

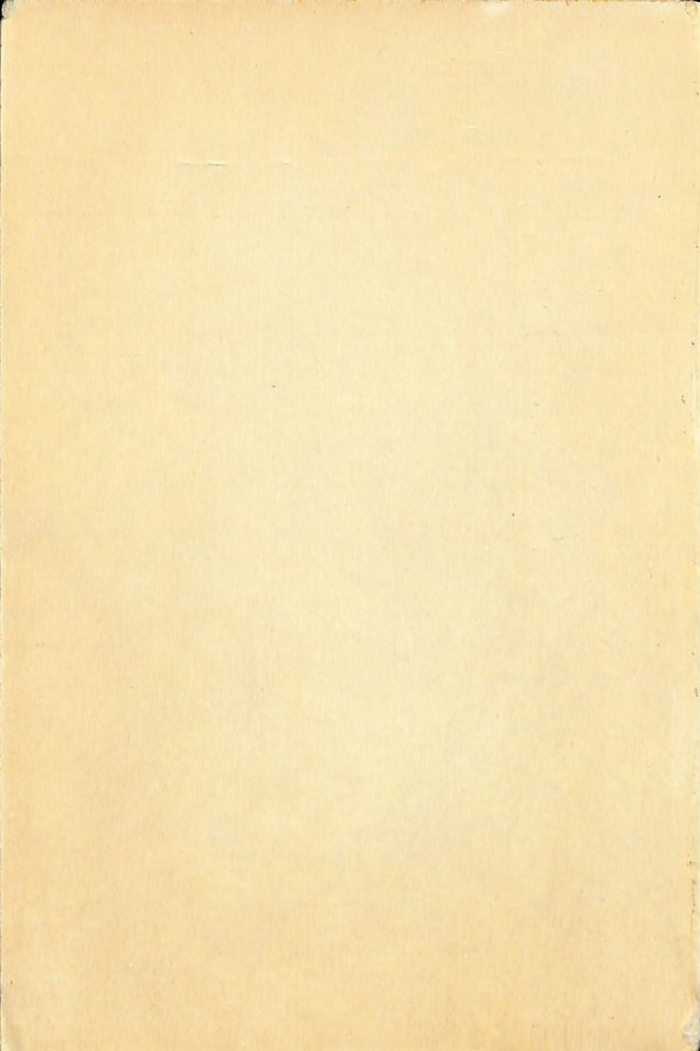
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LEE E. WELLS

# SAVAGE RANGE



Massacre  
was his  
Birthright



## BOUNTY, BOOTY, AND BACK-STABBING

Dan Mitchell had been out of the cavalry for five years when he suddenly received an urgent message from his old commanding officer. Colonel Ames needed him fast and needed him bad, for he knew Dan could do some cool thinking and fast gunslinging.

Dan knew it meant trouble with a fast fuse. But he never dreamed he'd find the whole Sioux reservation sizzling with war talk. If the Sioux donned war paint, the whole territory would be alive with singing lead and flaming arrows.

Dan had to act fast to stop the blood bath, but could he move fast enough? For he was surrounded by hard-cases who would do anything to keep him from talking peace. And you can't talk peace deep in Boot Hill.

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

Dan Mitchell

He found the trail of vengeance wound through the valley of drygulchers.

Millard Fleming

He robbed from the poor to give to the rich.

Janey Lang

The queen of Cribtown was ready to die like a man.

Colonel Ames

Because he lived by the rules, he hadn't a chance.

Cathy Holman

She found her first impressions to be more like second guesses.

Sean Sullivan

His Irish temper got up when he had to punch a friend.

Doc and Butch

Gunfire and firewater were their daily fare.



# SAVAGE RANGE

by

LEE E. WELLS

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TRACK THE MAN DOWN

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## I

THE TWO riders topped the ridge overlooking the town and drew rein. Both men were big and, despite dust-filmed working clothes, each had the square shoulders, the ramrod back that spoke of the military.

"Descanso?" Dan Mitchell asked.

"Yes, sir."

Dan looked down on the wide scattering of buildings and houses. Dark eyes lifted, then cast northward. His companion caught the swift change of expression. "It's over up there in Broken Bow. Nothing can change it."

Dan's wide lips set, then he sighed, a lift and fall of his deep chest. "I know, Sean. But it's hard to believe."

Sean Sullivan's freckled Irish face became bleak, his blue eyes cold. He indicated the town below, set his horse into motion and Dan, a second later, followed him.

Dan's dark thoughts chafed against this long detour to Descanso. No use asking why again, for the sergeant would only give him the same reply: "I was ordered to bring you the news about your sister. We're to go to Descanso where Colonel Ames will meet us. I was told nothing more than that, sir."

Dan thought of the long miles behind him to his ranch in New Mexico. He had not made such a ride since he had resigned his cavalry commission five years ago.

The main street of the town had the usual scattering of saloons, stores, hotel and livery stable. Sean searched for a familiar landmark and suddenly reined in to a hitchrack. Dan followed him, staring curiously at the faded sign over the building.

"*Descanso Herald*," he read. "Andrew Jackson Blaine, Editor."

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Sean tied his horse to the rack while Dan dismounted, frowning at this deepening of the mystery. Sean beat the dust from his clothing, set his hat at a precise angle. "This is it, sir."

They entered the building. The big room was filled with type cases and a huge press. The odor of ink and fresh paper was strong. A man in a wheel chair sat before a rolltop desk. Dan saw a pair of keen blue eyes under iron-gray brows, a high forehead ending in a shock of coarse black hair, salted with white.

The man was in his late fifties, his full face broken by a strong, determined jaw, marred by lines that recent pain had etched deeply into the flesh. A white shirt strained at a deep chest. The legs at first glance seemed large and powerful, but Dan sensed that they were useless forms of bone, flesh and muscle.

"Gentlemen?" the man asked in a surprisingly soft voice.

Sean touched the brim of his hat. "I'm looking for Colonel Ames, sir."

"Really? Who are you?"

"Sergeant Sean Sullivan, sir. Fourteenth Cavalry."

"And you?" The blue eyes turned on Dan.

"Dan Mitchell, from New Mexico."

The harsh lips broke into a warm, surprising smile. He thrust out a hand to Dan. "I'm Andy Blaine. Glad to meet you, Mitchell, and you, Sergeant. Push open the gate and we'll have a talk with the colonel." He saw the puzzled look in Dan's eyes. "Way things are, I had to make sure."

"It seems to me everyone's covering trail," Dan said.

"Have to, or we'd be murdered like your sister and her husband. But the colonel's waiting. Follow me."

He skillfully guided his chair down an aisle between type-cases to a closed door, rapped briefly and pushed it open. Dan stopped short when a man in a black business suit appeared in the doorway. He was a slender rawhide of a man with a mustache that made a gray line above firm lips in a sun-burned face. Hawk eyes rested on Dan and then lit.



"Dan! It's good to see you again!"

Dan automatically touched his hat brim in a salute. "Colonel Ames, sir."

"Come in, son." He looked beyond Dan to Sean. "Well done, Sergeant."

"Thank you, sir."

Blaine wheeled into the room. Colonel Ames waved Dan and Sean inside. The room was obviously part of Blaine's living quarters. The colonel waved Dan to a chair, considered him as he lit a stogie.

"You were always the biggest lieutenant in the army, Dan. I can't see that you've shrunk an inch or lost a pound."

"Building up a spread's no easy job, sir."

"I guess not. Ever consider coming back to the Fourteenth?"

"Not seriously, sir."

Ames nodded, though his thoughts had swiftly moved elsewhere. "Dan, about your sister and her husband. I'm damned sorry. I remember how pretty and gay she was at Fort Raton."

Dan's voice remained calm. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your sending Sergeant Sullivan."

"I wanted you to know as soon as possible, Dan. But there's another reason for sending him. And for this meeting." Colonel Ames steepled his hands and frowned at his fingers. "The report came that Marylou and her husband were killed by Sioux marauders out of the Broken Bow Reservation. I've not denied it, but I know better."

"What?"

"It had all the signs of an Indian attack. Marylou and her husband weren't . . . pretty, Dan, when we found them. There were tracks, plenty of them." Ames' voice sharpened to a knife's edge. "Shod horses, every one. Whoever did it forgot I'm an old Indian campaigner. There's not a Sioux at Broken Bow who owns a shod pony."

"Who did it, colonel?" Dan asked tightly.

"Any one of a dozen men—but I can't do a thing."



"You're in command, sir."

Ames looked beyond Dan to Sean. "Sergeant, what I'm about to say is in strict secrecy and confidence. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. I'll not be opening my mouth."

Ames turned to Dan. "All Indian Agencies are now under the control of the War Department. Agents and post sutlers are appointed by the Secretary of War. I am certain that both the Indian agent and the sutler are part of a graft ring operating at Broken Bow and Fort Adams. Blaine bears me out, and he should know."

"But if you're in command—"

"I can't touch them. They're under the War Department, but an independent branch of it. I've made reports, but they get lost somewhere between Fort Adams and Washington. There's a hell-brew right under my nose and all I can do is watch it bubble."

The colonel's hawk eyes speared Dan. "Your brother-in-law bucked that situation. It cost his life and Marylou's."

"Who are they? How do they graft?"

"Rake-off, cheating, theft. And murder. The Indians get inferior issues of clothing and necessities. Their rations are cut to the bone and it's food the dogs would pass by. So, someone, somewhere, is getting a rake-off. Prices are high and goods inferior at the sutler's store. Is that right, sergeant?"

"It's bad, sir."

"And I can't regulate the sutler," Ames snapped.

"Why don't the soldiers buy in Broken Bow?" Dan asked. "The town's fairly close."

Blaine rolled his chair forward. "I can answer that, Mitchell. I've heard rumors, for I exchange with papers all over the West. There are hints of this sort of thing in every town near an agency or army post. This graft is nationwide and Broken Bow is just one part of it."

Dan's lips pressed. "That's a big statement, Blaine."

"It's a big organization. I wanted to find real proof. I went up to Broken Bow."

