours later they topped the canyon pass above the Talbee ranch. It had been five hours of silence as
far as Johnny was concerned, although Bat Sanderson had ridden behind him with Hame Mitchell and the others, and had talked at length. The day that had dawned an hour or so after they had left Beldon behind them was gray with clouds, although the storm had moved on. Now as the mountains broke and the desert lay before them, Johnny could see the high-piled black mass of thunderheads moving over the distant eastern range. The desert was off-white, a sudden nothingness in the red-bottomed hills; in the near distance he saw the dull gray sheen of the tanks, glistening like a circular patch of wet gray paint. A black line of smoke was erected slantwise from the rusted tin chimney of the line shack, and even at that distance he could see the spot of color from flowers under the windows.

Victoria Talbee was waiting for them on the porch when they came up. She seemed even slimmer, and the shadows under her eyes had darkened. But she had combed her hair tight about her head, with two braided coils at the back. Her eyes regarded them levelly as they reined in, and Johnny caught something of relief—and something more—on her face as he dismounted. Then she saw the buckboard, piled high with tarpaulin-covered supplies, and her mouth twisted, and silently she began to cry. Then she fled into the clapboard shack.

“Now thet’s a hell of a welcome,” Hame Mitchell drawled. He still sat the saddle. His bright eyes watched Johnny. “No ranch house, no cattle, no horses, no bunk-house—no nothin’! An’ you’re fixin’ to light in on Landsfell.” He spat heavily to one side.

“The barn’ll do,” Johnny returned. “When I left here I didn’t have a dollar, I didn’t have a crew, an’ no supplies. Now I got foldin’ money, a hard-nut outfit, an’ grub for three months easy.”

Bat laughed, suddenly, a queerly distorted sound,
coming from his hatchet face. "Not to mention gittin' Landsfell's back up like a lightnin' struck cat!"

Johnny shrugged. "No cat in his right mind takes a swat at a bulldog, Bat—an' right now you're my bulldog." The shot told. Bat Sanderson's face darkened.

"Yeah, damned if I ain't," he grunted. "Okay, Geeter—you an' the boys git that stuff unloaded an' into the house. Me an' Hame'll git down to the barn. Bring a keg o' them nails, an' we'll see what we can do about fixin' her up. Looks like we'll be a-settin' here for some time."

Once again Johnny was struck by Bat Sanderson's acceptance of the situation. He had played a long shot in gambling on the man's reputation—and won. But for how long? He had little doubt that Landsfell would strike back—and hard—and how much it would take to make Bat go back on his word, Johnny couldn't guess. The outlaw was an enigma. But there would be a breaking point, and it would be toward that end that Landsfell would strike.

Geeter Vane and the other men worked cheerfully enough. None of them spoke, but Johnny caught one meaningful wink from Geeter. Johnny waited on the porch until they were through carting supplies into the shack; waited until Geeter and the other two rode off toward the barn; then he entered the house.

Victoria Talbee stood before the high-piled table set in the middle of the floor. Little David sat in a homemade highchair, eyes big with wonder. The woman put a hand on a case of canned milk.

"Milk for David," she said. Her eyes were red, but she didn't cry. "It's been months. Once Clay rode across the desert and brought a few cans back in his saddlebags. That's all he's had. A baby needs milk."

And a woman needs protection and care, Johnny
thought. He frowned, removed his hat. "I got a crew," he said. He hesitated.

She looked up at him. "I know. I've seen Bat Sander-
son and Hame Mitchell before. But I won't ask ques-
tions. You can tell me if you want to."

"Look," he said, then stopped. "Maybe this ain't the
way I'd like it. But it will work, give you a chance. I've
got Bat's word—for what it's worth—that he'll stay on
here with his crew for three months. He hates Landsfell's
guts. He'll kill him if he has a chance. And I think maybe
he'll make his chance. But Landsfell and Denver won't
ride in on us free and easy. They know we'll fight, now
—and that we've got something to fight with."

Her face didn't change. "Why are you doing this,
Johnny?"

It caught him off guard. He had no answer, knew
he would never have an answer. Why does a man do a
thing he knows is crazy and almost hopeless? Why does
a man keep on trying in the face of odds he can't beat?
He thought of Clay Toomey lying dead in the ranch
yard. He thought of the graves back on the hill above
the tanks. Little David made a crowing sound, thrust
his hands out toward Johnny, and Johnny took them
both in one of his. The baby started to laugh.

"I better get down to the barn," Johnny said. He
pulled his hand free gently. The woman remained
silent, watching him. He stopped at the door, turned.
"I'm doin' it because I want to. Because I figger there
maybe ain't nothin' else I can do." He saw her face
change; something darkened her eyes.

"I understand," she said. "I'll get this stuff put away.
Then I'll get some dinner. It will take an hour or two."

Johnny pulled the door closed after him. He felt ex-
hausted. Something had made him lie to her. There was
another reason he was staying—but he wouldn't name
it, not even to himself. He walked swiftly toward the barn.

He made himself work hard; and he worked the others almost as hard. But the outlaws made no complaint. Bat himself worked with a will, matching Johnny’s energy with a tireless force of his own. They partitioned the barn, made bunks from old lumber, rigged a rusted stove for heat and to cook over. The corral was repaired, the earthen banks of the tanks worked over carefully. And when each day neared its end, Johnny did not quit, but rode ceaselessly over the rough benches above the desert, studying out this barren land. The only remaining herd was small, some four or five hundred head, but fat. Plenty of feed and water, he guessed, in the canyon draw some five miles from the ranch. And he saw the possibilities in the ranch. With the tanks for water, it could be developed into a great ranch. The desert would run sheep in winter months, and the mountain heights would fatten them through the summer. It was a better sheep country than a cattle land. And Johnny had worked long enough in Montana to overcome his cattleman’s dislike for the woolly creatures.

What action he expected Landsfell to take first, Johnny didn’t know; but as a week passed without interruption, a growing nervousness beset him. The ranch showed the strenuous efforts of the men, and Johnny had seen a greater change in Victoria. The woman had grown stronger, more certain of purpose; the strength inside her had been tempered into steel. She made no effort to avoid him, and when they talked alone, it was as two men might talk, and Johnny liked her even better for it.

Mid-morning of the tenth day since he had taken Bat Sanderson from the Beldon jail, Simon Landsfell made his move. Johnny had been working, stripped to the waist, repairing a rain-worn gap in the earth bank
of the nearest tank, when he first saw the riders. A thin puff of dust against the blue and red of the mountain caught his eye, then he saw riders coming through the pass toward the ranch. Johnny thrust the shovel into the giving earth, shrugged into his shirt, left it unbuttoned as he strode toward the house. Bat was waiting, a rifle in his arms, a thin sardonic grin on his face.

"Company comin', Johnny," he said. "Reckon this is it?"

Johnny nodded. "Maybe. Where's Hame an' the others?"

"Geeter's down to the barn. He's seen 'em. I told 'em to sit tight an' wait. Hame's back on the bench—rode out this mornin'. He'll be comin' in behind 'em, if I know Hame Mitchell. I figgered I'd stick it out up here at the house with you an' Missus Talbee."

"What is it, Johnny?" Victoria met him at the door. She was tense, but there was no fear in her eyes.

Johnny managed a grin. "Riders. Comin' in fast. We gotta be prepared for trouble. Get David and stay inside."

She hesitated a moment, then nodded. The door closed behind her. Johnny picked up his rifle from the porch. He sat on the railing, and buttoned his shirt, slowly. His right hand loosened the Colt's revolver in the sheath. Then he picked up the rifle, cradled it in his arms.

Minutes passed. Johnny heard them before he saw them. The dry clip-clop of walking horses. He felt Bat stir uneasily at his side, but the outlaw was grinning. Then three men topped the low swelling rise of the benchland and rode into the ranch yard. The man in the lead carried a rifle in one hand, a white kerchief knotted to the barrel which was thrust erect. Johnny had never seen him before. The man directly behind him was Jay Sheen, and beside Sheen rode—Denver!
The man with the rifle was past middle-age, with a heavy gray mustache, and thick brows that met over the bridge of his thick nose. He wore a silver star on his open vest. Sheen and Denver stopped, but the man with the star rode boldly up to the porch. He leaned forward across his saddle horn, a frown wrinkling his thick brows, as he studied first Johnny then Bat Sanderson. He lifted his mustache with one hand to spit to one side.

"Howdy," he said. "I'm Jeb Fredis, Sheriff of Tumac County—reckon I'm talkin' to John Sundance?"

Johnny nodded. He saw Bat stiffen, glance at him.

"Hello, Jeb," the outlaw said. "Since when you workin' for Simon Landsfell?"

"Huh?" The Sheriff spat again. "Reckon I ain't, nohow. Thet was unkind o' you to say that, Bat. Still, that's about what I'd 'spect from a feller whose tail I been chewin' on fer more years than I'd like to say. Bat, I shore felt bad hearin' you was to stretch rope over to Beldon—made me feel like my job had ended, kind 'o. You been raisin' hell through these mountains so dang long, I jist natterly 'spected you to keep it up. Still I got to thinkin' about how plumb easy my job was goin' to be with you gone an' all. So I can say this here Sundance feller bustin' you loose don't sit none too good with me. Worse'n that, he tore up half o' Beldon doin' it—hell they'll be six weeks fillin' in the hole he blasted in the streets."

Sanderson bent forward. His dark face was more than ever hawklike. "Yo're out o' your territory, Jeb," he said. "Tumac County ends at the pass, an' you know it."

Jeb Fredis scratched at the short gray stubble on his fat chin. "Yep, reckon I do. But a feller does as best he can, Bat. Now if we uns on this side o' the desert was to wait fer the Sheriff in Larribee to get this far out o' his usual bailiwick, why'd they'd be nothin' done at
all. Me, I’m all fer law an’ order, Bat—so I feel it’s kind o’ my duty to stop this yere Sundance feller afore he blows up this whole end o’ Wyomin’.” The agate eyes blinked, once, twice. “You see, Bat, it’s like this—right this minute you ain’t important. Every galoot in Tumac County is a-rearin’ after Sundance’s heart’s blood after what he done. Fer that reason—I’m takin’ him back. If you was to slope off quiet-like—well, it’d take me a coupla days to git Sundance back to Beldon afore I could rightly git on your tail.”

Johnny could see Denver’s mind at work in the scheme. In one move he would block off what Johnny had gained by getting Bat Sanderson’s support. Johnny saw a grin start to slide around the outlaw’s mouth.

Then Johnny laughed. “’Tain’t no use, Sheriff,” he said. He grinned. “Hell you know that Bat Sanderson’s word is somethin’ you can bank on—like the ring of honest gold. An’ Bat’s given me his word he’s my man for three months. You’re off your beat, Fredis—an’ attempt at usin’ force will justify me an’ Bat here to blow hell out o’ you an’ your men.”

He spoke loudly, a ring in his voice that carried. He saw Bat’s smile fade away. When he looked at Johnny something new was in his eyes, respect—and maybe a little hate. Then he levelled the rifle in his arms.

“You heard him, Jeb,” he said. “Makes it all kind of legal-like, puttin’ a bullet in your head for trespassin’. Considerin’ how much hide I’ve worn off gettin’ away from you, can’t say as I’d mind doin’ it, either.”

The Sheriff straightened. The sudden turn of events had caught him offguard. But before he could speak, Johnny saw Denver bend to one side, come up with his gun. Johnny threw up the rifle, and the roar wasn’t an instant behind Denver’s shot. Wood flew from the porch pillar before his face. He saw Denver wheel his horse, race back. He levered another shot into the chamber,
fired again; but the sorrel horse with the silver-laden saddle dropped below his range too soon. The Sheriff, bent low over the neck of his mount, followed, Jay Sheen just ahead of him. Johnny let them go.

“That tore it!” Bat grunted. “Goddamn that crazy Denver, anyhow! Now Sheen an’ Fredis will have to fight.”

Gunfire burst out below them. Johnny saw the posse scatter, race back toward the pass. Men dismounted, knelt with rifles cradled in their arms. The answering fire came swiftly. He saw one man tumble crazily to one side, then a slug smashed against the wall of the shack, and he ducked back. He heard a yell, then a horse raced into the area behind the shack, and Hame Mitchell came around the building at a run. A moment later the three remaining outlaws led by Geeter Vane ran for the shack. One man stumbled, fell, then came on again. His left arm was oddly red as he gained the porch. Johnny recognized him as Pete Leghorn, the loudest-talking member of Bat’s band. He grinned as he gained the porch.

“Hot damn!” he yelled. “Winged me—it was that bugger Denver!”

“Get in the house!” Johnny yelled. The man ran in. Johnny followed, slammed the door, ran to a window that covered the porch and the slope beyond. He broke the glass from the window with the barrel of his rifle. “Get the glass out of the windows—it will cut hell out of us if you don’t! Then keep low an’ wait.”

Bat was kneeling beside him. “They ain’t gonna come in—not now in broad daylight. They’ll get above us on the banks of the tank durin’ the night—an’ then either burn us out or fill this shanty so damned full o’ holes it’ll look like a sieve.”

Johnny saw Victoria staring at him. She held little David in her arms, and crouched low against the far
wall. But there was no fear in her eyes, now. He smiled at her.

"Let 'em," Johnny said, slowly. "We won't be in it—and they'll pay for it, damn 'em!"

For a second Bat stared at him, then slowly he saw what Johnny saw in his mind, and chuckled. "I be go to hell!" he chortled. "That's an ideal! Man, that's a ripsnorter of an ideal!"

"Pete—you hurt bad?" Johnny queried sharply. The loquacious Pete for once was silent. He'd ripped his left sleeve all the way to the shoulder. His muscular arm was bloody. A tiny blue-circled hole was torn just below the swell of his shoulder.