"You found proof?"

"Nothing I could publish or take to court." Blaine lifted a thick finger. "But, Mitchell, any Broken Bow merchant who dealt with the soldiers found his store looted. He got beat up by toughs. One store burned to the ground and the owner with it. The soldiers have no place to go but the sutler."

"Who did the robbing and burning?"

"A man scared to death won't talk, Mitchell. I set myself to the job. In less than two weeks the ring knew what I was after. I had just one tip, the name of a gunslinger given by a drunken hardcase when I loosened his tongue with rotgut. He disappeared that night. The gunslinger rode out of Broken Bow and was never seen again. Two nights later, a bushwacker tried for me right on the main street."

Blaine slapped his leg. "The light was tricky and the slug struck my spine. I've not walked since."

Dan stirred. "This has something to do with Marylou. And with me."

Colonel Ames nodded. "Joe Hansen tried to sell his beef to the Indian Agency. The law says ration beef is to be bought on open bid. Joe tried to make a bid but the agent wouldn't listen to him. So Joe wrote a formal complaint to the Indian Bureau."

"To Washington?" Dan asked.

"That's right. He received a form letter referring him back to the local agent, who just laughed and told him to stop wasting his time. Joe openly accused the agent of crooked and illegal dealing."

Ames sighed. "A week later 'Indians' raided the ranch. Dan, I thought a lot of Marylou. I often wished she was my daughter." His eyes shadowed, hardened. "I saw her after the raid. Indians have never done worse. Lucky you'll never see her that way."

Dan's big hands clenched as Ames continued. "I had an idea that you might be able to help me, that you'd want to. Seeing Marylou as they left her, I knew I had to find out who

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was on that raid, who killed her and Joe. I want to find the person who ordered the raid. There's the real killing devil."

Dan strode to a narrow window, looked blindly out. Ames broke the silence. "I know I'm watched. The renegades know what my orders are before the ink is dry. I gave Sergeant Sullivan a leave but gave him money and verbal orders to buy civvies. He headed east in uniform so no one would suspect."

"I'm supposed to be conferring with General Miles right this minute. I can't make an open move. I believe this ring has connections powerful enough to have me transferred or retired within a month."

Blaine spoke up. "Even if I could walk, I couldn't go back to Broken Bow. They'd have me spotted in a minute."

Dan towered above the seated men, his jaw set. Blaine's eyes rested on the heavy gunbelt about Dan's waist. "They don't know you up there, Dan. They won't tie you in to Marylou Hansen, what with the difference in your last names."

The colonel cleared his throat. "Marylou's not the only one who's been killed. If you break up this ring, you'll hang her killers and you'll save many more good people who might otherwise die."

Dan nodded slowly. "I see what's needed, colonel. I suppose there's some plan?"

Blaine spoke up. "You can ride into Broken Bow as a trouble-hunting hardcase. If you act tough enough, that bunch will take notice."

Ames cut in. "I'll see you have a record, Dan."

Dan smiled tightly. "I'll live up to it, colonel."

"No way we can tell you how to get hired on by the renegades," Blaine said. "But you've brains enough to grab the chance when and how it comes. Get inside the ring. Find who works for it, who's behind it. Let me know."

"How?"

"John Holman runs a store in Broken Bow. He'll see word gets to me. However, the less he knows about you, the less risk he runs. Or you. He'll have your name, no more."



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Colonel Ames stood up and extended his hand. "Hole up here in Descanso. Give the sergeant and me at least two weeks' start. Less chance of suspicion that way. I'll be looking for you."

## II

EARLY one afternoon, two weeks later, Dan sighted Broken Bow ahead. It was two or three times as large as Descanso. With a sigh, he opened a saddlebag and took out a whiskey bottle. With a grimace, he swallowed some of the fiery liquor. He rubbed his hand along the stubble of his jaw and then slouched in the saddle as he touched the spurs. Dan Mitchell was a trouble-hunting saddle tramp.

He rode into the long main street, peering forward to the business district, covertly noting the people along the street. He saw a sign over a big store, "John Holman—Hardware and Groceries." He caught a sign further on: "Red Cloud Saloon." He headed for it.

He dismounted before the Red Cloud, wondering if he'd contact the deadly ring here. He pushed through the batwings and the musty, sour odor of beer, whiskey, tobacco smoke and sweat struck him like a blow. He walked on to the bar.

"A double shot," he ordered. He downed it, expelled his breath in a long sigh, as though of pleasure, and pushed the glass forward. The bartender filled it and Dan drank swiftly. The bartender narrowly watched him. Dan indicated the bottle. "I'll buy it."

"Okay, but a quart's a large order."

"I'm a large man."

He took bottle and glass to a table and looked around. The place was not too crowded. Some men sat at scattered tables. Several stood at the bar, three of them cavalymen who drank with the morose attention of men on pass with but little to do.

Dan made a pretense of attacking the full bottle, pouring it into a shot glass, then in a cuspidor below the table when he was certain no one looked. He finally judged that the liquor level was low enough in the bottle for his masquerade. He stood up, deliberately swaying.



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He walked to the batwings. Once he seemed to go at a tangent but he lined up on the door and went out on the porch without incident. He pulled his hat low over his eyes against the setting sun, hitched at his gunbelt and set himself to the porch steps.

By the time he reached the Holman store, he decided to play this role even with Holman. The man knew only his name and that was enough. He might more quickly show signs of betrayal, if that was in the cards, to a drunken wanderer than to a man who showed a gleam of intelligence.

The store was big, dark after the sunlight, and had many confusing aisles. There were a lot of people about. Dan disregarded them and started down one of the aisles. The store seemed suddenly hot and a mist gathered in his eyes. Dan mentally warned himself to do his drinking with more care after this. He veered and bumped into someone.

He first saw deep brown eyes set well apart in a long, oval face, thick brown hair neatly combed up from the face and neck so that small ears were exposed. He had an impression of slim shoulders held well back. Her voice was clear and forthright.

"You want to see someone?"

"Maybe. My business."

"I'm Cathy Holman. My father and I run the store."

"Holman. John Holman. I want to see him."

"He's busy."

"He'll see me."

He tried to move on but she cut ahead of him. Her voice lifted. "Father!"

A tall man, whose black vest hung open over a white shirt, turned. He had a sallow face, deep creased, with dark eyes under shaggy brows. His face was wise and somewhat tired, yet had an uncompromising firmness in the set of the jaw. He came up. He asked with deceptive mildness, "Some trouble here?"

"I'm looking for John Holman."

"I'm Holman. State your business."

"I was sent here from Descanso by Andrew Jackson Blaine."

"Your name?"

"Dan Mitchell."

"Come into the office."

Holman lead the way to the rear of the store, opened a door into a small office. He waved to a chair and then sat down at the desk. The girl entered and closed the door behind her.

"What's she doing here?" Dan demanded.

"My daughter knows about this business, Mitchell. She stays." There was an angry silence for a long moment and then Holman said, "Tell me about yourself."

"Didn't Blaine?"

"He sent a letter saying you'd be here and giving your name. That's all."

"I've punched cows a little here and there. Got in trouble here and there, too. Blaine figured I'd do for this job, so I'm here."

"Did Andy tell you the problem?"

"Most of it."

"We can skip the facts then. I think your best bet is to act as a tough-hand drifter." He smiled frostily. "That won't be too hard. Talk like a gunslinger. They use them."

"Who do I see?"

"Grant Evans is the post sutler. Try to get in with his bunch at Fort Adams."

"Leaving it up to me to find the place?"

Holman flushed. "Not at all. Take the road east. A few miles out, the road cuts south. You can't miss it. Go to Cribtown."

"Where's that?"

"Just outside the fort's boundary line. Nothing there but saloons and—" He slanted a glance toward his daughter. "You'll find the right bunch there. Get with 'em."

Dan stood up, shoved his hat on his head. He grinned at Holman, bowed in mock politeness to the girl. She pulled

her skirts aside as he swaggered by. The door closed behind him with a bang.

He returned to the Red Cloud hitchrack and mounted his horse, rode easily along the crowded street to the livery stable. Then he went to the hotel, registered, and dumped his saddlebags on the bed in a box of a room overlooking the street.

He washed the trail dust from his body, considered shaving but decided against it. He replaced his hat, settled the holstered Colt firmly to his leg and left for the street again. He ate, drank coffee and felt that he could again face another period of faked hard drinking.

He considered the several saloons and decided to investigate each. He skipped the Red Cloud but covered the rest. Here and there he saw a man with the suggestive shifty eyes of a renegade but there was no indication that they gathered in one spot.

He decided to grab some sleep until supper time and hit the saloons again that night. He returned to his box of a room and, with relief, removed boots and gunbelt, threw himself on the bed and instantly went to sleep.

It was dark when he awakened and the noise from the street below had increased. Voices lifted constantly as men passed. Dan washed sleep from his face, pulled on his boots and once more faced Broken Bow's main street.

He drifted along with the crowd, moving into saloons, studying their patrons. He ended up at the Red Cloud beginning to think that the embezzlement ring gunhands had no particular saloon where they did their drinking.

The Red Cloud was full now, men completely lining the bar, and the tables almost wholly taken. Sound beat at him, laughter, the clink of poker chips. Sinuous blue snakes of tobacco smoke hung in the air under the lamps. Suddenly, Dan had the idea that he need not find the renegades. Let them find him.

The idea half-formed, he moved to the bar, shoved men aside with unnecessary roughness. Some gave way to the



push of his powerful body. Two or three turned in irritation, saw the size of him and forgot their momentary anger.

Dan ordered, scowled at the men about him, making his eyes mean and his lips slack. He arrogantly shouted at the busy bartender, cursed because he had to wait for another drink. When it came, he managed to spill it. The bartender looked hard at him. "Maybe you've had enough, Jack."

"Never enough. And what the hell do you care! Fill it up again."

The bartender hesitated, then refilled the shot glass. "That's it, Jack. No more."

Men looked sidelong at Dan as he contemptuously ignored the bartender. Dan nursed the glass and watched the back mirror. Now and then he caught reflections of the crowded room behind him. One man, one fight, he thought. After the first two or three blows the bouncers would break it up. But Dan would be spotted as a trouble-maker. He inwardly braced himself, turned away from the bar and pushed free of the crowd. He stood a moment, deliberately swaying, considered the tables.

A man stood up at one near the door. The movement caught Dan's attention and he looked on a beefy man who hitched at his gunbelt as he made some coarse joke to his companions. Dan lowered his head and strode forward.

The man, still speaking to his friends, swung around the table. Dan veered slightly with the movement and they collided, hard enough that they staggered. Dan caught his balance as the burly man recovered.

The man glared, ugly jaw outthrust, heavy voice snarling. "If you're that drunk, you'd better douse your head in the horse trough."

Dan struck fast and hard. The man glimpsed the blow coming and jerked to avoid it, a split second too late. The fist caught him on the side of the face and he fell back against the table, knocking it over, his flailing arms striking his companions. They became a writhing tangle of arms, legs, splintered wood and overturned chairs.

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Someone yelled. The men disentangled themselves. The one Dan had struck shook his head as he pulled himself to a crouch. With a roar, he lunged at Dan, who swung his fist again.

His blow missed but the force of it swung Dan half around. An iron bar seemed to crash into his face and for a second he was blinded. A rain of blows made him realize that he fought not one but all the men at the table. They surged in and Dan met them, powerful fist sending one spinning back even as his own head snapped to one side from a glancing blow on his jaw. A knee came for his groin but he twisted enough to take the solid blow on his thigh.

He heard shouts that angrily called for a fair fight, the growl of the converging bouncers. The sound lifted to a roar when one of the men charged in, a whiskey bottle lifted and glittering in the lamplight. The bottle cracked against the side of Dan's head and he felt himself falling.

His shoulder struck someone and he was catapulted forward, the big room, the fighting melee, a whirling, dizzy kaleidoscope.

A fist crashed against his jaw. Lights flashed vivid, brilliant colors. He fell into space, felt his shoulders strike a sharp edge but his fall continued. His head slammed against something hard. Then there was nothing.

Someone shook him. Dan looked up into a lean, hard face, bisected by a sandy mustache. He became aware of the law badge on the man's shirt. "Get up, bum."

Dan looked around. He lay on a bunk in a small cell and somehow the night had changed into day. Agonizingly bright light streamed through a barred window. "How'd I get here?"

"We found you in the alley back of the Red Cloud after we broke up the fight. We make good use of drifters like you. On your feet."

Dan felt too sick to argue. His head spun, his stomach surged, but he managed to stand up. The lawman glared. "What do you know about that fight?"



Dan managed a sickly grin. "Never saw a better one."

"I'd give a year's pay to find who started it. Anyhow, you had a part in it so you'll work it off. Outside."

Dan walked out in the corridor where three more miserable men waited in charge of a deputy.

"That the lot?" the deputy asked. "Looks like it'll take a long time to get the job done."

"Work 'em harder."

The deputy flashed a hard grin. "That I'll do."

He led the way into the alley behind the jail. They went to a shed where each of them picked up a spade and then the deputy marched them into the street.

They made a sorry procession. They marched up a side street lined with silent houses under big trees. Dan saw the fresh cut of a drainage ditch. The deputy halted them and stood with legs slightly spread, hand on his hip close to his holstered gun.

"Now I'll tell you how it's going to be. You're going to dig until sundown. Back to jail, and you stay overnight. Come morning, you get out. But don't be in Broken Bow when the sun sets. Savvy?"

Dan asked, "Suppose you get a job?"

"Don't waste tomorrow looking for one." The deputy eyed them again. "Just line up. When I give the word, you keep those idiot-sticks full of dirt."

They worked slowly but steadily. The deputy sat on the grass for a time, and then began a kind of torture. He jeered at one, then another, and then started on Dan.

Dan held back his mounting anger. He set his mind on sundown. The deputy lazily walked down the line, grinning as he called the men names. Dan lowered his head and made the spade bite deep as the deputy came up to him.

Just then an expensive surry drawn by a pair of fine bays turned the far corner and rolled toward them. Dan saw the nearly fawning respect on the lawman's face.

The man who drove the surry wore a suit of black, rich material, and the wide brim of a cream Stetson shadowed his

face. Dan had an impression of smooth, hard jaw and chin, a bold nose and piercing black eyes.

The deputy spoke. "Morning, Mr. Fleming."

The man drew rein. His eyes swept over the four prisoners. "Joel, where'd you find that crew?"

"You just sweep the alleys and this rubbish turns up."

Dan viciously slammed his spade into the dirt, swung it with an angry swell of muscles that flung the load to the walk. He heard a woman's startled exclamation. Cathy Holman stood a few feet away, her hands holding back her skirt. Dan saw recognition come and then her lips set in a line of displeasure.

He heard a step beside him and Joel's cutting voice. "You blind fool! You'll get another day for that."

"It's all right," Cathy said. "He couldn't help it." She smiled at Joel and started to move on.

"Miss Holman?" the man in the carriage called. "It would be a pleasure to give you a lift."

"Thank you, Mr. Fleming, but walking is my one chance to escape the house or the store. I hope you don't mind."

Fleming, hat in hand, bowed in disappointment. "Perhaps another time then?"

She smiled and walked on. Dan half turned to watch her, but Joel's heavy hand spun him around. "You drunken, blind ape! By God! if you so much as look up the rest of the day, I'll break your thick skull!"

Dan tried hard to curb the anger that welled up in him. He took a deep breath and his fingers tightened around the spade. Let it go, he thought, and the challenge left his eyes.

Joel gave him a shove. "Now work!" He turned to Fleming. "The only thing these yellow-bellied gutter sweepings understand."

Dan dropped the spade, took a long stride to the deputy. His fingers taloned into the man's shoulder and he swung him around. Joel's jaw dropped and his eyes rounded. His face went white as his hand slashed to his gun.

Dan's fist landed squarely. The deputy sailed back and fell

full-length with a bone-jarring thud. Dan was unaware that Fleming had jerked erect, or that the three men behind him exchanged startled, worried glances. Dan grabbed a fistful of Joel's shirt front. The deputy's eyes opened, focused, and then Dan's shoulder muscles bunched as he jerked Joel upright.

Without warning, the three prisoners swarmed over him. One grabbed his arm. One clawed at his back. The third threw himself against Dan's legs. He forgot the deputy as he savagely tried to free himself from this new attack.

The four men hit the ground and rolled about in a flailing blur of arms and legs. Dan fought free, pushed himself up, backhanding a man who frantically grabbed for him. He had a blurring glimpse of the deputy's gun barrel as it lifted and slashed down.

The next moment, seemingly, he was drowning and fought for breath. He flailed about as another deluge of water slammed into his face, down his throat. He choked, gagged and sat up. The marshal stood above him, a bucket in his hand. Dan sat on the floor of a cell. He coughed, dashed water from his eyes, and saw that Fleming stood in the cell doorway, looking on with impersonal interest.

The marshal surveyed the big, dripping figure before him. "By rights I should send you to the Territorial Prison for a couple of years. Do you think you can answer some questions?"

"What's the use? You know what happened."

"Mr. Fleming, here, wants to talk to you in my office."

Dan glowered, puzzled, at the other man. He saw now that Fleming could not be over thirty-five at the most, a man a touch too handsome. His dark eyes had all the warmth of a mathematical calculation.

The marshal made Dan walk ahead up the short corridor and into the big office. Dan was signaled to a chair in a corner where there was no chance of escape. The marshal stood beyond the desk, his hand carelessly near his gun. Fleming took another chair. His voice was rich and deep but held a



cold precision. "What's your name and where are you from?"

"Dan Mitchell. Come up from the south, looking for a job."

"You found one," the lawman said dryly, "without pay."

Fleming asked questions that Dan answered with brusque brevity. Fleming seemed more interested in Dan's invented scrapes with the law and his fights than in anything else. The questioning abruptly ended as Fleming stood up.

"Marshal Haney, you can take him back to his cell."

Dan returned to his cell, noticing that Fleming followed him and the marshal. Haney locked the door.

"Thanks, Marshal," Fleming said. "Now I'll talk to Mitchell alone, if you don't mind."

Fleming waited until he heard the office door close. "Mitchell, Haney thinks you might be the one who started the fight in the Red Cloud. Did you?"

Dan looked at Fleming, his eyes steady, defying the man. "Try another question."

"All right. Want a job?"

"I've got one, like the marshal said."

"Yes, two months at the very least, I'd say. I've got another one in mind. I like the way you handle yourself."

"What kind of job?"

"You're in no position to ask, but it's not handling a spade."

"For you?"

"A friend of mine at Fort Adams."

Dan concealed his start of elation, grunted to hide his interest. "Sounds good. But how do I get out of here?"

Fleming turned on his heel and walked away down the corridor. Dan heard the door open, close, and then there was silence. He stretched out on the hard bunk and surrendered to his aches. He found himself thinking of Cathy Holman and wondered why. Before he could find an answer, he drifted off into a troubled sleep.

He awoke when he heard the key turn in the cell lock. Marshal Haney opened the door and beckoned to him. "Come on, Mitchell."

Dan swung his feet to the floor and stood up, winced at



the stab of pain in his head. The marshal stood to one side and signaled Dan ahead of him down the corridor. The office door stood open.

Dan stepped in. A man leaned against the wall by the window, a cigarette hanging from one corner of his mouth. He gave Dan an indifferent look and straightened as Haney entered. The marshal indicated the stranger. "You'll go with him."

"Who's he? A deputy?"

"Crag Marsh. You're free, Mitchell. Fleming paid your bail. But I'll tell you plain, get out of town with Crag and take the job Fleming got for you. If you don't, I'll personally drag you back in here."