"Nope. Jist a leetle nick," he said. "Denver meant that for my heart but went a little wide. On the right line, though! That's shootin'."

Johnny nodded. "They're goin' to be talkin' for a minute. One of them got hurt. That don't mean much except maybe Fredis will have a chance to talk some sense into them."

"Not a chance!" Hame Mitchell put in. "Hell Landsfell owns 'em all 'ceptin' maybe Fredis, an' I ain't so shore about him. Denver'll keep 'em riled an' do just what Bat said. We ain't got a chance."

"Shut up! Listen to him!" Bat cut in sharply. "Go ahead, Johnny."

"They'll talk it over—we got maybe fifteen minutes before they get back to the ridge below the shack here. They'll use the barn for cover, maybe get up on top of it to cover them. We got that long. You, Hame—you take Mrs. Talbee and David an' Pete there. Get out that back window and move straight back so they can't see you—get above the tanks in that stand of cottonwoods. Lay low. Don't shoot no matter what. You other two—go with them, but head to the left, go around the tanks, get behind them up the slope. Stay under cover. Don't
shoot, either! It's goin' to be cold tonight—but at least you won't have nobody shootin' at you. In the mornin' you'll see what to do, if they do what Bat thinks they will. Now get goin'!

"Hey—what about you an' Bat?" Hame protested.
"We're stayin' here," Johnny said.
"But—"
"Quit arguin'!" Bat yelled. "Goddamn your eyes, get goin' like Johnny said!"

Victoria Talbee was swiftly gathering up blankets and a small bundle of food. Johnny walked over to her. "You'll be all right," he said. "Maybe this will end a part of this whole thing."

If she heard him she gave no sign. Hame Mitchell took the baby in his massive arms, moved toward the rear windows. The woman waited a moment, and her eyes probed into Johnny's. Then she smiled, grasped his hand in her own, and without speaking she hurried after Hame and the wounded Pete.

Firing began again. The first few shots were high. Johnny had watched Hame and the others scramble back, and no shots were fired after them, and he was convinced they had not been seen. Hame waved a hand before he plunged into the cottonwoods. Then the barrage began, and dishes broke as the riflemen lowered their sights. Johnny hurried to a window, half-fell into a crouch below it. Using the window ledge as a rest, he methodically emptied his rifle along the ridge. He had no clear target, but fired low and waited. In a moment a man's head and shoulders bobbed up, and Bat's rifle blazed away, and the man jerked back without firing his gun. The bullet Bat fired dug a furrow just in front of where the attacker had been.

"Use your Colt," Johnny said. "Fire the rifle and the Colt at the same time. Make 'em think we're all sittin' here, darin' them to come in."
“Uhhuh!” The outlaw did as Johnny ordered. Johnny followed suit.

The pattern of rifle fire betrayed the movements of the posse. They edged up past the barn to enfilade the shack, cutting off escape toward the high earthen banks of the tanks. Other men were atop the barn, firing down from that eminence. By lying close against the base of the walls, Johnny and Bat were protected from direct fire, but not from ricocheting bullets and jagged splinters of wood where leaden pellets struck. Twice splinters stung Johnny, and a gash was opened on Bat’s cheek by a piece of smashed crockery, but the outlaw just grinned.

“Ambitious damned gents,” he grunted. “Since they’re payin’ for their own shells—wonder how long they’ll keep flingin’ ’em away at nothin’?”

“Not long,” Johnny hazarded. “But they’ll start a pattern after awhile to keep us pinned down.”

He saw a man’s dark form atop the triangular shaped barn roof, brought his rifle up swiftly. Before he could fire, Bat’s rifle roared, and the man pitched forward, then rolled down out of sight. For a moment silence fell, the attackers blazed away crazily, an insane barrage that lasted for long minutes and kept the two men inside the shack from the windows. Then the firing eased up. Bat grimaced. “Stung ’em that time!”

Johnny rolled a cigarette after reloading his guns. Bat tossed him a match from the window the other side of the door. “I think one of us oughter move aroun’ and let fly from the back windows. You manage these—I’ll get the two in back.”

Sundance nodded. Time passed. They played the deadly game without speaking. Once the attackers were in place, the fire slackened to sporadic brusts. Johnny moved back and forth to the front windows, firing only occasionally, but each time from a different place, and
firing both the rifle and his Colt to give the illusion of
two men firing at will at each window.

The sun moved overhead, poured in through the rear
windows. Long shadows began to march toward the
ridge. Johnny began to feel hungry. He moved cau-
tiously to the cupboard, got crackers and some cheese,
which he divided with Bat. The outlaw grinned his
thanks. His eyes were bright as he ate.

“You know, Sundance,” he said, munching slowly,
“I ought to hate your guts. But I don’t. At first I
thought, ‘when I leave here, I’m gonna kill that god-
damn Sundance.’ But now that’s changed. You’re kind
of like me. You’re doin’ what I’d do, if I was smart
enough. Maybe not for the reasons I’d be doin’ it—but
it works out the same.”

Johnny swallowed a mouthful of crackers and cheese,
grunted noncommittally. Bat grinned. “Thing is, Lands-
fell’s just about smart enough to lay off’n you after this
—until I’m gone. That’s gonna leave you in a funny
position, now ain’t it?”

There was no opportunity for Johnny to reply, for at
that moment a renewed burst of gunfire smashed into
the walls, dug into the floor, broke dishes, and clanged
against the rust-streaked chimney of the stove, sending
a black cloud of soot out into the room. They made
their rounds of the windows, Johnny sliding back and
forth, pausing only to reload his guns. When he had a
moment to rest and think, he grinned across at the
outlaw. Sanderson was munching steadily on the last
of his crackers.

“Bat, if it was up to Landsfell, I reckon you’d be
right—but Denver’s got a hand in this, an’ he won’t
wait. That’s partly what I’m countin’ on. If he goes too
far, it’s gonna stir up feelin’ in Beldon. An’ others are
gonna start thinkin’ if we can buck Landsfell, they can,
too! That'll be the writin' on the wall for Simon Lands- 
fell."

Bat blinked, nodded. "Sounds good," he said. "Funny 
thing is, you're not countin' on Denver puttin' a bullet 
in your hide—but I'd give you odds."

The single room of the shack began to darken. The 
long shadows in the yard were fading into a darkening 
shade. The sky over the white-face desert was purple 
and orange, long brush-like strokes on a slate-blue can-
vas. In minutes it would be too dark to make out a 
man's moving figure.

"You ready to make a run for it?" Johnny called across 
to Bat. The outlaw nodded. His face was shadowed, 
saturnine, somehow mocking. The incongruity of the 
situation struck at Johnny suddenly. Bat Sanderson, the 
most lawless man in Wyoming risking his life to uphold 
the right he despised. But the man's own character had 
made the trap he was caught in.

"I'm ready, Johnny," Bat replied.

Johnny held close against the base of one window, 
waiting. The darkness closed in fast. In a moment, 
now—he saw the soft red shadows against the opposite 
wall, watched them for a moment without understand-
ing, then burst to his feet.

"They've fired the barn!" he hissed. "They got our 
hunch about clearin' out in the dark. We better get 
goin'!"

Bat stood up, grinned once, sardonically. "Here goes 
nothin'," he yelled. "See you in hell, Johnny!" He cleared 
the rear window at a bound, and hit the ground run-
ning. Instantly a man shouted, and guns roared. Johnny 
didn't wait, but crossed the room at a run. He burst 
through the other window, stumbled and fell. He heard 
shots thud into the building, and rolled. Dirt burst up 
into his face, then he was on his feet, running. He saw 
Bat, far head of him, as he cleared the tanks, and was
lost in the closing dusk. Behind the house the barn sent long red fingers of flame and roaring waves of heat into the night sky.

Johnny ran half-bent over. Guns were a constant thunder behind him, then he felt a numbing jar against one foot, and fell headlong. A bullet seared his side, ripped into the earth beside him. Then he was up again. The heel of his right boot was gone, torn away by the chance shot. There would be no chance to follow Bat—long before he could clear the hundred feet between him and the corner of the tanks, he'd be dropped. Without realization or plan, he went straight up the sloping earth side of the tank. He slipped, went to all fours, made it to the rim. In one last burst of strength and speed, he cleared the rim, plunged into the tank. Bullets churned the water over his head, and he channelled his hands to bring him as deep as possible. At the farthest reaches of his dive, he began to stroke under water. Tangled masses of brush struck his hands, and he made his way through the thin growth of reeds. With caution, lungs afire, almost bursting, he thrust up. He tilted his head back, so only his nose and mouth cleared the water, and sucked in air.

"Where in hell'd he get to?" A man's voice barked, and Johnny recognized the voice as that of Denver. "I think I hit him—I saw him stagger."

"Aw, hell—who could hit anythin' in this light? He'll be floatin' on the water by mornin'."

Red light flickered and danced on the water. Johnny tread water. The thin rushes were no concealment. He lowered his head, started to swim away. Then a cry rang out.

"There he is!" A man shouted—and in that instant a rifle banged, and a bullet struck the water beside Johnny's head.
JOHNNY took a deep breath and dove. Something struck his back, a numbing blow as though a baseball bat had been laid upon him just below his right shoulder blade. It spun him in the water, drove the air from his burning lungs, and he sucked in water. Strangling, he struggled upward, the rushes impeding him. Then at last his head burst free of water, and he sucked air in great gulps. Only a moment dared he stay above water, and even as he plunged deep again, he heard the bitter bark of guns and the angry shouts of men.

Under water he swam steadily, toward the far edge of the tank. He could see the dancing red glow on the surface above him, and swam on until it seemed to pale. Then cautiously, paddling hard to keep from bobbing up in a splash that would send ripples over the still pool, he lifted his mouth to get air. He heard voices, muted, distorted by the water in his ears.

"Here—bring that torch—" He caught the words just as he dove and swam on once more. He was two hundred yards from the bank where he went into the tank when he again lifted his head. He was in a thick growth of green weeds, effectively shielded from the bank. He raised his head, treading water. On the bank he saw men gathered, peering forward.

"Somebody got him!" a man shouted. "Look at the blood in the water!"

Johnny remembered the numbing shock across his
back. He didn’t feel weak, and certainly the bullet had not gone through. His lungs were burning, but only with the water he had taken in. Slowly he grinned, pushed back through the reeds and rushes. In a matter of minutes he gained the sloping shallows at the far side of the tank, and crouched low there, listening, making sure his presence was not discovered. He probed up his back as far as he could reach with numbed fingers. Just below his right shoulder blade he felt an odd protuberance under the skin, like a boil to the bursting point—then he understood the blood in the tank. The bullet, all but spent by the restraining pressure it built up ahead of it in the water, had lodged there; what might have otherwise been a lung shot and certain death, would be no more than a terrible bruise. Using his fingers gently, while his body was yet numbed by the coldness of the water, he pushed the bullet under his skin until it popped out into his fingers through the jagged hole it had made in his skin. Smiling with something more than humor, he put the bullet in his watch pocket.

The men of the posse were clustered on the edge of the tank, above the shack, and the yellow lights of lanterns and crude torches played across the rippling water. Johnny saw Denver for a moment in the glare of a lantern, then the gunman stepped quickly back; like an Apache he avoided the light.

"Hey!" a man yelled from below. "There ain’t a soul in this damned shack!"

Almost instantly rifles broke into a staccato firing from the grove of trees up on the bench. Bat had made it to cover, and had taken advantage of the opportunity to open fire on the posse. Johnny saw the lights thrown into the water, and startled yells. One man screamed, tumbled off the bank into the water with a mighty splash. He waited for no more, but scrambled up and over the embankment, slipping and sliding in his haste.
He paused once to wring what water he could from his clothes and to empty his boots, then ran on in the darkness. The burning barn had died down, now; only a smoldering red glow limned the tank, danced on the water. He made his way through trees, keeping low. He saw the ranch house, men low against the edge of the tank firing up into the trees. They'd have little chance of hitting anything, Johnny thought. Then he found what he wanted: a quarter of a mile below the ranch house the posse had left their horses. One man stood guard, a rifle in his arms, pacing up and down the short rope line to which the horses were tethered. Johnny tensed, brought his legs low under him, drew his gun. He hadn't been in the water long enough to ruin all of his shells; some of them would not fire, probably, but most of them would.

He waited a moment longer. The firing kept up steadily. The posse would fall back in time, consider what further action to take now that Bat and his men had gained the shelter of the trees above them. Meantime it was up to Johnny to take what advantage he might of the situation. He felt his back begin to burn and itch where his shirt rubbed the open wound.

The guard walked down the line of horses, paused, staring up past the red glow of the barn. Then he turned, started back. Johnny was ready. The man reached the near end of the rope line, and Johnny sprang. It took two strides, running hard, to reach the man, and he had started to spin about when Johnny's gun lanced down across his skull. He dropped fast, driven toward the ground by the force of the blow. He lay still. There was a bowie knife in a sheath at his waist, and Johnny bent to take it. He came up at a run, and the knife flashed, parting the tie-line. The horses shied back at his unfamiliar look. The last one was freed, and Johnny yelled, ran at them. With one surge they broke back-
wards, rearing, fighting the still entangled reins, then they were gone, thudding away into the darkness.

A man yelled fiercely, and a gun roared. Johnny ran back. He caught up the fallen man’s rifle, broke for the shelter of trees some distance away. Panting hard, he dropped into brush, rolled for cover. More excited cries rang out. He brought the rifle up. He saw the spotted white and brown vest of Denver; heard a piercing whistle, and the answering neigh of a horse. The sorrel mare came in sight, running. Denver yelled, sprang forward. He sensed the trap, and was getting out. Johnny held the spotted vest in his sights—pulled the trigger. Denver dropped. The mare broke away, and the thundering hoofs beat out against hard-packed earth, died away.