Dan considered Crag Marsh. On the surface, he looked like the typical puncher: a tanned, leathery-faced man of about forty, with deep grooved lines curving about a long slit of a mouth, sun wrinkles in the corners of washed gray eyes. He was of average height with a hint of wiry, fluid strength in his movements.

But there was more than the puncher in the impassive face that looked on all men with a secret suspicion. He wore his Colt a trifle high on the right hip, gunslinger style. Crag's voice was without inflection. "You got a horse, Mitchell?"

"At the livery stable."

Crag tugged his hat brim lower and walked to the door. After a glance at Haney, Dan followed him outside. Crag waited under the wooden canopy until Dan was beside him and then, silently, headed for the livery stable.

He waited at the wide doors as Dan paid the bill, saddled his horse and led him out. Crag's glance rested briefly on the rifle in the scabbard, the gunbelt wrapped about the saddlehorn. Dan buckled the belt about his waist, snugging the holster to his leg.

"Can you use that?" Crag asked abruptly.

"When I have to."

"Fast?"

"I'm no professional, but I'm alive."

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"That's all that matters."

Well beyond the town, Crag turned into the road that Holman said led to the fort. They had ridden but a few yards up the road when Crag slowed the pace. He abruptly made an all-inclusive sweep of his arm. "See this country, Mitchell? You'll have to learn every inch of it."

"Why?"

"No telling where Grant Evans will send you. The quicker you learn it, the more use you'll be."

Dan nodded. Indeed, he'd become useful! Grant Evans! The very man Holman wanted him to work for!

### III

FOLLOWING Crag's advice, Dan used his eyes, placing the landmarks in his memory. This would have made good ranch land. Here and there, small hills rose and these, with the trees and high bushes along water courses, broke the great, smooth green expanse of the grass.

Dan saw movement under trees ahead and, a moment later, half a dozen riders appeared. He saw huddled, blanketed forms: Indians. Dan's hand dropped to his gun, an automatic act born of many meetings with Apaches in New Mexico. Crag didn't so much as turn his head.

The Indians drew rein as the two white men rode up. Their blankets were thin, shoddy and ragged. Dan doubted if their sorry nags could break into a trot. None of them had weapons. Black, unwinking eyes watched him with little glints of hatred. The dark faces were frozen in bronze, hiding everything but a barbaric pride. They watched with the deadly patience of the wild as he rode past them.

They dipped into a swale and topped the opposite rim. A few minutes later, the buildings of the fort showed on the horizon. Fort Adams was the typical Plains army post. The road led directly toward the quadrangle of barracks, offices, storerooms and buildings about the parade ground.

The post loomed larger and Dan glimpsed the activity of the parade ground. It suddenly struck him how long it had been since he had seen that familiar sight. He heard the distant, pleasant ring of hammer on anvil and then his eyes centered on the road ahead as dust lifted in a plume behind a buggy.

The buggy flashed by, drawn by a fine black horse. The young woman handling the reins threw a quick smile at Crag. Her face was fair, her eyes dark and brilliant. Raven hair coiled under a pert black hat. Dan saw a slender, shapely body, the waist narrow above the wide flair of the dark skirt.



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Then the buggy was gone and the fine dust hung in the air.

Crag caught Dan's curious look. "That's Janey Lang. Heads up Cribtown for Evans. You'll meet Janey sooner or later."

They rode on, coming into the quadrangle of the parade ground, a huge rectangular field broken only by a tall pole from which the flag hung in limp folds. Crag rode toward a high, ugly building at the end of a row of barracks. He pulled in at the hitchrack and dismounted. Dan swung out of saddle, moved around the rack and entered the store just behind Crag. The room was big, counters leaving a cleared space in the center.

A clerk, arranging stock on the shelves, turned as they entered. Crag gestured toward a small office in the rear. "Is he back there?"

"Nope, storeroom."

Crag went out again, walked around the building and Dan saw a smaller structure, broken only by an open door. Crag walked in. There was a single window high in the rear wall. A man in shirt sleeves, his back to Dan and Crag, counted boxes in a stack and made a notation as he turned toward the door and looked up.

"Howdy, Grant," Crag said.

The man had a round, florid face, black eyes set too close. Thin, black hair was combed flat to a round skull and his neck strained at a white collar and black string tie. His cheeks were mounds of flesh.

He looked at Dan. "Who's that?"

"Dan Mitchell. Fleming says to use him."

Evans studied Dan as he would unwanted merchandise. He obviously didn't give it much value. "Take him over to Cribtown."

As Dan followed Crag out, he looked back at Evans, who wore a sour expression as he turned to his work.

In a few moments, Dan and Crag rode out of the fort compound, headed west. Not long after, the collection of false-front stores, houses and huts that was Cribtown came into



view. They entered its dusty street. There were half a dozen buildings, mostly saloons. The most imposing structure was a paint-peeled two-story hotel, cramped, dusty and dirty. Passing a small street, Dan saw a line of shacks, as jerrybuilt as all the rest, in each the blind pulled at the single window, the flimsy door closed. They seemed to leer as Dan passed the corner. Crag pulled in to the livery stable beyond.

Their horses taken care of, they walked back to the hotel. Entering, Crag unceremoniously kicked the soles of a man sleeping in a broken chair. He snorted awake and glared at them with red-rimmed eyes.

Crag grinned. "Earn your keep, Salty. Get me a key."

Salty moved disjointedly to the desk, pulled a key from a board and pitched it to Crag. "Front, on the left."

Crag tossed the key to Dan. "You've got a place to sleep. Now let's get a drink."

He turned on his heel and walked to the saloon next door. The ramshackle place was dark, unclean, with tables scattered over the big room, every one empty. Two men stood at a zinc-topped bar. The bartender looked up inquiringly.

"A couple of shots," Crag ordered. "Dan, here's two gents you'll get to know real well."

He indicated a dark, round-faced man whose drooping eyelid added to the sinister note of the ancient knife scar along the jaw line. A gunbelt circled his ample waist.

"This is Butch Kennedy."

Kennedy murmured a "Hidee" as Crag said, "This'n is Doc Lear."

Lear's face was long, the cheeks gaunt, the bloodless lips thin. His burning eyes sat deep under bony brows. His skin was pale, spots of high red color in the cheeks. He was tall and his clothing hung loosely on him. His hands showed the shape of every bone and tendon beneath unhealthy white skin.

The bartender filled the shot glasses. Crag finished his drink and pushed away from the bar. "Mitchell's with us. Show him the ropes."

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"Anything coming up?" Butch asked quickly.

"You know better'n to ask that."

"Damned secretive outfit," Butch grouched.

Doc gave a hollow chuckle. "Give evil to the day thereof and forget it. So we live longer, for whatever good that is."

Crag gave Doc a strange look and turned to Dan. "Stick with the boys. When we need you we'll get you."

He walked out of the saloon. When the batwings whispered behind him, Butch turned to the bar. "Well, Mitchell, how about another drink to make you feel at home?"

"Thanks."

Dan lifted his glass, met Butch's brief salute and downed the drink. Doc immediately ordered another round and Dan felt the harsh bite of the whiskey. But, still, he had to order in his turn. The glow increased and he fought the effects. But the drinking paid off, for Butch and Doc were accepting him. So drift with it, he thought. A hotel room waited when he became drunk enough.

Later, he walked with Butch and Doc to a small restaurant and noted that the evening sent deepening shadows along the street. Soldiers were everywhere, along the walks, in the restaurant, crowding into the saloons.

The meal had a sobering effect and he was much more alert when the three came out on the planked sidewalk, watching the soldiers stroll by in groups, pairs and singly. Dan now saw women, many of them, mingling with the cavalrymen. Gay, clinging dresses, red lips and heavy powder could not hide the harsh lines in their faces, their predatory air.

Doc Lear watched, feverish eyes slitted. "Look at 'em," he said suddenly in his deep voice. "Cavalrymen of the United States Army! Fools! giving their money to Evans."

Dan looked sharply at him. "Evans?"

"Sure! All of it, one way or another. Cribtown belongs to Evans and don't forget it."

They moved into the nearest saloon. The bar was crowded and most of the tables were taken. The batwings whispered ceaselessly and Dan swore every soldier of Fort Adams was

present. Many had harpies on their arms, buying them drinks, giving them gewgaws.

Crag Marsh suddenly stood before their table. The man's eyes sharply judged them and his thin mouth set in unpleasant lines. He leaned over the table. "Have a final drink and turn in. Come morning, we ride, meeting a freight outfit."

A movement beyond Crag caught Dan's attention. The girl he had seen in the buggy walked among the tables, speaking to one man, laughing with another, flirting with them all. She wore an abbreviated costume that revealed startling white of shapely shoulders, suggested even as it covered the contours of the striking figure, ending in a short skirt just above the knees. Her slender, tapering legs were beautiful, sleek in black silk.

She came up to the table and Crag straightened as she flashed her smile at him. "Having a good time, Crag?" Her eyes swung to Doc and Butch, to Dan. "I saw this one with you up at the fort, Crag."

"Dan Mitchell. Fleming found him."

Dan was surprised to see that she wore but a light touch of powder over long, smooth cheeks. Her eyes were friendly and there was no hardness in her mouth.

"How big do they grown 'em where you come from, Dan?"

"I'm counted a runt."

Her laugh was honestly amused. She moved off with a flowing swing of body and hips. The four men watched and then Crag sighed regretfully. "Well, sure wish I could stay."

"Do you no good," Doc grunted. "Evans keeps a close eye on her."

Crag moved off and Dan asked, "Is she Evans' girl?"

"Leastways, she keeps check on things in Cribtown for him."

Dan wondered how this information might help him. Doc's sneering voice broke in on his thoughts. "Butch is saying that none of us has the guts to find out if she's Evans' girl or not."

Dan caught the indirect challenge. His mind moved fast. Making a play for Janey would satisfy Doc, nor should it



be too dangerous. Evans might get angry but he'd probably do no more than warn until he knew where Dan stood with Fleming.

Dan pushed away from the table. "Think I'll get a drink at the bar."

He moved to the bar, saw that it was crowded. However, one end was comparatively clear and Dan was surprised to see Sean Sullivan.