Johnny levered another shot into the chamber, watched the fallen figure of Denver. A man came forward, dragged Denver back. The guard Johnny had struck sat up, got to his feet. His curses were clearly audible. Johnny sent a bullet out into the clearing where the horses had been, then rolled back hurriedly before an answering hail of shots tore into the shrubs where he had been.

The posse was pinned between Johnny on the edge of the road below the ranch, and Bat and his men above the tanks. The situation had been reversed in one crazy moment. Johnny grinned, shook his head, then frowned immediately. Had his shot stopped Denver for good? In the doubtful light he couldn’t be sure, but Denver had fallen like a dead man. Nor had he moved again. Johnny wished it had been Landsfell himself he had held in his sights that moment; not because he didn’t hate Denver, but because he hated Landsfell more. The emotion was full-swollen inside him, a seething hatred that would not dim. It was alien to his nature, and therefore of consuming intensity. It was as if the death of Jube had kindled something inside his head that ate sullenly away at his
emotional control. He had seen men affected that way; had watched the total disintegration of their moral sense until they had revolted like a rabid mongrel, snapping at everything in sight. How long would it take until he reached that state, what one single incident would precipitate it? His hand was clenched so tightly on the rifle guard it cramped. He released his hold, sat up.

He wished he had a smoke. The makings in his shirt pocket were ruined by water. He threw the soggy bag away. The cold night wind made him shiver, hunch down against the earth. Bat would have heard the ruckus below him, and would have guessed that Johnny had gotten away. The posse had no retreat now. The horses would scatter far by morning. It might take days before relief would come to them. Johnny held that thought in his mind, enjoying the discomfort that he knew plagued the posse.

A complete silence had fallen. The burning barn had collapsed inward upon itself, sending up a gigantic spray of diamond-bright sparks. A column of black smoke stretched with the wind against the dark sky, blotting out stars in its path. Johnny held still, rifle across his knees. His eyes closed from time to time, but he fought back sleep. He heard an argument, the voices dimmed by distance; but nothing moved against the pulsating redness of the embers of the barn. It hurt his eyes to watch the red light, and they insisted upon closing. He came to once, startled. A coyote had yapped in the distance, an echoing, mournful cry. Nothing moved.

He got up twice and moved cautiously around, to keep warm. When the first grayness in the east warned of dawn, he drew back further into the brush, picked a spot where erosion had dug a shallow pit, squatted down. The barn was a low mound of black-streaked glowing red, changing shape insanely as cooling winds darkened cooling coals, urged others to brighter yellow blaze. But
as the day dawned and the sky lightened, the embers of the fire darkened.

There were no yellow-red probing fingers of the sun yet visible when Johnny first saw a man. He was moving down toward him, walking stiffly, hands over his head. He recognized Jeb Fredis, the silver star on his vest glinting dully as it caught the last redness of the fire.

"Sundance—you out here?" the Sheriff called out. He paused, then moved on. Johnny levelled the rifle on him.

"I’ve seen Denver’s trick with a white flag, Sheriff," Johnny replied. "You’re a dead man if he tries anything!"

The Sheriff stopped, facing the grove of trees where Johnny crouched out of sight. "Denver’s through," Fredis said. "You got him low in the chest. I figgered he was dyin’, but he’s still breathin’. I reckon we’ve carried this damn thing far enough. I got one man killed an’ three others wounded not countin’ Denver. I don’t give a damn about Denver, but I don’t want any more killin’. I’m finished. Come daylight, you can make it too hot for us. This ain’t what I bargained for."

"I’ll only say this once," Johnny warned, soberly. "You an’ your men can go. All of you. I think you can catch some of your horses to carry your wounded. Stack your guns out in the open. We’ll empty them, let you have them without shells. You can have water and start walkin’."

Fredis balanced, leaning forward. His face was clear, intent. "Sundance, you’re startin’ somethin’ I hate to see come. Anybody with a lick of sense would know that a feller like you would show up in these parts some day. Just my luck you had to come now. Downin’ Denver like you done might give you a chance. Maybe he’ll croak, an’ maybe not. But he ain’t goin’ to be in your hair none for a month at least. And I figger maybe Landsfell ain’t up to chasin’ you off now. The Lincoln County War is still recent enough to scare the hell out of me
just thinkin' about it. The setup's different up here, but the end result is goin' to be the same. Right now you're fightin' alone, an' as long as it looks like you got tough sleddin' a damned good chance of bein' killed, folks is goin' to lay off helpin' you. But this set-to tonight is goin' to wake a lot of folks up, an' they're goin' to be watchin'. Let 'em start thinkin' you've got a chance of beatin' Landsfell—well, all hell's gonna bust loose in Wyomin'. Three hundred men died down in New Mexico in '81, Sundance—I hope you're up to facin' the number you're gonna get killed right here!"

The words struck home to Johnny. It had been an unformed thought in the back of his head. But he thought of Victoria Talbee's worn face, of the liquid eyes of little David who would remember nothing of the father buried back of the Talbee ranch.

"That's Landsfell's worry, not mine!" Johnny returned savagely. "He started it. Let him finish it the best way he can." But his words held a hollow mockery to them. What mattered whose underlying fault it might be? Men would die in these mountains, and they would be on Johnny Sundance's conscience. "I'll give you thirty minutes, Sheriff. Get the guns piled up—hail Bat up there and tell him what's up. Then you can start lookin' for your horses."

Three hours later Johnny watched the last of the posse riding down the road that entered the mountain pass toward Beldon. Denver and the other wounded were in the buckboard Johnny had rented, and he had caught one brief glimpse of the gunman's pain-drawn face. Denver hadn't spoken, but his eyes had burned out of the white mask of his face. Johnny became aware of Victoria standing on the porch beside him. He half turned to catch her profile. She was staring at the blackened embers where once the barn had stood. Her left hand reached
out to touch a jagged rip in the porch railing made by a .30-.30 slug.

"Is it worth it, Johnny?" she asked, softly. She turned to look at him. "To you, I mean? One more man is dead—Sheriff Fredis said Denver might die. Is it worth that? There's some money left, isn't there? I could take that, go away—"

"Once you start runnin', it's too late to stop," Johnny answered, soberly. "I found that out a long time ago."

Her oval face had once been beautiful. Johnny thought. Lines of toil and worry had been engraved in the soft whiteness of her skin, and her eyes were shadowed. But that changed them, somehow. In the clear light of morning, she seemed younger, as if he were seeing her through a softly shaded lens. Her eyes met his, held there. Something passed between them, and Johnny felt it almost as an electric shock.

"Is it too late to stop running, Johnny?" she asked, gently.

He saw the lithe figure of Bat Sanderson riding in from below. The outlaw was grinning. "Howdy, folks!" he called out cheerfully enough. "I saw our friends on their way. Reckon that's the end o' that social call." His sharp blue eyes darted between them. He read the tenseness that lay upon them. "Excuse me, reckon I'm bustin' in on somethin'."

"No, Bat," Johnny said. He moved away, suddenly anxious to be moving, to be doing something, anything. "I want to talk to you."

"I'll get some breakfast ready," Victoria said, and went inside.

Bat swung down from his horse, climbed to the porch. He was rolling a cigar between his hands. He bit off the end with a snap of his strong white teeth, spat it out. He lighted up, puffing heavily. "Hot an' heavy," he grunted. "That was it. Now what? I'm stakin' Geeter
out in the pass. Hame'll git chow up to him later. No sense in takin' chances, although I'm thinkin' Landsfell won't try that again."

For Johnny, it was not such a matter of certainty. But as always, he lost himself in hard work. From what scrap lumber they could find they built a lean-to back of the shack proper, and rigged bunks for the men as best they could. But the loss of the barn assumed larger proportions in Johnny's mind. Despite the moldy condition of some of it, it had housed ample feed. For the rest of the summer they could graze the horses, but winter would follow, and there would have to be forage stored. Sooner or later a trip to Larribee for supplies would be necessary, and Johnny considered the possibility of persuading Victoria to stay there until the trouble had reached an end one way or the other. He had avoided the woman the past few days, had not once spoken to her, and yet he often felt her solemn gaze upon him, and discovered something that puzzled him in her eyes. Women were not a problem with Johnny Sundance, for the simple reason he never allowed them to play any sort of permanent role in his life. But he sensed a change within himself, and fought against it in his own way. As for Bat and his men—they were sufficient unto themselves, and seemed to bide their time without protest of any kind. Sometimes at night they played poker for absurd stakes, and yet with a seriousness that belied the Pettiness of the wagers.

The time would come when Bat would ride off. He would wait for his three months to end, then leave. And Johnny sensed that the promise chafed Bat, and he would strive to find a quarrel before he left. But it was a problem that Johnny forced himself to leave unanswered. With luck, he could strike a telling blow before the time ran out, and it would be possible to hire a crew. Maybe in Larribee. Meantime, there was still
Landsfell to consider. The rancher would know what he faced if he did not stamp out this trouble before it grew too big for him to handle. And yet the very act of destroying Johnny and his band might precipitate the war Landsfell would dread.

One morning Hame Mitchell rode in, his horse at a run. He reined up, and sprang from the saddle in one tigerish bound. His flame-yellow eyes were smoldering, and they narrowed as he saw Johnny rounding a corner of the shack. Geeter Vane and Bat Sanderson were seated in tipped-back chairs on the porch, feet up on the railing. They held their pose as Hame came forward.

"Howdy, boss!" Hame barked. "There's news. Jist rode in from the north. You might like to know the Talbee spread is now minus cattle. That goddamned Landsfell's taken the whole herd!"

Johnny felt Bat's quizzical gaze on his face. Like this was something the outlaw leader had been waiting for. He grinned, his hawkline face splitting apart.

"Ahu!" Johnny let the sound out like a man who has been struck low. Then he caught himself. He spun about. "Bat—you an' Geeter get your horses. We're movin' out pronto."

Sanderson let his chair fall forward easily, catching the weight on his toes. "Shore," he drawled laconically. "Only where in hell are we ridin'?"

Johnny let a smile twist his mouth. "I heard once that Bat Sanderson's outfit was the best damned rustlers that ever handled a runnin' iron. I'm thinkin' I'd like to see you strut your stuff. I told Landsfell we'd pay him back in his own coin—an' it's a cinch he's got a hell of a lot more cattle to lose than we have!"

"By God!" Geeter Vane let his chair down with a crash. His face was wild with excitement. "You mean that, boss?"

"I mean it," Johnny answered. "Landsfell's opened
the ball—let him dance to the same music. Bat—leave Dusty an' Wop here. Four of us can work a big enough herd. We'll cut through the pass, drive back. Hit an' run."

Bat Sanderson stood up, a hawk of a man. "What're we goin' to get out of it, Johnny?" he demanded. The other two outlaws held tensely.

"Half," Johnny said. "Landsfell's cleaned out the Talbees, an' they used to run ten thousand head. It'll take us a long time to work off that many of Landsfell's cattle, so I figure we'll split what we take. Half to you for helpin' to run 'em an' to sell 'em—half to Mrs. Talbee."

Sanderson's grin came back. "Fair enough!"

And that was the start of it. Johnny felt they had crossed an invisible barrier, one that had held back those who fought Landsfell before. They could not fight him on even terms. But a range war must be fought on the terms of the aggressor. Johnny had, as had any cowhand, put his boss' brand on a maverick that he was morally certain had not been dropped by one of the ranch's cows. Technically, that was stealing; but it was an accepted practice. But rustling on a large scale was new to Johnny, and he felt an underlying excitement building within him. It was a betrayal of the wildness he held under control, fought in every way that he might. As for the raid against Landsfell itself, it came off unexpectedly well. They ran into one S-Bar-L rider, and he fled before guns could be trained upon him. They cut out a herd of some six hundred head, and moved it as rapidly as possible through the mountains. Once through the pass, Johnny and Bat fell back and waited.

The day was hot, and the dust of the passage of the cattle had not settled before the S-Bar-L riders showed up. They came into the pass at a run, and Johnny's rifle broke the silence. He shot a horse, saw it go down, throwing the rider far over its head. Then Bat's gun roared,
and other animals went down. The dust was thickening, and into the turgid yellow mass Johnny pumped shot after shot. He didn’t know whether he hit a man or not, and didn’t care. But none of the S-Bar-L riders went through the pass. He was certain of that. The dust broke once, and he saw the rock-littered floor of the pass below; horses were down, and he thought he saw the inert figures of two men but could not be certain. Others were riding back, faster than they had come up.

Bat’s eyes were coldest blue through the gray dust mask of his face. He grimaced. “Like shootin’ fish in a barrel,” he grunted. “Let’s git goin’.”

The rest of the drive was no more than that: a cattle drive. They left the nucleus of a herd in a northern canyon, drove the others south along the desert. It took four days’ driving to get four hundred head to the railroad at Larribee, and Johnny let Bat handle the sale. To his surprise there was no hesitancy on the part of buyers, and Bat forged a receipt cheerfully enough. They spent the afternoon in Larribee, where Johnny put out feelers for a crew without result. The men of the cattle shipping town seemed reluctant to talk to him, he found, but it was a sort of studied reluctance. He gained the impression they were waiting, before they decided. He couldn’t blame them. They started for the Talbee ranch before nightfall. Geeter Vane was drunk, and Hame not far from it. If Bat had been drinking, he did not give himself away. Johnny had taken just half of the money, and he carried it in his vest, and wondered at the chance he took. He caught Bat eyeing him speculatively twice, but the outlaw made no overt movement. When they stopped late that night, Johnny approached the lean dark man at the fire. Bat watched him come, smiled.

“First herd you ever rustled?” he queried.

Johnny nodded. He dug into his vest, drew out the thick roll of bills. “Bat, I got a favor to ask you. Mrs.
Talbee's all alone. She needs this money. I'm going to give it to you to carry. I might lose it along the way."

For a moment Bat stood still. Then he laughed. He took the bills. "Okay, Johnny," he said, finally. "I get your hunch. But three-four thousand won't bother me that much."

Johnny thought: *How much would make you sell out, Bat?* But he said nothing.

They had been gone a week the morning they saw the red-bottomed mountains behind the tanks. The shack stood alone, the charred ruins of the barn a black blot below it. Smoke stood up into the sky in a vertical line. Johnny saw two men on the porch and breathed easier when he saw they were Dusty Miller and Wop Curtis, Bat's two men. Then he saw Victoria Talbee. She was dressed in white, and her body was tensed, bent like a bow, as she clung to an upright post, shading her eyes to see the oncoming riders. Then they reached the yard, and Johnny swung down. The woman held still for a moment, then suddenly she was running to him. And she kissed him, unaware of his stubble of beard, the dust that bleared his face.

"Johnny—oh, Johnny—you're back!" Her voice was low, vibrant.

Johnny stood rooted to the spot. He could find no words. Then she was laughing, wiping the dust from her mouth. "I—I was so glad to see you—"

He nodded. "Sure," he said. "We're back. Any trouble?"

She shook her head. Her face had gone pale, and her eyes were damp. "No. There's been no one. Not even a rider." She turned, hurriedly. "You'll be half-starved. You look like a scarecrow. I've got to get busy."

He watched her go into the shack, then faced Bat and his men. Only Geeter was smiling. The others looked away. Johnny stepped up to Geeter Vane. "It ain't funny,
Geeter," he said, slowly. "If you laugh, I'll knock your teeth down your throat."

Geeter's grin faded. He glanced at Bat, then back at Johnny. "All right, Johnny. I didn't mean nothin'. I'm a damned fool, I reckon."

"Lay off, Johnny," Bat said, quietly. "We're not fightin' each other, you know."

The sudden blaze of anger died away inside Johnny. He nodded. "I just wanted to get it said," he declared. "I wanted you to know how I felt about it."

"Okay, Johnny," Bat answered, soberly. "Now we know. That goes for all of us."

Stiffly, Johnny moved away. He walked up the ridge to the benchland above, and into the cottonwoods. It was like walking through snow, the fuzz lay so deep, browning now from heat and dirt. His boots made dark marks on the surface, and he scuffed the heels as he walked, making jagged streaks against the brown-white earth. He came out of the trees close against the red-streaked mountains, and walked along the bench until he found a tumbled mass of boulders fallen from above. There he climbed atop one and settled himself. He rolled a cigarette, and his eyes were narrowed against the smoke of it as he stared out over the off-white glare of the mountain desert.

It was now July. In another five months the white tops of the mountains would start to lower, and it would grow colder day by day. The cottonwoods would be gaunt and bare, their interlaced branches crushing down with the weight of snow. Here, this close to the desert rim, there would only be a few snow flurries. He tried to keep his mind on that, the picture of the mountains of the north in winter. He tried to think of New Mexico and the desert land far to the south where he had been heading when he stopped here. But the pictures he built
in his mind faded, blurred, and all he could see clearly was Victoria Talbee’s face, and the shining moistness of her eyes as she cried.

A chill wind roused him, and he realized with a start that he had been sitting there for hours. He got to his feet stiffly, climbed down from the rock. Then he heard rocks sliding above him, and drew back in the shelter of a giant boulder and drew his gun. He held it ready, then dropped it back into the holster as he saw the slim figure of the woman coming towards him. She walked slowly. She stopped a few feet away.

“I’ve been looking for you,” she said. “You’ve been gone for hours.”

“I wanted to do some thinkin’,” he answered. She was standing there, as if she was waiting. Johnny moved away from the rock, towards her. She met him, and their arms crushed each other. Her mouth was soft and warm as he remembered it, and she was breathing hard when he let her go, stepped back.

“I’ve wanted to do that,” he panted, hoarsely. “God, I’ve wanted to do that for days.”

“Then why didn’t you, Johnny?” she whispered. Her face was strangely set, unsmiling. Her eyes were level, dark pools of thought.

“I wanted to be sure,” he said. “I wanted to be damned sure.”

“Are you sure now?”

He couldn’t reply at once. The words held back. Something moved in her face. “I’m not sure,” he said, finally. “I’m not sure we’re not making a mistake. You’re filled with gratitude. It’s makin’ you think different than you would otherwise. You’ve seen a hundred men like me ride through when John Talbee was alive—and you never looked twiced at any of them.”

“Everyone has to change sometime,” she answered.
"John Talbee's dead. A part of my life ended with him. But not all of it. I know that now."

Johnny thought: *With me she'd live it all over again. I don't know anything but cattle and sheep. If I stayed I'd bring sheep into the mountains, and there'd be more trouble. Could she go through it again? Could she? And then anger with himself came. It wasn't just that. It wasn't that alone. Don't kid yourself, Sundance! Put it the right way 'round: could you stick it out, even for a woman like her? You've never tried before, and maybe it's too late now. You'll keep seein' ranges in your mind's eyes that you ain't never rode before, an' you'll start thinkin', why not move on?*

She read his thought, his doubt, in his eyes, and her own closed, tightly. She swayed a little, then opened her eyes, smiled at him. "Make up your own mind, Johnny Sundance," she said, finally. "I'll be waiting. Don't be too long."

She moved back down the hill ahead of him, and after a moment he followed. He understood her, then, and the thought was sharply poignant. She needed him, even more than he needed her. She would wait—but not too long. That was her warning—and her promise.

* That day marked a change between them, for they understood each other. Johnny stacked days up behind him like cordwood, and with as little thought for each. With money they had power of a sort. But it was costly. Supplies and materials were hauled in from Larribee, and Mexican laborers for construction. The barn was up once more, and the house was enlarged, rebuilt. A bunkhouse was placed down the bench from the main house, and corrals were mended and built. Johnny marked out an area for alfalfa, and planned a canal from the tanks for irrigation. The Talbee ranch began to look like a working cattle ranch. Johnny had posted a notice in Larribee for riders, but none rode in. They
were still waiting, waiting for a decisive action to take place before choosing sides. Twice men from Beldon rode in, looked the ranch over, ate a silent meal, and rode off once more. They were not hostile, and yet not friendly, either. Bat kept a man posted in the pass, and despite the precaution snipers had appeared twice. Wop Curtis had been killed from ambush, and in a raid on Landsfell's stock to the north, two of Landsfell's riders fell. Of Denver, Johnny heard only once. He was alive. That was all, but he sensed the threat in the words. As if the man who told him was saying to himself: *Wait until Denver gets back on his feet, then we'll see!*

Then the day came when Geeter Vane raced down from his station in the pass, his horse a-lather, to bounce off and run up the steps of the porch. His face was working with excitement, and Johnny felt a sudden sinking inside him.

"It's Landsfell!" Geeter yelled. "He's alone—an' he's ridin' in fast!"

In the days and weeks that had passed, Johnny had had time enough to think out any eventuality, but the coming of Landsfell found him strangely unprepared. He found himself strangely drained of thought, reluctant to meet the gray withered face and rasping voice of Simon Landsfell. And then, for the first time in weeks, he thought of Jube, of the brave range horse he had loved, dying out there in the white waste of desert. Funny thing, he thought, that he would remember a horse and not the men Landsfell had slain; but it was the way his mind worked, and he accepted it and the thin edge of expectant anger that began to grow inside him.

He watched Landsfell ride in. The rancher rode ungracefully, his slight body awkward in the saddle. He paused several times to look at the new construction, then as if unable to put it off any longer, spurred the
animal up the slope to the ranch yard. He reined in, sat the saddle. Gray eyes and gray face. Calm, mask-like. Old gray leather scraped almost to translucency, then finely worked with an etching knife. There was no rifle in the saddle boot, and no gunbelt about his slender waist. He sat there and waited. Johnny heard the door open behind as Victoria came out. Bat stirred, and his boot heel scraped loudly, making his spurs jangle as he put one foot up on the low porch railing. He spat noisily.

"Here's the best chance you'll ever have of ending this squabble," he said tersely. "Put a bullet in Landsfell's head and it's done, once an' for all. If you're too squeamish, let me do it."

Johnny watched Landsfell's face. It didn't change. He looked at Bat, then looked away. "That's why you're alive, Sundance," he said, his voice a keening rasp deep in his scrawny throat. "Because you had the guts to take a man like Sanderson to work for you. That's why you've won. Three men of the S-Bar-L are dead, four others are wounded. Others have quit. Fredis balks at doing anything I ask, and Sheen won't leave Beldon. That's what you've done. I won't say I'm beaten, because I'm not. I could win—despite the guns backing you up. I could win—but it would cost too much. My power is beginning to weaken—that might destroy it. I ride down the streets of Beldon and men hate me with their eyes; if I go too far—they'll start to fight. You've shown them the way. That's why I say you've won."

Bat had his gun in his hand, the muzzle pointed down. His face was striking with the bold features, arrogant, purposeful. "We could bury him alongside Wop and the others, Johnny," he said. He meant it. Dispassionate hate rang in his voice.

Landsfell's face moved. What expression it meant, Johnny couldn't tell. But his slash of a mouth was
curved up at the corners. “Think about what Bat says, Sundance,” he said. “Think about what that would mean. It would end me, that’s sure. But you’d find yourself caught worse than ever. There’d be a fight for power in the mountains that would go on for years. You might come out top dog, but I don’t think so. Because Bat would sell you out, sooner or later.”

Bat brought his gun up level. He was smiling, and the evil of his eyes burned out.

“Stop it, Bat!” Victoria moved swiftly, caught the outlaw’s arm, dragged it down. He made no resistance, but his eyes met Johnny’s.

“All right, Landsfell,” Johnny said, at last. “You didn’t come here to tell us what we done to you.”

Landsfell watched Victoria. His smile—if it was that—broadened. “I’ll buy the tanks—at your price. It will be high, I guess. That’s all right. You can pay off Bat. What he does then I don’t care. Bat has guts but no brains. He needed you but doesn’t know it yet. Mrs. Talbee can have a week to leave. I’ll bring the cash tonight. There it is.”

Johnny felt the sudden loss of incentive strike at him again. Victoria was close behind him. Her face was anxious. Bat was smiling, not without humor. “What was the best offer John Talbee ever had for this land?”

The woman hesitated. As if she didn’t dare to hope that the end was so near, as if she didn’t believe what she was hearing. “Twenty thousand dollars,” she answered, slowly. “Mr. Landsfell offered that eight years ago.”

Johnny looked again at Landsfell. “The price is forty thousand,” he said. “Then we’ll get out.” He was thinking, with that much money she can have a new life. But—would it be without Johnny to share it? The old plaguing doubts were strong upon him.

Landsfell nodded, quickly. “That’s a deal!” he de-
clared, flatly. "I'll be back with the money tonight. I'll come alone."

He wheeled his horse, dug in the spurs, and was gone. Johnny stood still. He felt empty inside. Bat was grinning. He spun his gun in his hand, holstered it.

"That's one way to end a war," he intoned, solemnly. "Be damned if I blame you any."

Victoria's hand was on Johnny's arm, and he felt the pressure of her grip, sudden, compelling. Her face had come alive, was vibrant. "Oh, Johnny!" she cried.

No doubt was in her mind. It was over. Johnny could read that, the terrible relief that flooded her. He saw Bat's grinning face. The outlaw shrugged.

"Me—you ain't got to worry none. The three months ain't up yet. With a start like that—well you go a hell of a long ways. Me an' Hame an' the boys—well I guess we've had our fun, too. I'll give you three days start, then I'll pay my last respects to Mister Landsfell afore I blow the dust of this country from my hide." His heavy face worked.

For Johnny, it was not that easy to accept the fact that it was all over. The responsibility had been his too long. He kept thinking about the canal he wanted to dig, of the riders he hoped to find. He kept thinking of the sheep he'd planned to stock the ranch with. He looked back out across the white desert to the distant blue mountains to the East. Then he rubbed at his jaw.

They celebrated with dinner that night, the best their stock of supplies could provide. But Johnny could not enter into the spirit of the thing. The outlaws ate with a hearty goodwill, and spoke loudly, and with circumspection because of the woman and boy. For Bat it meant the end of his promise, and unfettered freedom, and he planned to make the most of it. Victoria was as Johnny had never known her, with a vibrant buoyancy that made her walk as though she were dancing. Her
eyes were alive, and seldom left Johnny’s face. To her mind there was no doubt they would share the victory, and that bothered Johnny too. The meal over, they sat on the porch and talked, and Johnny found nothing to say. Then Bat and his men drifted back. Geeter would be back in the pass, just the same, Johnny thought. Taking no chances of a trick, or a trap.

Then Geeter fired a rifle shot from the pass, and the sound rolled down flatly. One man, coming alone. Then, later, the sound of a buckboard, the clip-clop of a team on the hard earth road. The vehicle moved up the slope, into the yard, and Johnny got to his feet.

“Wait here,” he said. The odd sense of loss was strong upon him. He felt it as a weakness in the back of his legs, and the tiny tic in his right temple began, slowly. There was no reason for it, and yet it accelerated as he moved down the porch, into the yard. He walked slowly, met the buckboard some distance down from the house. He saw the two horses, breathing hard after the climb over the pass. He could hear the whirring of the metal-bound tires. Then he made out the figure of a lone man. He stopped, waited.

A half minute passed. The team came close. Johnny stiffened. He saw the man in the buckboard rein in, then lean down towards him. Something about the movement of the figure sent an electric shock through him. Then Denver’s drawling voice whispered out at him from the darkness.