The big sergeant nursed a drink and watched the crowd. Just then Janey came up to Sean, spoke to him, placing her hand on his shoulder.

Dan threw a covert glance back at the table. Butch and Doc watched him and Dan saw Butch nudge Doc and say something with a wide and knowing grin.

Dan realized Sean's presence gave him a chance to prove himself to these hardcases. He mentally begged Sean's forgiveness for what he was about to do. He hitched at his gun-belt and walked directly to Sean. Janey looked up, startled, began to smile over Sean's shoulder. Something in the set of Dan's jaw made it freeze on her lips. Her eyes widened in alarm.

Dan brushed her aside. His hand grabbed Sean's shoulder, whirled him around. Sean stared in surprise as Dan's booming voice lifted. "No yellow-leg is going to put his hands on my girl!"

His arm swung in a blow aimed at Sean's craggy jaw.

Sean threw up his arm and Dan's blow glanced off it. Dan saw Sean's puzzled, hurt look as he fell into a clinch, wrestling Dan back toward the tables. Their heads were close.

"Fight me, Sean," Dan said in a fierce whisper. "It has to look good."

With a powerful heave, Sean broke Dan's hold and thrust him away. Dan struck the bar. Sean, head lowered, waited and his eyes said he didn't fully understand.

Janey stepped toward Dan, smiling, hands making soothing



gestures but her eyes were alert and wary. "Boys! What's this all about? Let's all have a drink and forget it."

Sean shook his head. "Tis no place to fight, Bucko."

"Afraid?"

"Not of you, but of me stripes should a patrol find me changing the shape of your face. Do you have the guts to match your size, there's a dark alley in back."

Dan spat elaborately, jerked his head toward the batwings and pushed through the crowd. In a moment, Sean was beside him. They heard the shuffle of feet as the crowd followed. They came out on the dark porch and, for an instant, stood alone.

"Why?" Sean asked, low.

"A dare from one of them. Maybe a test. Play it my way, and pull no punches."

"A shame!" Sean said. The batwings burst open and his voice lifted angrily. "Ye'll have no mercy from me, Bucko."

"And none asked. Where's your alley?"

Sean walked ahead, around the building, Dan striding at his heels. Dan had a glimpse of Janey Lang, her magnificent figure silhouetted in the light streaming from the door behind her. Her face was partially in shadow but he saw that she did not share the excitement of the crowd. Then he stepped beyond the corner of the building.

There was a wide expanse of bare, packed earth behind the saloon. Sean strode to the center of it, unbuckled his belt and peeled off his coat. The crowd formed a huge ring as Dan waited for Sean to make a neat bundle of his coat, belt and campaign hat. The Irishman faced him, spat on his hands and doubled them into fists.

Men called bets as Dan moved slowly forward. There was a faint light from stars and crescent moon, a yellow gleam of lamps from a few windows. It was sufficient to see Sean's huge figure, but it was also tricky.

Suddenly Dan lunged in, driving a blow for Sean's stomach. The Irishman moved fast, turning as he blocked the blow, his right fist sizzling up. Dan could only move his head

a fraction of an inch before the mauling fist caught him a grazing blow along the chin and sent him staggering back.

Sean bored in, intent to end the fight quickly. The flashes of light left Dan's eyes and he blocked Sean's driving blows, gained his balance and slammed his fist into Sean's ribs. The man grunted, gave way. Dan swept after him, aiming blows at the bobbing head and weaving figure.

He and Sean cautiously moved about one another. Sean rushed in and Dan braced to meet the attack. Sean side-stepped, feinted, and his fist slammed hard into Dan's chest. It seemed to stop heart and lung. Dan's mouth flew open in a gasp and his head whirled. He dimly heard the savage, exultant roar of the crowd and Sean was upon him again.

The Irishman was too eager and threw wild punches where a single, shrewd blow would have ended the fight. Dan blocked them as his lungs again bellowed and his senses cleared. Men scattered as the struggling giants crashed into them. Dan's shoulders smashed against the corner of the saloon.

The building gave him the brace he needed and he found solid footing. Sean grunted as he threw fists in a constant rain. Knuckles scraped along Dan's cheekbones, a blow glanced off his ribs. He saw an opening as Sean drove for his stomach. Dan's fist pistoned a short distance and landed with a solid crack on the point of Sean's chin.

Sean's head snapped back. Then he fell, struck the ground and lay still, mighty limbs asprawl and flaccid. A roar went up from the crowd.

An alarmed cry sounded. "Patroll! Beat it, soldiers!"

The crowd melted away. Dan lifted Sean by his shoulders, shook him and slapped him, rocking his head. Sean's eyes blearily opened.

"On your feet!" Dan snapped. "Patroll!"

He saw Sean's coat, belt and hat. He swept them up. The crowd had completely disappeared now and Dan heard the faint, steady beat of boots down the dark alley. He jumped

back to Sean, who had come to a crouch, head hanging and body swaying.

Dan's rough hands helped Sean stand up. He wheeled the man around and pushed him, unprotesting, to the dark shadows between the buildings. They reached the shelter and then Sean came fully awake. He jerked his arm loose.

"Now what—"

Dan's hand clapped over his mouth. "The patrol—be quiet!"

The men of the patrol moved aimlessly about the area. One came to the very corner of the building and peered into the black area. Dan and Sean held their breaths and then the man moved away.

There was more shuffling and then the rhythmic steps resumed, faded down the alley into silence. Sean's breath eased out in a long sigh and, with one accord, he and Dan moved out of the shadows.

Dan handed the sergeant his tunic and Sean shrugged into it. He felt his jaw. "I would swear that ye had broken it. I've not come up against the likes of ye in a long time."

"It was a lucky punch, Sean. You had me beat."

"I'll thank ye for the words though I'm not believing them." Sean buckled his belt. "Now would ye be telling me why?"

Dan briefly told him what had happened since his arrival in Broken Bow. "So I've been hired," Dan finished. "Doc Lear thought I didn't have the nerve to cut in on Janey Lang."

"None has," Sean said.

"I figured it was a test, Sean, being this new. Or it was something Doc cooked up to see what would happen. Then I saw you and Janey talking. I saw this was an even better way to make them think I'm a trouble-hunter and tough-hand."

Sean grinned wryly. "Sure, and that they'll be thinking by now. So do I."

"Tell Colonel Ames what has happened. I've made the first step. I'll let him know how things develop. Right now, I'd better get back to the saloon."



"And I'll be to another one for a drink, then back to the post."

Dan circled the buildings, hitched at his gunbelt and pushed open the batwings. The moment he appeared, there was a roar of approval. Men who had won bets pushed toward him. Dan was hustled to the bar and he had to accept several drinks.

A bartender looked at Dan with respect. "A lady wants to see you, friend."

Dan pushed away, followed the bartender across the room, climbed narrow stairs at the far end of the bar that led to a closed door. He tapped lightly.

"Come in," a woman's voice called.

The room was comfortably furnished. A desk stood in one corner, a little iron safe beside it. A table held a lamp with an ornate globe that cast light on a rich red carpet, touched the highlights of polished wood on chairs and table.

Janey, still in her scant costume, sat at the desk. She saw his face. "Looks like the sergeant wasn't easy. He left his marks."

Dan touched the bruised and tender spot on his cheek and then waited. She made an impatient gesture toward a chair and a small bar against one wall. "Have a drink and sit down, Dan Mitchell."

Dan remained by the door. "One fight's enough. I don't want another."

Her dark eyes widened. "With me?"

"With Grant Evans, from what I hear."

"You won't have the fight. I will. Sit down and have the drink."

He sank into the chair, ignoring the bar. He was again struck by her clear, smooth skin unmarked by Cribtown. She crossed her long legs and Dan hastily looked to the floor.

"Why?"

"I don't like soldiers. Had too much of 'em in my day."

"Where are you from?"

"South. New Mexico, the Border."



"What brought you to Broken Bow?" She met his steady look a moment and then smiled faintly again. "All right, forget that question. But who sent you here?"

"Millard Fleming."

"Then you belong." Dan stole a look at her from under his brows. "So you don't like soldiers. But why did you claim I was your girl? That could get to the wrong ears and you'd have more than a sergeant to handle."

"It was a good reason to pick a fight. It hit me you'd be worth fighting for and I just blurted it out."

She fought against it, but a faint pleased light came in her eyes. Her lips parted and he saw they could be soft and warm. Then her eyes grew shrewd. "Gunslinger?"

"Of sorts."

"Somehow, I doubt it."

He asked easily, "Now what makes you say that?"

"I don't know. Something about you. I've seen many a gunslinger—too many. You don't fit the usual pattern."

He looked at her in surprise but she seemed hardly aware of him. Her face was bemused as though she saw deep into memory. She spoke without rancor, as though of some person she barely knew.

"I know how it can happen. Something or someone comes along and you know it's right. Then it changes, and you find yourself hurt, or driven out, or beaten."

"It happened to you?" he asked softly.

She nodded, still far away in time. "It's like you come to a fork in a road. You want to go one way but you're forced the other. Then there's nothing to do but travel along, doing what you have to and knowing you can't turn back to the other road, never again."

Her eyes snapped open and she looked at him, half angrily, accusingly. Just as abruptly, she smiled, a cynical curl of the lips that gave Dan a slight shock.

"Now who'd think Janey Lang would talk like that to a perfect stranger!"

"Now and then a person has to talk honest or bust."

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She shook her head but he had not missed the quick flare of pleasure, swiftly smothered. "You're so new here you haven't learned your first lesson. Grant Evans runs Cribtown and owns most of it."

"And you?"

Again her smile, twisted and bitter. "I'm one of the fixtures. So, good night, Dan Mitchell."

He lifted himself from the chair and stood a moment, dark eyes brooding. Then he smiled, showing he didn't quite believe this was final. He walked by her and down the stairs.