“Hello, sucker!” Instantly a burst of orange-yellow flame blasted out in a deafening report, and Johnny felt a sledge hammer tear into his chest, spinning him around. His own voice rang out, even as the rapid roar of shots came from above.

“Look out, it’s a trap!”

He bent to the left, and his gun was in his hand. He
saw Denver's smiling face above him in the buckboard, tried to bring his gun up. Then Denver's gun tore a red jagged hole in the darkness, and the sledge hammer slammed against Johnny's head; driving him back and down, blackness in a solid wave closed in over him. . . .
CHAPTER NINE

Cash-Out

It seemed as though for one unbelievable moment the whole world held still, as though his consciousness were stopped on the edge of interstellar blackness, as though the very blood froze in his veins. Then Johnny struck the earth, and the pain of his fall sent reason back into his mind. Red and black lightning flashed crazily in his head, and he felt the strange grasping of some indefinable terror, then he drove it back and rolled in the dirt. He caught a glimpse of Denver, leaning forward in the buckboard. Denver's gun barked again and again, and Johnny rolled desperately. Then rifles roared and the team lurched, catapulting Denver backward into the body of the wagon. With a screech of steel-tired wheels, the buckboard went past Johnny, missing him narrowly.

Johnny knew he was hit badly. Stifling a groan, he tried to get to his feet. Then soft, strong arms were about him, and Johnny saw Victoria, kneeling in the dirt, her face shadowed by night. Something warm and salty splashed on his dirt-cracked lips, and he knew she was crying. She was right, Johnny thought, now she's crying for me. The thought made him sit up, groaning with the effort.

"High," he said. "It hit high. I'm not done for. Get back to the house."

"Be still!" she answered, holding him fiercely. "oh, Johnny, why did I let you go on with this?"

"You couldn't stop me. Nobody could." His right
hand probed at his chest. Denver's shot had caught him just below the collar bone on the left side. He got his kerchief from his hip pocket, thrust it into his shirt. Something hot ran down his face, into his eyes. He put his hand there, felt wetness, then a groove along the right side of his head. A quarter of an inch lower—he drove the thought away angrily, and ran his finger into the cut ignoring the agony of it. The bone was scraped deeply, but not broken through.

"I should have expected it," he groaned. "I'm dumb! I'm so goddamn dumb it's pitiful. I should have known."

Boots thudded down the hill toward them. Bat Sanderson's gaunt figure loomed up against the pattern of stars in the sky. Strangely the pinpoints of light seemed to waver, then enlarge. As though the universe were exploding, crashing down upon him. Johnny tried to move, to dodge that terrible onslaught of the stars, but his arms and legs were moving through heavy clinging mud, and the odd warmth of it made him drowsy. His eyes closed, blotting out the stars. . . .

A moment later, it seemed to Johnny, his eyes opened. He was in a bed, and it was broad daylight. For a moment shock rooted him to the spot. A sudden sharp pain in his head made him close his eyes, and his questing hand found a bandage around his head. Beneath it was the hardness of a scab; that meant hours at least had passed since Denver's unexpected attack. Johnny sagged back against pillows, opened his eyes again. The wound in his chest made his body stiff and sore; but by the fact he could move his left shoulder at all he knew the bullet had broken no bones.

A door opened, and he saw then he was in the shack, and the curtain across the far end was open, letting him see the door. Victoria Talbee came in, carrying a pail of water in one hand. She paused as she caught his eyes
on her face, and a quick smile broke the sadness of her expression. She was beside him in an instant.

"You’re awake—oh, Johnny, I was afraid—"

"How long?" he asked. "What happened?"

It came out slowly. He had been there for a day and a night. Denver’s crew had not made it through the pass, after all. Geeter Vane had driven them back, dropped two horses. Denver had gotten away. The ranch was in a state of siege, and Landsfell’s men had worked along the bench twice the day before, to empty rifles through the roof of the shack. Fortunately none of the men had been hit.

"They’ve been gone for hours, now," she said, finally. "But Landsfell won’t give up; we know that now. Johnny, it’s time to quit."

He closed his eyes then. Sleep fell upon him like a cloak. When he awakened once more, it was night, and the yellow glow of lanterns filled the room. His head was clear, and he felt stronger. Testing his shoulder, he realized he could, with an effort, sit up. He did so, stifling a groan. Bat and Hame Mitchell sat at the table in the middle of the room; they were haggard of expression, sullen of eye. Victoria was holding David in her lap, the boy asleep. She rocked slowly back and forth, the squeak of the rocking chair the only sound in the room.

"Howdy, Bat," Johnny called. His voice was strong. The outlaw started, then grinned. "Howdy yourself," he answered. "Damn, I thought we was goin’ to be buryin’ you to keep Wop company."

"Not this time, Bat," Johnny replied, slowly. "Bat—tell me: how long you think we can keep this up?"

The outlaw lost his grin, glanced swiftly at Hame, as though there was a secret between the two of them that the words reminded him of. "Not long," he said, finally. "It figgers that sooner or later Denver’s goin’ to start
droppin’ us. We lost Wop, an’ Geeter’s got a slug in his arm. I don’t know how many men Landsfell’s got—but they’s only five of us, now. An’ Johnny—you ain’t got a hell of a lot of time left.”

Johnny felt Victoria’s eyes upon him, sudden anguish in her look. He forced himself up. He was dressed except for his boots which stood beside the bed. He swung his legs out, forced them to hold him. For a moment he swayed, then he felt his strength coming back. There was a dizziness in his head and a fierce pounding where the bullet had torn the skull; but the tic in his right temple was gone, lost in the greater shock of the striking pellet of lead.

“That’s what I was thinkin’, Bat,” he answered. “We can’t play this game like this any longer. But we’ve done pretty good; we’ve got a fatter stake than we sat down with. Now it’s time to cash Landsfell out of the game for keeps.”

“Cash him out?” Hame Mitchell’s evil face worked, and suddenly he guffawed. “Hell, that bullet must let some o’ your sense drip out.”

Victoria was erect, staring. Only Bat seemed to take his words without shock. His oddly light eyes were dancing like flickering blue flames.

“Bat—how many head will that buyer in Larribee take without askin’ too many questions?”

Bat shrugged. “All he can get; he’s payin’ ten dollars below market for ’em.”

“How about Landsfell—what’s his next move?” Johnny barked the words.

Again Bat shrugged. “Anybody’s guess. But Denver will be raisin’ hell to ride in an’ clean us out. I don’t think Landsfell will go for that. He’d rather see if he can’t drop one or two more before he tries it. Maybe try to trap us if we try to take any more cattle. Right now,
I figger, he’s doin’ some thinkin’—but he ain’t goin’ to take long.”

“We don’t need long,” Johnny answered, quickly. “We’re ridin’ in an hour. Get Geeter in here, first.”

Victoria carried the baby over to a crude crib, laid him down, tucked blankets close around him. Johnny bent, to try to pull his boots on, nearly fell headfirst to the floor. Suddenly she was there, helping him.

“Johnny—you can’t ride like this. Wait. A few days—”

“A few days will be too late,” he answered, grimly. “We’ve got to hurt Landsfell—and hurt him bad! It’s got to be done now—tonight.”

Bat stood up. “Hame—get Geeter in here. Tell Dusty to get the horses ready.”

“And tell him to get that keg of coal oil strapped on a spare horse,” Johnny said, quickly. He saw Bat’s eyes widen. Then the outlaw nodded. Hame Mitchell went out shaking his heavy head.

Johnny stamped his boots on, swayed uncertainly for a moment, gathered his strength again. His left arm was useless. He got his gun belt. “Bat—help me strap this on.”

The gun belt was strapped on, and Johnny felt better. He got a drink of water, downed it in choking gulps. The coldness of it struck at him, strengthened him. Then Geeter came in, one arm in a sling.

“Geeter—we’re ridin’ out. I don’t know how long we’ll be gone—maybe a week, ten days. You’re stayin’ here with Mrs. Talbee an’ the kid. Keep the buckboard ready. If Landsfell comes in—get out fast. Head for Larribee, an’ keep goin’. We’ll come after you. Understand?”

Geeter Vane nodded, jerkily. He looked at Bat. The outlaw leader nodded, and Vane shrugged. “Shore,” he answered.

“Now wait outside, both of you.” Johnny was watch-
ing Victoria. The woman stood very still, only the rise and fall of her breasts gave her away. The door closed and they were alone.

"Don't do this, Johnny," she said, finally. "There's some money left—enough to get by on. We can leave. We can take the train at Larribee."

He didn't answer. She stiffened, her mouth thinned. "Johnny, a woman doesn't have much say so out here. I've known that all my life. At first I took it and let it go as the way things were. Now it's different. I'm not a frightened girl. I'm a woman, and I know my mind. I've told you what I feel for you—but you're killing it inside me. You're trying to help by fighting Landsfell—but it's gone beyond that now. Now you want to pay him back. If you go on with what you're planning tonight—it's too late for us. Because I'll know it was useless, and you wouldn't hear me, understand me."

Her words struck him. Her voice was deep-toned, husky. Her dark eyes were bright, shining. But there was no weakness left inside her. She was all tempered steel. The ringing tone of her was in her voice. Johnny felt that, and somehow she seemed a stranger to him in that moment when he should have known her best. For a moment he held still, then turned away to get his hat.

"I told you once you can't end a thing by running from it. Maybe you see it one way, an' I see it another." He thought of the story of the Mormon and the wolf. He thought of Denver's twisted grin as he fired at him. He shook his head. "It's got to end—and it's goin' to end tonight!"

He expected her to relent, to call out to him as he moved toward the door, but she remained still and silent. And Johnny felt that it marked an end to something that he had never really possessed anyway. A loss of something he had never owned. Then the cold night air was in his face, and he saw the three men waiting for
him, and knew it was too late to change anything. He closed the door behind him. The click of the lock held a sad finality in the sound of it.

There had been many times in Johnny Sundance's life when he thought that he had reached the end of his endurance. But a man's strength is a funny thing. Johnny knew that, and it was in his mind during the long hours of the ride through the mountains. The wound in his chest should put him down for weeks; but once moving, the pain of it, the weakness he had expected, did not develop. The night was clear and cold; behind them, below now as they reached the pass, were the lights of Talbee's Tanks. Then they reached the pass, the rocky walls closed in, and the lights were gone. The unease that had bothered Johnny for days was gone now, and his head seemed clearer than ever. As though he left behind him a weight; and the thought struck hard. Was he doing what he had always striven so hard against, running away? He felt that, and yet something more than that. Wherever a man might stop, no matter for how brief a while, he left a part of his life behind him when he rode on Johnny felt like that now. He would return, he felt sure, and Victoria Talbee would be there, and maybe they would go along as they had before—but something had ended between them with the closing of the shack door behind him.

Twice he fell asleep in the saddle, to awaken each time with a start, feeling a growing stiffness through his left side. Gingerly, he worked his left arm, fighting against groaning by clenching his lower lip between his teeth. It helped, and some of the soreness left his side. His hand was numbed, and there was a pressure against his skull like a piece of hard ice pressed tightly over his right eye. There would be a scar over his right eye, fading back into his scalp; for that he would never forget Denver. He thought of the gunman, of the murderous
daring of the man in driving straight into the desert ranch to reach him. There was an elemental fierceness in Denver that frightened Johnny, made him feel somehow inadequate. He tried to fight the feeling down, but it persisted.

They rode steadily, but without haste. Once through the mountains they quickened the gait. Dusty Miller climbed down to cut the barbed wire fence to one side, and they filed through one at a time. By chance more than design they avoided Landsfell’s guards, and then the lights of the Landsfell ranch were below them. Bat reined it, turned in the saddle to stare quizzically at Johnny.

Johnny closed his eyes. There was a dull hammering in his wounded head, and his chest ached with each breath he drew. But he pieced a map together in his head, and tried to see it clearly. He opened his eyes.

“This has to end it,” he said. “We have to be sure. But we have to be fast, because he’ll have riders out who’ll come in as soon as they hear shootin’. Bat, you an’ Hame sit here. Spread out a little. Get your rifles ready, and move in as close as you can. There’s a point of rocks about a quarter of a mile closer—but there’ll be a guard there. Get him if you can, and get in the rocks. You’ll know what to do.”

Hame grunted, then Bat said: “Maybe one of us better handle it, Johnny—you’re hurt bad.”

Johnny shook his head. “Dusty—think you can lug that keg of coal oil?”

Miller was a short, squat man of tremendous girth. He grinned through a two-inch black beard. “Hell, I can pack that an’ you too, Sundance.”

“Then let’s get goin’!”

On foot they moved down from the rocky bench where they’d left the horses. For the first few minutes Johnny was light-headed, and his body ached with every
step; then strained muscles loosened, and his head cleared once more. The night was chill but clear. Behind him loomed the ghostly white-capped mountains, and before him lay the broad valley of the S-Bar-L, the spattering of lights blinking like yellow stars lost in mud.

They reached the grove of trees beside the main ranch house, and paused. From the cook shack came the banging of pans, and the humid aroma of hot coffee. In an hour first call for chow would be run on the triangle outside the mess shack. At Johnny's whispered direction, Dusty opened the valve on the keg he lugged under one massive arm. The stench of kerosene filled the air. High into a tree they poured it, then over brush, and close up against the house. Walking swiftly, they rounded the house. In that same instant a match flared directly in front of them, and a startled guard's face shone out.

"Who the hell's that?" he yelled, tugging at his gun.

Johnny bent away, and his Colt's revolver came up. He fired low, spilled the guard to the ground. The wooden keg crashed to the ground, and Dusty backed away.

"Run for it!" Johnny yelled.