## IV

AN INSISTENT pounding awakened Dan. He swung out of bed and opened the door. Butch filled the frame and, behind him, Dan saw Doc Lear's cadaverous face. The two men waited as Dan sloshed cold water on his face, pulled on shirt, trousers and boots, stood up and swung the cartridge belt about his waist.

"Where do we ride?" he asked.

"I dunno," Butch answered carelessly.

"Don't they tell you anything?"

"You don't ask. It ain't healthy."

They left the hotel. The morning sky was streaked red to the east and the street looked more scabrous than ever, empty except for a drunk curled up on the walk.

"What's the job?" Dan asked.

Doc's voice held an edge of irritation. "We don't know. We get there, we do it, whatever it is."

"Any chance of . . .?" Dan touched his Colt.

"Always is. That's why they put us on the payroll."

Doc led the way to the livery stable. They saddled and rode out, cutting directly south from Cribs town, avoiding the fort. They came upon a trail of sorts and Doc reined in. Butch eased back in the saddle and grinned at Dan.

"Rest while you can. A lot of riding later."

Time passed. Dan sat down beside the trail and Butch smoked placidly. Doc did not stir. Suddenly Butch flipped his cigarette away. "Well, here they come."

Dan saw distant, small black shapes far down the trail. They became half a dozen riders and, when they came closer, he recognized Crag Marsh in the lead. He reined in a few feet away. The rest of the riders pulled up behind him. Crag made a small, careless gesture of greeting.

"Well, let's get yonderly."

He spurred ahead and the rest fell in. After a few moments,

Crag motioned Dan up beside him. They rode in silence for a time until Crag made up his mind to speak.

"Was it a good fight last night?"

"Is that how you heard it?"

"Yes. So did Evans. Was it over Janey?"

"In a way. She was an excuse to get at that yellow-leg."

"Find another next time."

"Why?"

"Janey's dynamite. Keep your eyes and your hands to yourself or there'll be more trouble than you can handle."

"Are you threatening, Crag?"

"Now why should I threaten? If plain words ain't enough, a forty-four slug is. But others ain't that way. Grant Evans, for instance."

"Then maybe Evans ought to tell me."

"Not him! He sends me." Crag's slit of a mouth tightened.

"Next time, I might bring a bullet."

They rode for several miles where they struck the main road to Broken Bow and Crag turned into it. A little further along, they caught up with a slow-moving line of freight wagons. Crag moved in to speak to the driver of the lead wagon. They exchanged a few words while the riders moved along with the wagons. Dan noted that they rode high, an indication that none of them carried a load under the canvas tops.

Puzzled, Dan settled to the slower pace, wondering why armed men had come to ride escort on empty wagons. An hour later, he saw another wagon train approaching them. Crag spurred ahead, riding out to meet it. Dan saw a man ride out from the other train. A little while later, Crag rode back signaling them to pull off the road.

Crag spoke sharply. "Mitchell, Butch, Doc—keep an eye north. Pronto!"

Dan rode out with Butch and Doc. A safe distance from the train, Dan moved closer to Doc. "What goes on?"

"We're earning our pay. Just head down the road a piece and see nobody comes in."



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"Suppose they do?"

"Stop 'em. That's why you wear a gun."

The two wagon trains were now indistinct shapes against the sky. Dan was at too great a distance to tell what happened back there, so he faced the empty road that wound northward to the horizon and on to Broken Bow.

The sun moved slowly toward zenith and then Dan heard distant shots, three of them evenly spaced.

One of the trains pulled out and came toward the road. It was the one Dan had ridden with, but now each wagon had a cargo. Crag rode up and they turned to fall in with him.

Nothing was said as the train reached the road and rolled toward Broken Bow. From the silence, Dan knew this was a job that had been repeated many times before. He rode along, outwardly unconcerned but inwardly boiling with curiosity.

A short time after noon, the wagons pulled off the side of the road. In a few moments, a small fire blazed and a coffee pot bubbled. The riders gathered about the fire with the wagon drivers, sipping coffee, smoking, talking lazily.

Crag moved to one of the wagons. He looked around, signaled Dan and Butch. When they came up, he climbed into the wagon bed. "Give me a hand."

When Dan entered the wagon, Crag knelt before a large box. Dan read stenciling on the wood: COLONEL AMES. FORT ADAMS. PERSONAL.

Crag's eyes danced. "Personal for the commandant! You know what's in there! Never knowed a big officer that didn't like his wines and good whiskey, along with his cigars."

Doc moistened his lips. "How about a drink, Crag?"

"Time for that later." He patted the crate. "Mighty nice of the colonel. He can't report it missing because it ain't allowed on army posts. Boys, we'll have us a little extra, you keep your mouths shut."

He motioned them to leave. Crag strode up to the drivers and his crisp orders sent them to their wagons. In a few moments, the train continued its slow way. It rolled

north and west now and, close to sundown, struck another road. The drivers turned into it and headed directly for the town.

It was nearing dusk when they saw the actual lights of the town. Crag called his gunhawks. "All right, gents, this job's done. Go have yourselves some drinks." He pulled bills from his pocket, shoved them at Doc. "See they get their drinks and don't hold out on 'em."

Doc took the money, neck-reined his horse and the rest followed him. Dan rode along until they threaded the streets of the town. Then he dropped back and waited until the sound of hoofs died away.

It was not long until the line of wagons passed him. Dan drifted along the street after the wagons. They turned into a wide gate that broke a high fence surmounted by barbed wire. Dan saw the dark shape of warehouses and the sign above the gate: FLEMING SHIPPING COMPANY.

He felt a start of elation but then immediately sobered. He kept to the shadows and watched the train go into the yard. He heard muffled sounds of activity and saw the glow of torches and lanterns.

The gate opened and a man in a buckboard drove out. Torchlight briefly touched his face as Crag Marsh smartly slapped the reins on the horse's rump. The buckboard clattered away and Dan saw the low shape of a blanket-covered crate riding just behind the seat.

He hitched at his gunbelt and then boldly walked across the street and pounded on the gate. A hoarse voice called a challenge.

"I'm one of Crag's boys," Dan spoke in a low but carrying voice. "He told me to come help him."

"Crag just left. Besides, none of you gunhawks are supposed to be around here. Forget about the box. He's taking it to the boss now."

Dan returned to his horse and rode thoughtfully down the street to the Red Cloud. Inside, he found Doc, Butch and

the others hard at work at their drinking. Dan ordered a whiskey. His mind kept returning to that box. The wines and contents would not appear in any store or army post, assuming Dan's suspicions about the day's work was right. Crag had taken them to Fleming. Or had he?

Butch came up. "Ain't you drinking? Not often we get to spend Crag's money."

Dan thrust his glass to the bartender. He tossed the whiskey, swiped his hand across his mouth. "Butch, how about that box Crag found?"

"If we're lucky, Crag'll manage to hold out a cigar for us."

"Does Crag take it?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then how about the cigars?"

"I reckon Fleming sends 'em to us now and then."

Dan nursed his drink. He had the feeling that Crag Marsh had placed an opportunity in his hands, but it was more hunch than anything else.

Dan could not picture Millard Fleming sending fine cigars to gundogs. He rubbed his hand slowly along his jaw, pushed away from the bar and left the saloon.

He saw the sign across the street—FLEMING MERCANTILE COMPANY—along a high, dark warehouse. But a light glowed from behind blinds in a small office section. Dan hitched at his gunbelt, approached the door and knocked. He waited a moment and knocked again.

The door was suddenly jerked open and light streamed out, momentarily blinding Dan. Fleming's voice sounded harsh and angry. "What do you want?"

Dan blinked and gradually Fleming took definite shape. "The street's no place to talk."

Fleming studied him then stepped aside and motioned Dan in. Dan entered a short, dark hall, lighted at the far end by a steady glow from an open door.

"Hold it right there!" Fleming closed the door and then



stepped around Dan, blocking further progress. "You'd better not be wasting my time, Mitchell."

"Just one question about the wagon train."

"What wagon train?"

"All right. Let's say if there was a case of wine, whiskies, cigars and such on a wagon train headed this way, would you know about it?"

Fleming's voice held less challenge. "Depends. Maybe I ordered it."

"No, Colonel Ames."

"Who got them?"

"Crag Marsh hauled 'em from the warehouse. If you don't have them, then Crag's cached them at his own place."

Dan couldn't read Fleming's face in the half-light of the dark hallway. But he could feel a mounting anger and tension. "Why do you tell me this, Mitchell?"

"Simple enough. Right now I ride guard. There's nothing to that kind of job."

"Plenty, if trouble breaks."

"How many fast guns and hardcases in the outfit?" Dan asked contemptuously. "Maybe I'm hardcase enough to fit the job. But there's a lot more things I can do."

"Like watch Crag Marsh and come running to me?"

Dan decided boldness was the only answer now. "If I figure he's stealing from the man who hired both me and him. I don't like a crooked deck when I'm working for someone. If things are up and up, then I made a mistake and no harm done. If they're not . . ."

Fleming considered him a moment longer, weighing, judging.

"We'll see, Mitchell. Wait here a minute!"

Fleming strode into his office, to appear a moment later strapping a gunbelt about his waist. With no further word, he stepped out into the street, Dan following him. They came to a saloon half a block down and Fleming hurried in. He reappeared, two men close behind him, men of the same breed as Butch and Doc.

"Mitchell, you'd better be right," Fleming said tightly, "for the sake of your own breathing."

He strode off. The two gunhawks and Dan fell in behind him. They turned into a side street and, halfway down, Fleming stopped. A faint glow came from behind the blinds of a squat house sitting far back from the street. Dan's right hand touched the leather of his holster as he followed Fleming up the walk.

Fleming's fist rapped an imperious demand upon the door. It jerked open and lamplight streamed out, sharply silhouetting Crag's muscular figure, glinting on the steel of the gun in the holster on his hip.

He blinked in surprise at Fleming. His eyes cut to Dan and the two men, then back to Fleming. "Something up?"

"Mitchell?" Fleming said.

Dan moved forward. "We've come for the case, Crag."

"What case?"

"The one you took from the warehouse."

"You're crazy, or lying!"

"Not me, Crag. You. I hung around the warehouse and saw you with it on the buckboard."

"How about it, Crag?" Fleming demanded.

"It's a lie."

"Crag," Dan cut in, "want me to show Fleming where it is?"

Crag eyed him, trying to gauge how much Dan knew. His hand suddenly streaked to his holster. Dan's hand stabbed down and up. He fired as the muzzle tilted toward Crag. The slug drove Crag back into the room. The man's gun flew from his hand as he struck the floor near a plain, square table. Gun thunder echoed deafeningly as blue smoke trailed up from Dan's Colt.

It had happened so fast that Fleming and the gunhawks stood frozen. Very slowly, Dan dropped his Colt into the holster. One of the gunhawks made a whispering whistle.

"Fast!"

Fleming broke the tableau. "Show me where he hid the case, Mitchell."

"I don't know. It was bluff and it worked. We'll probably find the box easy enough. He's not had time to hide it."

"Find it, then."

The implied threat loaded Fleming's voice and Dan understood. Fleming was not fully convinced that Crag had tried to steal. Dan masked uncertainty as he calmly looked about. There was nothing in this room, furnished only with the table, a few chairs. He looked in the second room, almost as bare as the first. Fleming stood in the doorway, watching. Dan opened the big doors of a corner closet, saw only a few clothes hanging limply from a high center rod.

Fleming moved to one side of the door, allowing the two gunhawks to come into the room. Dan knew time ran out. His eyes fell on the bed. He peered under it and, up against the wall, he saw the bulk of the case. He beckoned to the gunmen. "Give me a hand. Here it is."

They pulled the case from under the bed. Fleming, coming up, looked down on the box of nested fine cigars and bottles. His jaw set. "Take it to my office."

"What about him?" One of the men indicated the other room where Crag's body lay sprawled.

"I'll call the marshal. He'll take care of him." Fleming looked at Dan. "I want to talk to you."

Dan followed him out of the house. Fleming lived several blocks away on the other side of town. He maintained a tight silence the whole of the trip and Dan did not try to break it. Fleming turned in to a huge dark house. He unlocked the door, struck a match to a lamp on an ornate hall table and led the way to a large living room.

"Sit down, Mitchell."

Fleming went to a cabinet in a far corner, returned with shot glasses and a full bottle of whiskey. He poured two drinks, gave one to Dan. He sat down, lifted his glass in a brief salute. He considered Dan over long, steeped fingers.

"You didn't like Crag Marsh?"



Dan shrugged. "Crag was all right, I reckon."

"Then why did you come to me?"

"I saw something I thought you should know."

"You were with Crag today?"

"Sure, when we transferred loads from one train to another."

"Why do you think I had anything to do with that?"

Dan grinned. "Just figured."

"You can't prove it."

"No, and I don't give a damn. But I figure the way you got me out of jail and over to Cribs town, you'd be somewhere along the line. Everyone moves when you send word along—Crag, Evans, all the rest, even the marshal."

Fleming smiled frostily. "How do you think this will help you?"

"I figured you'd do me a favor."

"Such as?"

Dan sipped his whiskey and Fleming waited. "I can think of a dozen healthier ways of working than handling a Colt," Dan said at last. "I've seen the gunhawks come and I've seen 'em go with a forty-four slug in their chests. That's not for me."

"What then?"

"I've found out a man can get further without a gun. Like the time down in New Mexico I hired on as bookkeeper to a mining outfit."

"Bookkeeper!" Fleming was honestly startled.

Dan chuckled. "Good enough. Point is, I can see a little farther into this deal of yours than most. I like what I see. I could be very valuable to you. Why not use me? I know most of the tricks and can spot the signs."

Fleming poured himself another drink and sipped it slowly, thoughtfully. Finally he set the glass aside. "Why'd I bring those two gunslingers along tonight?"

"To down me if I lied about Crag. To down Crag if I told the truth."

"We operate that way, Mitchell. A double-crosser asks for and gets a bullet."

"I figured as much."

"Crag tried to beat the game. It's happened before. There's more people in this than you know. Say you turn out to be another Crag Marsh. You'll never know who'll kill you. Might be a drifting saddlebum, a teamster, a drunk in a saloon, a stranger, or someone you know, a Cribtown girl with a thin blade knife. We've got lots of ways and lots of people."

Dan's dark face grew tight and sober. "You've lined it out plain enough. You meet my deal, I'll meet yours."

"You're still not backing out?"

"Why should I? You've told me how it'll be. Give me the right job and the right pay and I'll ride a clear trail for you."

Fleming suddenly laughed and now all suspicion was gone, replaced by admiration. "So you kept books?"

"That's right. I can keep them straight or crooked, however you want."

"Straight, and for me. Grant Evans needs a clerk. I'll send you to him."

"I don't think Evans likes me very much."

"Because of Janey? Evans likes whoever I send to him. This is only for a short time until I can get you assigned to the Indian Agency."

Fleming crossed to a small, ornate desk in a far corner. He pulled paper and ink from a drawer, scribbled a few lines and then sealed the message in an envelope.

"Give that to Grant in the morning." He pulled a bill from his pocket. "Have a night in Broken Bow on me. You've earned it."

"Thanks. I'll make it a full night."

## V

GRANT EVANS again read the note at his desk in the small office of the sutler's store. He looked up at Dan.

"Bookkeeper! You?"

"I've done it," Dan answered equably.

He waited, sensing Evans' resentment at Fleming's order. But there was something else; suspicion, undoubtedly, and also a subtle fear. Dan broke the silence. "This isn't my doings."

Evans scowled. "It comes mighty soon after you killed Crag Marsh."

"Crag tried to hold out on Fleming."

"How'd Fleming know?"

"You guess and I'll guess." Dan moved toward the door. "There's no point in working for a man if there'll be trouble. I'll ask Fleming to give me another job."

"No, wait. I reckon you can keep stock records, and clerk."

"Fleming said *all* the books."

Dan again turned toward the door but Evans irritably checked him. "How do you know there'll be trouble?"

He stood up and his smile tried to say he accepted the situation. He tore Fleming's note in small pieces, dropping them in the cold belly of a small stove. "You'll work out here."

Evans led the way through the door. Dan followed him to a glass cubicle at the rear of the big storeroom, containing a bookkeeper's desk, a small safe, two stools. Evans worked the safe combination and pulled out a heavy ledger.

"We keep records like the government wants us, all straight and aboveboard."

Dan nodded. Evans asked brief but penetrating questions that revealed Dan's knowledge of books. Satisfied, Evans patted the ledger. "Well, I leave it to you."

Dan peeled off his coat, unbuckled his gunbelt and placed it beside the ledger on the big desk. Evans noticed it. "No need to keep a Colt close to hand."



"I got in the habit. It's kept me alive."

"Oh, well, if you need me, I'll be in the warehouse."

He left. Dan eased himself on the high stool and opened the ledger. He slowly turned the pages and saw that, for the most part, it was a standard system. But one account puzzled him. It was headed "Transfer" and held periodical entries in a neat, crabbed hand that must be Evans'. Dan mentally marked this account for questioning.

In an hour or so, Evans came in and looked over Dan's work. He nodded. "Reckon that does it for now. You could give me a hand in the warehouse."

Dan spend the rest of the afternoon marking prices on items ranging from bone-handled razors to sewing kits. He quickly realized that the prices were outrageous and the quality poor. Toward sundown, the job was finished and Evans, with a weary sigh, turned to the door. He locked it after Dan and walked toward the store, speaking over his shoulder. "Nothing more for tonight. You can ride to Cribtown. Be here by seven in the morning."

It was the first Dan knew he would not live on the post.

The days passed slowly. There were times when there was little to do about the store. Dan and Evans stood on the small wooden porch looking over the parade ground, Evans scowling, chewing on his own thoughts. Colonel Ames came out of the headquarters building and strode down the walk.

Evans spoke from the corner of his mouth. "Here comes old Spit-and-Polish. Want to bet he tries to make trouble?"

"What damn yellow-leg doesn't!"

Colonel Ames approached. Evans straightened and nodded a distant greeting. Dan remained slouched against a porch post. Ames coldly eyed Dan, who didn't move. Ames stopped. "You, there! Who are you?"

Dan answered lazily, "Store bookkeeper."

"Your name, sir, and answer properly."

"Dan Mitchell. Colonel."

"Sure that's the right name?"

"It's what I go by."

Ames' scowl deepened. "I have a feeling I've seen your face somewhere on a reward dodger. Where are you from?"

"Southerly."

Ames' jaw tightened. "Where were you going when you landed here?"

"Wherever it was, it's my business, Colonel."

The officer eyed Dan for a long moment. "All right, Mitchell—for now. But if I find out you're wanted by the law, I'll turn you over to the sheriff. I'm tired of having this place overrun by riff-raff civilians."

He glared at Dan and marched away. Dan chuckled.

"He means it," Evans said.

"Let him look. It's Fleming's worry, not ours."

Evans looked after the spare, distant figure. He slowly nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's right."

He threw a sidelong glance at Dan but there was less animosity in it than before. It was as though the colonel's harsh words had made Dan slightly acceptable.

The next day, about midmorning, Dan threw down his pen and pulled himself from the stool. He walked to the doors and looked out on the parade ground, breathing deeply of the clear air. He watched a buggy approach and then he saw that Janey Lang drove it. She wheeled smartly about the quadrangle and reined in before the store.

Her dress was demure enough, dark with a blacker stripe running through bodice and full, flowing skirt. A small hat sat pertly on her raven hair. She considered Dan.

He smiled. "Welcome to Evans' Store."

"Thank you. Is Grant around?"

"In his office."

She descended and swept by him into the store. He looked after her, disappointed. He slowly walked back to his own cubicle. Dan worked steadily, wondering why Janey's conference with Evans bothered him.

He heard the sudden scrape of a chair from Evans' office and was surprised that the conference had ended so suddenly.

A door opened and then Janey's steps halted nearby. He looked around. She stood alone in the doorway.