He struck a match, tossed it towards the wetness on the ground, but it went out. A man was yelling, and a window slammed up. Then a gun roared. Johnny ducked instinctively, then struck a second match. The gun banged again—then the match hit the kerosene, and a dull yellow glow burst suddenly up, reddening, growing like a mushroom of flame. Johnny broke backwards. Each step seemed to tear his side, and he felt blood starting to well from his chest again. But he ran for the trees. Beside him the kerosene trail blazed up. Men were shouting, firing uselessly into the darkness, into the flames. Then the tree caught, went up. It was aflame, and yellow-red light spilled out for two hundred yards. Into the trees Johnny ran, panting and gasping for breath. He heard the stri-
dent screeching of Landsfell behind him: "Water—for Christ's sake get water!"

Johnny spun around. He dropped to one knee. Smoke rolled into his face, then cleared, and through the trees he saw the brightly lighted side of the house. Landsfell was there, naked to the waist. His seamed face was twisted out of all recognition. Johnny levelled his revolver—and as he thumbed the hammer of his gun, smoke closed in before him. He didn't wait, but ran on. The woods were dancing into red, crazy life, the flames leaping from top to top as fast as the wind that sang through them. Then he was in the open, running, and saw bright pinpoints of red from ahead as Bat and his men emptied their guns toward the ranch. Shots were a clogging, numbing roar in his head. He gained the rocks, scrambled up. Someone thrust a rifle into his hands, but for a minute he could only gasp for breath. Then his lungs eased their burning and he stared down at what he had wrought.

Like the molten hell of the new-risen sun, the ranch burned. Black dots ran across the mad scene, and Bat's men chopped them down with staccato bursts of fire. A horse ran blindly towards the fire, then reared, wheeled back. A shot dropped it. Johnny brought his rifle up. He emptied toward the ranch, without aim, reloaded it. The house was on fire now, the whole roof a mass of flames that shot up a hundred feet into the sky. The men were scattered, pressed into the ground against the gunfire from the rocks above them. Johnny got to his feet, almost went down as a wave of weakness hit at him. Then he gathered his strength.

"All right, Bat—let's get out of this!" he yelled.

They fell back toward their horses, firing as they ran. Behind them the holocaust challenged the growing redness of the new-born sun. A tall black column of smoke
was edging up into the sky. A barn had caught, as had the bunkhouse and mess-shack. Flames danced strangely along one line of a wooden fence.

They rode north, along the mountain range. They rode fast. They saw one S-Bar-L rider who spurred away from them, clinging low to the neck of his horse. Hame emptied his rifle at him, laughed scornfully.

"By God, this was worth the ride!" he yelled, fiercely. "Better'n the Fourth o' July in Phoenix!"

They found the main body of the Landsfell herd in a valley in to north, and rode down in a solid phalanx. At the point Johnny rode hard. The wind helped to keep his head clear, and he felt a strange singing in his body. Like the humming of wire stretched too taut, almost to the breaking point. Then three S-Bar-L riders came out to meet them. Johnny returned their fire—he heard Bat’s yells, and guns blazed. One of the three went down, the other two fled.

It was madness the raid they made that night, but men under the impress of excitement, with blood lust in their heads, do mad things. Three thousand head of cattle lay in the valley, and four riders started them through the mountains toward the northern pass to the desert land beyond. Dusty Miller used an old Mexican cattle rustling trick to start the herd on the move by tying a mesquite to his lariat and setting it ablaze. Riding into the herd with the blazing torch behind him scattered them, made them run. Then Johnny and the others rode at them, firing their guns, waving their hats, yelling until hoarseness clogged their throats like sand. But the herd moved, gained momentum, like a living tidal wave, sweeping down the canyon depths. Fright gave way to panic, and the lowing cattle bellowed and roared, and the thunder of their hoofs shook the earth. Into the dawn they moved, and the swelling column of dust matched the black smoke to the south.
Of that ride, Johnny would remember little. Dust clogging his nostrils, and heat burning down, and constant, terrible pain in his head and chest, but on and on he drove himself, and the stampede of the cattle, once started, could not be stopped. How soon they would run themselves out, how many head would be lost and trampled, he could not guess. It was sheer ruin to drive a cattle herd like that, but a rustler can operate no other way. And Johnny was rustling on a scale never dreamed by the wet-backs of the border land far to the south. The mountain clung close, and they worked their way down through the chasms where the sun never burned away the shadows, and wetness trickled over slime-green rock. Then the mountains were behind them, and the white gleaming of the desert lay below. The herd had stopped the mad careening, and moved forward at a steady pace. Twice Johnny was aware of stopping for a meal; and darkness sent cold against them, but they kept the herd moving, and there was no pursuit.

For Johnny it was like a dream, sometimes startling clear, details standing out like objects on open range after a heavy rain that has cleared the air, left it sparkling clean; at other times it was distorted, fuzzed, like something seen beneath moving water, and during those moments time seemed to be accelerated, for hours passed without Johnny having any awareness of them. He slept in the saddle, and once or twice on the hard ground, and his head seemed to be a cabbage-like thing atop his shoulders, unthinking, absorbing sounds and colors, unable to interpret them. Then the shock of his wounds, of the strain upon his strength, began to fade, and Johnny found a new awareness filling him. Twice he caught himself jabbering madness into the air, with Bat and Hame and Dusty staring at him out of narrowed eyes. The second time it jolted him back to normal realization. It was as if a film had been withdrawn from
before his eyes, and he could see clearly. With something of a shock he realized they had edged around the white desert, and that ahead the sun shone from the twin steel stripes of the railroad edging off into the blue mountains beyond. In the distance the squat outline of buildings loomed, Larribee! For three days, then, he had been out of his head, driving on. He saw Bat and the others, and they were more like scarecrows than men. Bearded, dirty, eyes red blots in the whiskery mass of their faces, they grinned at him, and there was something unhealthy in the grin. Bat looked quickly at Hame, and Mitchell spat to one side.

"Feelin' better, boss?" he drawled.

It was like the bite of a hot iron into his head. Johnny felt the pressure of their eyes, and realized what his madness had almost cost him. The cattle—how much money would they bring? His eyes narrowed, and he swung his horse to one side. Without caution, he drew his gun, checked it. His hunch was right. The gun was unloaded, his belt empty of shells! A cold freeze went into his belly, then he plunged his hand into his saddle-bag, came up with a box of ammunition. He ripped it open, dropped shells into the chambers of his gun, snapped it closed. He saw Bat watching him, but the outlaw made no overt move; they were too close to the town. Then the outlaw wheeled his horse over.

"You was out of your head," he said. His hawklike face was bland, emotionless.

"Reckon I was," Johnny answered, coldly. "I'm not now. Thanks, Bat."

"Por nada," Bat returned. He grinned, suddenly. "You had us scared for a while there, talkin' out of your head. Like you was seein' dead men paradin' in front of you."

Dead men in front of him, the old, old dream that plagued him. A shudder rippled down Johnny's spine.
He holstered his gun, loaded his belt, threw the empty box to one side. "I'm all right now, Bat," he said.

"Yeah." Bat's eyes were gray pools of speculation and hate. Then he shrugged. "We'll be in Larribee in an hour. Want I should ride ahead an' start hagglin' with Hardy?"

Hardy was the cattle buyer they had met in Larribee before. Johnny nodded. He looked over the herd. It was thinned, the cattle gaunt from much running. "Do the best you can," he said. "We'll bring them in."

Johnny fought hard to keep the dream-like state from engulfing him, and in the main succeeded. There were times when things slipped past him, but his mind was clear, and he kept his hand on his gun. Then long before they reached the first of the loading pens, riders came out from town, Hardy's men. They took charge of the herd. Into Johnny's hand money was counted, and the count made little sense to him. But he thrust the thick wad of bills into his pocket, rode straight through the town to the bank. He dismounted, staggered as he entered the building. A teller stared at him as he pulled the money from the pocket of his ragged Levi's.

"Give me a receipt for this," Johnny mumbled. Sleep was a steady pressure on his eyes. "I'll get it tomorrow. I want to leave it here tonight." Then grasping the paper the clerk thrust at him, he staggered out, and across to a hotel. He got a room, locked the door, pulled down the blinds, and ignoring the sweating heat of the oven-like frame building, dropped instantly into deep sleep.

Eighteen hours later a banging on his door awakened him. He felt as though he were swimming up from the depths of some great, still pool of water. Then his eyes opened, and he groaned. He still lay in the position he had fallen into across the bed. But his head was clear, and his chest no longer ached. The pounding came again at the door, and he groaned a reply.
“Hey, you dead in there?” It was Hame Mitchell’s booming voice.

“I’m awake,” Johnny called out at last. “Be out in twenty minutes.”

He got up. His body ached and pained with stiffness, but functioned properly. He pulled off his shirt, found a pitcher of water and dumped it over his head into the tin washbowl atop the dresser. He washed with care, then stared at himself in the mirror. He was gaunt, bone-thin, his ribs standing out like stakes. The wound in his head was closed, and the bandage was lost. It seemed clean, and his probing finger felt no swelling. He removed the bandages about his body. The flesh about his chest wound was puckered and inflamed, the skin around the jagged little hole blue. But the blood seepage had ceased. He found a rusty razor in one drawer, used it and bar soap to shave, and despite the burning of his skin, felt better. He grinned at himself wryly. Then he thought of the money, and found the slip the bank teller had given him. Forty thousand dollars! His pursed lips whistled silently.

His eyes caught a fly-specked calendar tacked to the door. For a moment a thought pressed in upon him, an urgent demand for attention. He tried to catch it, but it slipped away. He shrugged, feeling a growing satisfaction inside him. There would be money, now, and the word would go out that Victoria Talbee had struck back ruthlessly against Landsfell, and there would be others to follow her example. His guess proved true before he left the hotel, for three men approached him and inquired about work at the Talbee ranch. He caught Bat’s appreciative grin, and grinned back. He told the men to ride out, that there would be work at premium pay for any riders who showed up. He felt it was different this time, that men would show up. And he felt the differ-
ence it made; no longer would they need Bat and his men.

Johnny saw a doctor, had his body wound bandaged before he left Larribee. He had the money in a belt about his waist, and rode warily beside Bat, the others ahead of them. Bat caught his thought, made no protest. Once again something tugged at Johnny’s mind, tried to gain his attention, then slipped away once more.

Jubilance filled him as they rode out of Larribee that afternoon. He felt rested, his strength returning. A dozen men had approached him, and he had spoken to them all. There was a growing pattern in his mind, and triumph seemed close then. There would be riders behind them, following them to the Talbee spread. Men to work the herd, to fight Landsfell with a will. The power of the man would fail him, now. Of that Johnny felt sure.

They rode easily, and Johnny watched the men with care, but it was evident that Bat had missed his chance and was determined to make the best of it. Johnny relaxed then. His strength flowed back. The heat of the sun was welcome, and he felt the tingling itching along the wound in his scalp which betokened healing. Only one doubt remained in his mind, and that was Denver, for the gunman would not stop at the defeat of Landsfell. But his luck had been good, Johnny reflected, and he had no doubt that was real. Only that same plaguing question tried to assert itself, then fled as his mind grasped for it.

The desert was crossed, the mountains loomed close. They followed the road from Larribee that edged the red-bottomed mountains. At points where the mountains thrust a shoulder out into the white desert, the road climbed, wound in and around the towering pinnacles of red rock. And it was on one of the blind curves that Denver met them. He was alone, and saw them
first, and thrusting his hand over his head, spurred close. His darkly handsome face was grinning, and his flat-crowned Stetson was thrust back from his black curls. His red, white and brown calf-hide vest glistened in the sunlight.

Johnny reined in. He saw Denver’s grin. Something cold slid along his spine. And the furtive thought that had escaped him all day loomed up suddenly close. He read it on Denver’s face, in the mockery of his grin.

Then Denver’s tinkling laughter rang out. “You’re late! I expected you this morning. Howdy, Bat—I always had a hunch you were stupid—now I’m sure. I figure that herd of Landsfell’s must have brought you forty-fifty thousand—and here I see Sundance ridin’ along like it was nothin’ at all.”

The outlaw glared at him, said nothing. His face was sharp, arrogant, cruel. “You damned fool!” he hissed. “Do you think we won’t kill you?”

Denver’s laugh rang out. “No, I don’t think so! I don’t think so forty thousand dollars worth, Bat!” He swayed in his saddle, but kept his hands carefully over his head. “I know all about you givin’ your word to Johnny here—but, you damned fool, the three months was up yesterday!”

There it was, there was the warning his mind had striven to pick from the fly-specked calendar in Larri-bee. Johnny tensed in the saddle. He saw the sudden twisting of Bat’s face—then Johnny’s hand dropped to his gun.
A MAN'S word is a strange and sometimes terrible thing. And with Bat Sanderson, as Johnny realized, it was something of a fetish. He had taken advantage of that, knowing that once he had told Sheriff Fredis of Bat's word to him, the outlaw had no means of escape or betrayal that wouldn't conflict with his own code. He had sensed the antagonism behind Bat's arrogant features, the steady contempt and hatred for his self-imposed bondage. And with Denver's words, Johnny marked a change in Bat, a thin-edged smile that warped his lips.

"Landsfell can afford to lose forty thousand dollars, Bat," Denver went on. The bright blue of his eyes danced with sly humor. "That's a lot of money for just sitting still for five minutes. You never had it so easy before. Just sit still."

It was Johnny's death warrant, and he knew it. He saw it in the sudden narrowing of Bat's eyes, the oily grin that tugged across Hame Mitchell's face, the sudden movement of Dusty Miller's body as he straightened in the saddle. They would sit there and let Denver kill him—a sudden laugh welled in Johnny's throat. He saw them staring at him—then he slipped to the left, and his gun was in his hand.

It was unexpected; he had caught them off-guard in what would, perhaps, be his last moment of life. He saw Denver's hand move, so swiftly his arm seemed to blur. Bat was cursing, tugging at his gun. Johnny's first
shot spilled him from his saddle. In the center of that broad forehead, just above the bridge of that hawklike nose, he drove a one ounce pellet of lead.

Hame Mitchell's shot was an instant behind Denver's. Johnny's horse reared as he drove his spurs in. He felt the slugs rip into the animal's breast, then a sickening backward motion as the horse fell. His gun blasted again, and he saw Hame jerk back, grasp at his belly. Johnny tried to see Denver, to get in one shot—but it was too late. Dusty's gun roared in cadence with Denver's, and Johnny's horse teetered backwards, fell—Johnny freed his feet from the stirrups, leapt backwards—he saw the side of the road, realized the injured animal had reached the edge. Below him lay a hundred foot drop, a steeply sloping jumble of talus and slide-rock. His arms akimbo, he fell into the void, the horse falling behind him. For one breathtaking instant Johnny fell freely; he forced his body to relax, caught a deep breath—then he struck. He felt the wind jarred from his lungs, and the sudden spurt of blood from his nose. A boulder caught him long enough for him to see the horse strike, legs flying madly, then the dying beast lurched back upon him. Its shoulder struck, spun him away, and he fell heavily. Dust welled up as the horse plunged down and down the long slope, a growing slide of rock hurtling past Johnny to follow it. He lay wedged between two halves of a splintered rock, invisible from the roadway. He could not move, but his senses did not leave him.

A jarring, thudding rumble beneath him; he felt the quivering of the slope like the shaking of a mud slough. The whole slope was moving down in the wake of his horse. The beast would be buried beneath tons of rock and dirt. Johnny felt the rock beneath him stir, move, then hold; he was out of the slide-path by a matter of feet. Even so rubble smashed into him, burying his legs.

For long minutes the thundering roar kept up, and
once he thought he heard a man’s yells. Slowly the slide diminished. Dust was thick, filling the entire canyon from wall to wall. Then Dusty Miller’s voice screamed out: “Look out, the whole goddamn mountain’s goin’!”

The lower half of the rock in which Johnny was wedged broke apart. He felt the sudden swelling of the earth beneath him, lifting him up. He tried to get to his feet but could not. Then a boulder struck his chest, just over his wound, and the shock of it brought a cry to his lips. He fell, and the dust seemed to thicken, to close in chokingly upon him. . . .

Pain brought him to. An agonizing ache over his heart that was echoed by a soreness that seemed to cover his entire body. He groaned, opened his eyes. For a moment he could not think, then remembrance swelled in his mind. Bat—a bullet between his eyes, sagging from the saddle, Hame Mitchell clutching his belly; and Denver’s triumphant face—Johnny groaned, forced himself to sit up. His eyes met a nightmare scene. The summer rains had weakened the canyon road, and the weight of his falling horse had precipitated the slide which had carried a quarter-mile section of the road down into the canyon depths. Johnny’s fall had apparently ended with the tag-end of the slide. His clothing was ripped, his chest naked, and blood welling down. The wound in his chest had reopened. Then his hands clutched at his waist, came away empty. The money belt was gone. Denver had come down the ruined slope to find him, had left him for dead after taking the money.

High overhead a vulture wheeled in narrowing circles. The slide area was a raw slash in the red-brown canyon. The road above was empty. Johnny got to his feet. He staggered like a drunken man, but kept going. Then the toe of his boot struck something and he stared down. Half-buried in the dirt and rock lay a gun. He bent, retrieved it, and even the familiar feel of it did not sur-
prise him. It was his own gun, knocked from his hand by his fall, and hurled far enough away not to be buried in the sliding dirt. He paused there, a nightmare figure, blood mingling with dirt on his naked chest, his shirt ripped open by ruthless, questing hands. He checked the gun, sheathed it, grimly, then moved warily up the rock slope. Little slides started under feet, but he moved too fast to let them gain the momentum that might pitch him clear to the bottom of the canyon. He gained the road, dropped to the ground, breathing hard.

Full realization of what had happened struck at him. So close, so close to final victory—and then to have it snatched from his hand. There would be no second chance. . . . Then he sat up, his eyes suddenly wild.

“Victoria!” the cry was torn from his lips. She would be alone, now. If it wasn’t already too late—

He got to his feet, began to run. The run slowed to a shambling trot, then to a walk, but he kept going. The sun moved up higher into the sky, burning down on his naked head, but he did not pause. The bleeding of his chest wound stopped, and the steady movement eased the torture of his muscles. The road dipped sharply down toward the desert. The white of it flashed suddenly into his face, but it wasn’t that which made him stop. He stiffened, and a cry was torn from his lips.

He stood in sight of the Tanks. A yellow-grey tower of smoke stood erect into the windless sky. And a jagged hole was rent in the wall of the tank; he saw the green bottom, now browning in the sun, and the path of the water where it spurted out into the desert to waste. The shack, the corrals, the barns, were gone; the ranch was destroyed, finally, and for all time. The tanks were gone, the walls blasted, the precious water hurtling out into the desert to be swallowed at a single thirsty gulp.

It was over. The thought tore at him. The agony of his mind matched that of his body, and he could not
move against the strange paralysis that held him. And yet, despite the dread that filled him, he must go on, he must be sure. . . .

The smoke column thickened as he walked steadily on. He passed the black-charred skeleton of what had been corrals. He saw the inert, smoking bodies of horses, of cattle. Merciless slaughter lay about him, sickened him. The stench of burning hair and hide. He moved on, came into the ranch yard, stopped.

The shack was gone, burned into shapeless ruins; the bursting water had poured down in the wake of the fire, and the path of its rage was marked by mud and debris. It fouled his boots, made him slide and slip, but he kept on. Then he stopped again. The buckboard stood unharmed in the center of what had been the ranch yard, a horse standing in the harness, head drooping. The wooden porch of the shack stood strangely untouched, with only chaotic black ruin backing it, and on the steps he saw a figure. For a moment his eyes blurred, then he saw clearly, moved on, his heart pounding incredibly hard in his breast. A woman, huddled there on the steps, head bent, something in her lap—

Horror struck at Johnny. The woman looked up. It was Victoria, her eyes dry, filled with agony. She saw him, and yet no expression crossed her face. In her lap lay little David, strangely motionless, strangely still—Johnny saw the red that seeped down the woman's skirt, into the dust and ash of the yard.

Her voice came, oddly inflectionless. It was deep, calm, the singing tones of it tearing at Johnny. "I asked you not to go on," she said. "I told you what would happen." She stood up, fell back a step, braced herself against one of the remaining uprights of the porch. "Davey's dead," she whispered. "Denver shot him—He ran at Denver, screaming—and Denver shot him. They told me to get off the ranch—"
The woman started to fall, and Johnny ran forward. He caught the boy, held her weight against him, eased her down. He stared at her, his lips moving, but no words came. Then a whimpering cry, and the woman stared, unbeliev, wonder in her eyes. She stared at the baby—Johnny felt the child moving in his arms.

A compelling urgency gripped him, broke the lethargy that held him. He laid the boy down, tore at his clothing. The bullet had struck his side, smashed clear through. The chances were against it, but the shock was ending now, and the boy had a chance—The woman was staring at him as though he were someone she had never seen before.

"Get in the buckboard!" Johnny's voice was a harsh screech in his ears. He grasped her arm, brought her to her feet. He fumbled, ripped his shirt from his back, bound the narrow body of the boy. Then, lifting the child, he lurched backwards, and the woman followed. She did not speak, and his arms thrust at her, forced her to the seat of the buckboard. Johnny sprang up, still holding the child. Then the horse came alive, and the buckboard moved.

"Where's the nearest doctor?" Johnny thundered out the words. The woman stared at him. Unbelief held her.

"Davey—"

"Doctor! Doctor!" Johnny yelled. Something like sense came back into her face. She nodded, dropped her head into both hands. Suddenly she was crying. "Beldon!" she answered.

Seven hours by road; Johnny cursed, and drove like a mad man. In all that long ride no further words passed between them, but Johnny felt the woman's hate for him burning inside her. Like a living thing, sustaining her, holding her. But there had been no other way, no other choice for him. He tried to reassure himself of that, but failed as a whimpering cry from the child
in his arms sent self-accusation in a blinding wave through him.

Darkness fell upon them, and they kept on. Then in the distance Johnny saw the lights of Beldon. He slowed the horse. Houses were to either side, then the woman grasped his arm, and he saw a house set back from the road. He pulled into the driveway, stopped. He climbed down, and Victoria followed him. He kicked against the door with his foot. Then, impatiently, again and again. Yellow light flared out from the hall as a lamp was lighted, and through the curtained glass of the door he saw a man coming, then the door swung wide, and a man stood there, a sawed-off shotgun cradled in his arms. He stepped back as Johnny thrust forward, then dropped the shotgun against one wall. Without speaking he took the child, hurried back. Johnny caught an impression of gray whiskers, of bright eyes behind half-moon reading glasses; then a woman came out, and the man's voice came clearly.

"Agnes—it's a child—badly hurt—hot water, I'll need it!"

The woman—Johnny saw only her white hair, and soft, gentle features—came up. "In here," she said, and took them into a parlor. Victoria dropped into a chair, as if her legs would no longer support her weight. Johnny moved to the window, stared at nothing. The woman was gone for long minutes, then came back with a tray.

"Coffee—please help yourself." Johnny came over. The woman stared at him, at his gaping shirt, his blood-streaked upper body. "You're hurt—"

Johnny's voice caught at her. "I'm all right!"

Then she was gone. Johnny poured coffee into two cups. He carried one to Victoria. She looked up. Her face was ashen, and her hand trembled. She didn't speak, but the hatred in her eyes was undiminished. "I tried
to stop you—as I tried to stop John,” she whispered. “Killing, killing, killing—there’s nothing else in the world for men like you. Denver fired the shot—but you killed Davey, too!”

Johnny took it as he might take the whip strokes of a strong man, quivering under the force of it, but standing straight. Then he went back to the window, and felt her hating him, staring at him.

Minutes passed, stretched into a half hour, an hour, and silence tore at the room with invisible fingers. Then the doctor came silently up the hall, stood there in the ball-fringed curtains of the archway. He was small, slight of build; his face was lined with wrinkles, yet strength was there, too. Johnny heard Victoria suck in her breath, stand up.

“The boy—” The doctor’s words were slow, halting, and Johnny’s mind froze. “The boy will be all right.” For a moment Johnny couldn’t make meaning of the words. Then he heard Victoria’s cup crash to the floor, saw her fall. Instantly Johnny sprang to her side, but the doctor was there first. He bent close, then looked up. His wife came in quietly.

“Agnes—she’ll be all right. Shock. She’s fainted. You’d better put her to bed. In a day or two she’ll be all right.”

Johnny stared at the small man. “Doc—that’s Mrs. Talbee. I got to tell you. Landsfell’s tried to kill her—it’s Denver’s work. There may be trouble—”

The doctor straightened, slowly. His jaw set into a firm line. “I don’t care who—or what—she is!” he flashed. “I’m a doctor. She needs medical care as does the child—and I’ll see to it they get it.”

“Thanks, Doc.” Johnny straightened. “I’ll be back sometime tonight. I don’t know how soon I can get here. But I’ll be in a hurry when I hit here.”

“Man, you’re injured—you’ve got to rest. You’re heading for collapse.”
"Not yet," Johnny declared, tersely.

"Then let me see to your wound, at least." The doctor pressed him back into a chair. Johnny's eyes closed against his will. He heard the doctor as if at some distance, felt his probing fingers but numbly. Then he spoke again. "You're a lucky man," the doctor said. "Why you're alive I wouldn't know. But you are, and will stay that way if you don't stop more lead. That's all I can do for you except tell you to rest."

Bandages bound his chest, made him feel stiff. He grunted, opened his eyes. His head felt clear, almost rested. He got up. He felt the doctor watching him as he moved out into the hall. He paused at the door. "Take good care of her, Doc—an' tell Mrs. Talbee—"

He stopped. He couldn't find any words. "Tell her I said good-bye."

He closed the door behind him. The night wind chilled his sweat-damp face. The buckboard still stood in the yard, the horse all but spent. Johnny climbed in, and the horse responded to his voice and the crack of the reins. He drove back down the tree-lined lane to the road. Ahead the yellow lights of Beldon blazed brightly. He loosened the gun in its holster, and his lips tightened into a straight, hard line. It was more than rage that held him now. It was a compulsion he could not understand nor stay. He felt a strength in his body that was false, but knew it would last out his purpose. Like the story of the Mormon and the wolf, he had entered the final stages of the hunt, and only death could stop him now.

Why he was certain that Landsfell would be in Beldon and Denver with him, Johnny didn't know. But the S-Bar-L was a charred ruin, even as the Talbee Tanks. And half the town was owned by Landsfell. The long row of red brick buildings that held the bank and stores. He remembered the night he had freed Bat Sanderson from the jail, he remembered the blatant roar of the
bursting dynamite in the streets. What was it that Hame Mitchell had said that night? "Me'n the boys left the rest o' the dynamite back of a chimney on top of Simon Landsfell's nice new buildin'. Kind a wanted to lay a fuse to it but didn't." Memory of the words sang suddenly through Johnny, thrilled him.

Down the empty streets of the town he drove. He passed a rider or two, and they stared at him but rode on. The jangling of a piano sounded from a saloon. A man's hearty laughter thundered out. The smell of a small town, the moistness of trees in a desert land, the warmth of cookery, the smell of human life, strong, pungent. He left the buckboard at the edge of town, walked the rest of the way. Twice he felt his strength draining away from him and paused, only to force himself to move on. He came to the plaza, skirted it to the far side. He saw the new brick buildings. A row of lighted windows across the second floor. He stopped there, watching them. He saw a man's black shadow slide across the lighted rectangle. He nodded, slowly.

He crossed the street, held to the shadow of the building. He found an outside stairway, went up to the landing. To his disappointment the door was locked. He stood there undecided for a moment, trying to think. Then he saw a brick cornice that ran midway around the building, like a belly bulge in red brick. He swung over the low railing of the landing, found purchase for his feet, edged out along the narrow walk. It was little more than a brick's width, and he pressed tight against the building, not daring to suck in even a full breath. But he moved along, sideways, like a scuttling crab, clinging with bruised fingers to jagged edges of brick. He reached a window. It was dark, apparently an office. A door was open into the next room, spilling light across the floor. He saw the pattern in the green rug on the floor, the squat shape of a broad desk.
The window gave to the steady pressure of his hands. He felt it sliding up. It screeched once, and he froze there, his heart pounding furiously. But the light-framed doorway did not darken, and he pushed again. The window rose, a half inch, an inch, then slid up silently. He stopped it from slamming fully open, held on tightly while a wave of dizziness assailed him. Then he stepped into the room, breathing hard. He caught his breath and crouched low as steps echoed up the wooden stairs outside. Then a hand rapped sharply on the locked door.

Johnny saw a man's long shadow edge out into the square of light on the green rug, then a man's bone-thin body stood there. The face was in shadow, but Johnny knew him. Landsfell! His Colt's revolver slid silently into his hand.

"Who's there?" Landsfell's strident voice rasped out. He held motionless in the center of the office.

"Me, goddamn it! Denver." The man rapped again. "Open the door. I don't want to wait out here all night."

Landsfell grunted a curse, moved toward the door. Johnny stood up. He stepped forward. "Don't open the door, Landsfell!" he whispered.

As if he had struck a brick wall, full-face, Landsfell stopped. The stiffness of his body was electric, frozen. He turned, slowly, like a man walking in water. The light moved up his slim body, to his seamed, lined face. It was not human, the fear that was written there. "Sundance!" he rasped.

Instantly a furious tattoo of blows fell upon the door. "Landsfell! What's goin' on in there!"

Johnny held the gun on Landsfell. "I want that forty thousand dollars," he whispered. "Get it!"

Before the terrible blaze of his eyes, Landsfell reeled, half fell back across the desk. A safe stood behind it. He sidled around, staring over his shoulder. Then bony fingers spun the dial, and he cursed, spun the dial again.
Johnny heard Denver’s yells, and answering cries from the street. Then a boot thudded against the heavy outside door. The safe door stood open. Landsfell held a key on a chain, opened the inner door. It swung aside—then his hand darted in, came out flashing flame.

Johnny’s shot spilled Landsfell over on his face. He tried to roll over, to bring up the gun from the safe, but the second shot crumpled him down against the green rug that slowly began to stain a darker color.

Johnny bent to the safe. His probing hand caught up a roll of bills. It was the same he had been paid in Larribee. He thrust it into his pocket, backed away. He heard men stamping up the outside stairway. Landsfell lay still, and the rug was dark around. Dark with blood that soaked in. God, how much blood in that skinny body! Then Johnny reached the window. He backed out onto the ledge, edged along. He didn’t look down, trusted to the darkness to veil him from the men running in the street below. The door of the office splintered, gave way. A shout peeled out, then Denver’s cry:

“Look out, he’s outside!”

Past lighted windows Johnny edged. He heard a rifle bark in the street and the window behind him went out with a crash. He moved along faster. Bullets chipped into the bricks—then he reached the corner. He stared down. The streets were alive with men, armed men who would kill him on sight. He felt the rough protuberance of brick at the corner, reached up as high as he could. For a moment he swung dizzily by his hands, and pain lanced through his injured chest. Then his feet found a crack, and he surged up again. Guns roared in the street and windows went out as they combed the ledge for him. Then his hands grasped the top of the ledge that ran around the roof, and he pulled himself up and over. He landed with a crash on the roof, gained his feet in an awkward lunge, ran across. Behind him Denver’s yells
were audible above the roar of many men: “He’s on the roof! Get up there, damn it!”

He gained the shelter of a chimney, crouched down, searched the tarred roof with outstretched hands. For a moment he found nothing, then a jagged-ended box came into his reach. The dynamite that Hame Mitchell had left that night of the jail break. Johnny got the box in his arms, carried it to the center of the building. There the glassy surface of a light well spilled up light from the offices below. He found a fuse, tucked it into a bundle of dynamite sticks. He found a match, struck it. He heard a man’s fierce yell, then a bullet broke the glass in front of him. The fuse sputtered, and Johnny put his booted foot through the skylight. He dropped in the dynamite. He saw men’s startled faces peering up at him from the room below, then a man shouted, ran back. Johnny felt insane laughter tearing at his breast as he ran for the parapet.

A building below him—twenty feet down. He backed up, gained a running start, cleared the parapet, then his feet took the shock, and he fell heavily on hands and knees. His wound was bleeding again, but he couldn’t pause, even for an instant. Frightened yells broke out behind him. Landsfell’s men—and Denver with them—were in that building—that was Johnny’s thought—then all hell erupted into the sky as the dynamite went off.

The force of the explosion hurled him from the roof of the building, and the limbs of a cottonwood broke his fall. A frightened red-yellow blast scorched the earth, and the red-brick building ceased to exist. A wave of sound came at him, and he felt his head numbing to the shock of it. Things hurled upward into the night sky, and the screams, the cries, the shots, were blotted out in that one mad holocaust of sound. Then it ceased; and dull flame began to lick away from the center of the
explosion as burning timbers and paper and cloth fell over the town.

Johnny lay where he had fallen, numbed. For long minutes he lay there, panting, and noise began to mushroom around him. A church bell was clanging, and he was aware of flames that grew higher and higher into the sky, but after the blinding flash of the explosion, it was nothing to him. Men rushed past him, but none looked at him. He got to his feet after a time, edged back against the buildings, and walked away. He walked slowly at first, then faster. He was tired; God, he was tired!

He found the buckboard, half fell in, urged the jaded horse out of town the way he had come, only an hour before. It seemed longer; like an age that had passed. Then he found the tree-lined lane and turned up it. He saw the doctor standing on the porch. He stood there silent as Johnny drove up, climbed wearily down. He came up to the house, stood there.

"Come in man, come in!" the doctor called out. Johnny stared at him.

"The woman—the boy—?"

"Both asleep—both safe," the doctor replied. "That's more than I can say for you." He stared back at the town. "My God—you've torn the whole town apart."

"It's over," Johnny said, dully. "It's over."

He started to fall, then the doctor caught him. Despite his slight build he handled Johnny easily, led him back through the house to the kitchen. Johnny sank into a chair, dazed. "I'll—I'll be all right. I'll have to get out of here, fast."

For a moment the doctor stared at him, then nodded. "Yes. They'll comb the town for you."

"Doc—" Johnny fumbled in his pocket. His hand opened, spilled the waded bills onto the table. He stared up at the gray-whiskered face. "This is for the woman. There's forty thousand dollars there. It's enough
for her to start a new life—away from here. She’ll pay you. See that no one knows she’s been here—see that she gets to Larribee as soon as she can move the boy.”

“But—what about you?”

“Me?” Johnny laughed. “What have I got to offer a woman, any woman? I told her once I wasn’t sure—about us. Now I know it can never be. I got to get out of here. I’ll take the buckboard, swap it for a horse and saddle down the line somewhere. Tell her just what I said before—good-bye!”

He got to his feet. He felt stronger again. False strength, ebbing fast, but it would last long enough to get him out of Beldon. The doctor followed him down the hall to the front door. A compelling urgency bestrode Johnny now. He wanted to be gone, he wanted to forget. At the door he hesitated.

“Doc—I’m dependin’ on you.”

The bewhiskered little man nodded. Johnny saw him there, grimly determined. The cock of his head was reassuring. And the sawed-off shotgun still leaned against one wall. Johnny nodded, opened the door. He closed it behind him. He stood there on the porch, sucking in great gulps of cold night air.

Then someone stepped against him. He felt a hand pluck his gun from him, throw it out into the yard. Boyish laughter, tinged with bitterness, rang out.

“You’re a hard man to kill, Johnny,” Denver whispered, “but try dodging this bullet in your guts!”
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blue Mountains Calling

The shock was complete. Johnny's mind had refused to function past the explosion of the dynamite. But he had considered it over, done. And now Denver stood in the night and whispered to him, and held death in his hand. For a moment he held there, rigidly.

"I can't pay you back, Sundance," Denver whispered. "But I'm goin' to try. You got Landsfell—you've had all the best of it. How you're alive, I don't know. But there won't be a mistake this time. And take this thought to hell with you—I know Victoria Talbee's in there—and I'm going to kill her, Johnny!"

Denver's voice broke off hoarsely. Johnny caught a glimpse of his face, taut, frozen into a hardness not human. In one second—

The door suddenly opened, and the doctor's voice rang out sharply: "Sundance!"

Johnny moved. He moved with every bit of strength he had left, bringing his arm down in a chopping blow. It beat Denver's shot by an instant, spilling it into the wooden floor. Then Denver leapt back to bring the gun up to bear, and Johnny sprang to one side. "Look out, Doc!" he yelled, then his shoulder caught the little man, hurled him tumbling the length of the hall. Johnny fell into the hall, and Denver's shot splintered the door casing. Johnny's hand shot out, scooped up the double-barrelled shotgun, the ugly length little longer than his
arm. He brought it up—as Denver stalked into the doorway. A smile was fixed to his lips. His face was handsome, his curly black hair tumbled down over his unlined forehead. He held his gun in his hand, ready to fire—

Johnny pulled both triggers at the same instant. The jar slammed him back against the wall, and the full charge caught Denver in the belly. It blasted him backwards onto the porch, broke him, smashed him, cut him in half. The smiling beauty of his face dissolved instantly into bloody havoc, his bright, burning blue eyes ceasing to exist. Then he fell heavily to the porch, and Johnny threw the shotgun from him. He got to the door, stood there staring down at Denver. The slender body was broken, bent crazily in the middle, and the railing behind where he had stood was chewed into jagged splinters. To one side Denver’s flat-crowned black Stetson lay in a pool of yellow light, the little silver coins twinkling merrily. Johnny bent, picked it up. He felt the doctor move up beside him.

“Doc—you got a hammer and some nails?” The words tumbled from his lips.

The doctor stared at him as if he were mad, then nodded, moved back. He was back in a moment with a hammer and some heavy nails. He held them out. Johnny walked out on the porch. He found a bare wall, held the Stetson up. He placed one nail against it, pounded it down. As he drove in the second, the doctor spoke.

“That’s a hell of a way to ruin a forty dollar hat,” he said.

Johnny grinned, suddenly. “Maybe it’s a hat to you, Doc—but to me it’s the hide of the biggest wolf I ever saw.” Then he slumped suddenly to the porch, and his eyes glued shut, and he could not even make an effort to break the sleep that claimed him.
At dawn Johnny awoke. He saw the gray light spilling through the front windows of the doctor’s house, and realized he had slept on the couch. He saw the doctor sitting in a chair, his head low on his breast, breathing easily. Johnny sat up. His head was clear, and his body was stronger. He grinned ruefully, stood up. Time to go. He felt it in his breast as something real, as something normal a part of him. That time always came, and he could not deny it. Silently he left the house. He found Denver’s sorrel mare in the barn, still saddled with the fine gold-mounted saddle. Spoils of war, Johnny thought, grimly. He led the animal out. He saw that the horse they had driven in from the tanks was spent. He took the doctor’s horse, saddled him. The buckboard would be a fair trade. He hung a canteen over the pommel of Denver’s saddle, then climbed up. He looked once at the porch, but the gray light of dawn was too dim to see where Denver had fallen. By the time the sun was full up, Johnny had reached the mountains, and Beldon lay far behind him.

It was the morning of the second day thereafter that Johnny rode into the desert. He knew his route, and did not pause. By mid-day he saw a shine of water, and urged the horses on. He found the wooden board, weather-beaten, thrown to one side. It had been his welcome to these mountains, and it would be his farewell. WARNING: THIS SPRING IS POISONED!!! GOOD WATER FIVE MILES ON.

He reined in, sat there. He saw a low mound of white bones, thrusting up through the white alkali sands. Jube! He rubbed at his chin, swallowed something. That was one thing he left behind him. A part of his life, a part that was Jube. He dismounted, ran a hand along the sleek, sweating side of the sorrel mare. She was tall and fine and a better horse in every way. A horse to run, and a horse to care for. But she was not, and never could
be, Jube. The sun picked out dull highlights from Denver's silver-mounted saddle. Johnny bent, loosened the cinch, dragged the saddle free of the big red mare. He carried it in his arms close to the sun-whitened bones, dropped it heavily to the sand. Then he walked back, stripped the plain riding saddle from the doctor's horse, placed it on the big red beast. He tightened the cinches.

"I kept my promise, Jube," he whispered. A fine silver saddle that a horse like Jube would wear as proudly as a horse could.

Then Johnny Sundance swung up into the saddle. He sat there a moment longer. His face was undecided. He looked around. West and East and North, South. He saw the long spread of the off-white desert. The building rim of cloud above the blue mountains. The mountains there seemed softened, muted. They wavered in the burning heat of the sun as though they were beckoning to him. Johnny nodded. Suddenly he was smiling. He felt free again. A promise kept, and a thing done, once and for all. A man must leave everything behind him someday. And in the blue mountains that called so strongly, he might find something better.

Johnny urged the tall red mare on. He started to whistle as he rode on—South. Behind him the silver mounted saddle glittered brightly in the tarnished white sands.
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