"Busy?" she asked.

"Not very."

Janey came into the cubicle. Dan indicated the office. "I've been promoted."

"That means you're in deeper. I thought you'd get out of this."

"A man does what he has to, Janey."

"Sure, but I didn't think you could be forced into anything."

He looked at her, the deep dark eyes, the slender body that the quiet dress concealed. He sensed her friendliness and he glanced toward the empty doorway, back to her, "When can I see you?"

"Why, anytime, at Cribtown. A few words, a drink, the time of day."

"No, I mean—"

"You know better. I owe my time to Grant Evans, had you forgotten? I work for him, just like you."

His lips thinned in anger but she lightly touched his chest and turned away. The small gesture took the sting from his dismissal.

Dan helped her into the buggy and she thanked him politely. She lifted the reins, hesitated, then spoke in a low voice. "You have disappointed me, Dan Mitchell."

She smartly slapped the reins and the horse trotted away. Dan watched her as she rounded the parade ground. A strange one, he thought. One moment she was hard and cynical and the next warm and lovely, encouraging him to escape the very life she lived.

He made a grimace and turned to find Grant Evans watching him. The round face told nothing, though the black eyes moved toward Janey's disappearing buggy and then back to Dan. He beckoned Dan to follow him and led the way to the glassed office.



"Janey brought word from Fleming. You're to report to Greg Haley at the Indian Agency."

Evans' pudgy hand slapped the thick ledger. "Find anything wrong with my books?"

"Should I? Of course, I didn't see *all* the books."

Evans flushed angrily. "What do you mean?"

"That 'transfer' account. It balances the ledger but it hides another bunch of accounts somewhere."

"So you spotted it? Well, Fleming knows about it. Those accounts ain't for any ordinary bookkeeper to see."

Dan laughed. "Thought I wasn't ordinary. Well, I'll be riding."

Around midafternoon, he approached the Agency headquarters. There were several buildings, squat, low affairs. To one side stood a stable and beyond it a corral and a tangle of cattle pens, empty now.

He reined in before the office, above which a flag hung listlessly from a tall pole. He crossed the wide porch and stepped into a large room, bare except for a dividing counter and two or three hard, straight chairs. There was no sound. He rapped on the counter and heard a sudden flurry from the inner office. A man appeared.

He was tall and spare. A black coat hung loosely from bony shoulders. His face was long, as angular as his body. A flowing yellow mustache could not conceal long, nervous lips. Blue eyes sat deep beneath rugged brows. Dan judged him to be about forty.

"Yes?" he asked in a strangely resonant voice.

"I'm looking for Greg Haley."

"I'm Haley."

"Fleming sent me. I'm Dan Mitchell."

Haley stood a moment, uncertain. Then he opened the swing gate in the counter and held out his hand. "Come in. Come in."

Dan stepped through the gate and Haley led the way to his office. It was large and pleasant, occupied by a huge rolltop desk, a swivel chair before it. Haley waved Dan to

one of the chairs placed along one wall and went to his desk. The agent steepled his hands and frowned at the far wall.

"I hardly know where to start you. I think, first, you should become familiar with the Agency, and the Indians especially. You'll have to know them individually as well as you can. An Indian will show up for rations and allowances a dozen times under as many names. They like to pull that on a new man. Yes, I think you should first see our Indians. In the meantime, we have to quarter you, don't we? Bachelor, of course?"

"Yes."

"The small cottage then." He stood up "I'll show you."

Dan followed him out of the office, untied his mount and walked along beside Haley. They passed the main buildings and came on three small cottages sitting in a row. Haley indicated the first. "That one will do for you."

He turned into the cottage and, with a wave of the hand, indicated a small stable for the horse in the rear. Haley waited for him on the small front porch. He opened the door when Dan appeared and led the way inside. It was a box of a house, the furniture cheap and frayed. Small windows opened on the tangle of empty stock pens. Haley waited while Dan looked in on a small kitchen, another cubicle that held bed, nightstand and chair, no more.

He returned to the front room and Haley said, "It's not a palace but it does for a single man."

Dan grinned. "Better than a lot of bunkhouses I've seen."

By sundown, Dan was established in his new home. He cooked supper and, after the dishes, rolled into bed and was soon asleep. A man who has been soldier and rancher never sleeps late, so Dan awakened the next morning just at dawn. He looked out the window on an immense, half-lighted world, yawned and dressed.

An hour after full sun-up, he saddled his horse and rode south toward the Indian villages. The trail was plainly marked by the imprint of unshod horses. He came to a creek and, on the far bank, saw the tepees of the Sioux. His eyes moved

down the creek, saw an Indian boy watering horses. Dan touched his mount and splashed into the water.

The Indian boy spun around, took one glance and gave a cry. The life in the camp came full stop. Women straightened from fires, sleeping bucks jumped to their feet.

Dan briefly touched his Colt then rode slowly into the village street. He saw hatred in the slanting glances the squaws threw his way, in the faint curl of lip in the warrior's impassive face. He also saw the shoddy agency goods drawn by this village. The evidence of cheating showed in ragged, thin blankets, in sleazy shirts, in the poverty-stricken air of the camp. No one spoke, no one followed him but, once he was clear of the camp, he felt as though he had run a gauntlet of hatred.

He shook himself free of tension and suddenly realized, from what Colonel Ames had told him, that Marylou's home was not far. He cut away from the Indian trail.

He came on another creek and, beside it, the charred ruins of a house, corrals and barn. He looked about, dark face grim and tight. Here his sister and her husband had died. A muscle worked in his jaw and his eyes misted. A small copse of trees stood between the corral and the creek. He saw headboards, reined his horse about and rode over.

Names were crudely burned into two long slabs. Dan dismounted and walked to them, taking off his hat. He looked down at Marylou's grave, face granite hard.

He vowed he would not be satisfied with finding the man, or men, who had fired the actual bullets but he wanted the one who had planned this. His fingers tightened on his hatbrim. He heard a slight sound and his head jerked up.

Half a dozen Indians materialized out of the copse, young and bronzed giants who regarded him silently. They stood like coiled springs and each held a weapon. In a moment they would strike. Muscles slowly bunched in Dan's legs and back as he tensed, and his hand started a slow, careful move toward his holster.

There was an electric silence. Dan decided to try for the



young buck who held an old musket. The Indians seemed to wait for some signal, some final urge to attack. Dan's hand rested on his Colt but he didn't draw, sensing that all of them were poised on the edge of decision.

A seventh Indian appeared so suddenly that he seemed to materialize out of air. He was an older man, harsh, bone-carved face tight with suppressed anger. His eyes contemptuously swept over the six young braves. Dan felt the silent pull and tug between them and the unmoving Sioux who bore the marks of a respected warrior or sub-chief.

The older man, still unmoving, spoke a few sharp and guttural words. They lashed and flicked at the six, for their hands tightened on their weapons. Their eyes moved from the sub-chief to Dan, back to the Indian. Then, silently as they had appeared, the six faded into the bushes and trees. There was a brief movement of leaves and then they were gone. Dan's fingers lost their taloned rigidity and he dropped his hand to his side.

Though the Indian had stopped the attack, there was no friendliness in him. Dan felt a shock at the impact of the hate-filled eyes. Then Dan received his second surprise. The man spoke in a passable English. "You fool. Go now. Next you ride this way, be one of many. The young men have hot blood. You are strange and do not belong this place."

"Do you have a right to speak for your people?" Dan asked sharply.

Despite the faded, cheap shirt worn over a breech clout, the Indian had innate dignity. "I am Stone Nose. I speak in council of my people. You do not belong this land."

"I belong. I'm Dan Mitchell, with the Indian agent." He indicated the bushes where the young warriors had disappeared. "I owe you thanks."

"No thanks. They should kill you. I do not like Agency men. Agency starve Sioux. Little food, little meat, not good. Agency men bad. Sioux hate, but to kill is foolish. It would bring the yellow-legs. My people not ready for war."

Dan touched the headboard over Marylou's grave. "Then why did your people do this?"

"No! The man and his squaw good to Sioux. They give us food, sometime kill beef, sometime give clothes. They were friend of Sioux."

Dan nodded. This removed the last suspicion from the Indians. He considered Stone Nose, wondering how much the man knew. "You know who killed?"

"No, but it was not Sioux."

Dan spoke slowly, feeling his way. "I am new to this place. Why should these people feed and clothe you? It is given to you at the Agency."

"My people make treaty with white warrior chief. If we keep peace and come to this place, we shall not hunger or grow cold. We will always have shelter."

"That was promised," Dan agreed.

"We need blanket, so we ask. Agent say maybeso. We wait a moon and ask again. No blanket. Maybe many moons later we get one. It is thin, like woven grass."

"Each moon there is beef. Sometime cow sick, always thin. Little meat, no fat, bad hide. White man promise Sioux cow like buffalo, but they are like starving coyote. Agency speak with two tongues; big promise, then sorry but promise again."

"Your chiefs could hold council with Haley," Dan suggested.

Stone Nose snorted. "We go many times. Haley listen sometime. Sometime he will not see us."

"How about Colonel Ames?"

"Always white warrior chief listen. He promise next moon there will be change. He also speak with forked tongue."

"No, the colonel's your friend."

"Sioux has no white friends. You also speak with double tongue."

Dan shook his head, but Stone Nose turned on his heel and strode to the edge of the bushes. There, he wheeled about and his voice became vibrant.

"You listen. My people wait day after day, like sky. The

## SAVAGE RANGE

chief's and wise heads council peace, but young warriors look toward lance and bow. They say take white blood before Sioux starve and die."

One moment he spoke to Dan, the next he had vanished. Dan stood for long, thoughtful moments by the graves and then turned to his horse and mounted. He rode to the second village, keeping to the main trail. He half expected to meet more of the vengeful young men but there was no sign of them.

The second village also showed indications of Agency graft. Once again, Dan felt the impact of silent hatred as the life of the village stopped with his presence. He did not linger, merely made a quick survey and rode out again.

He wondered how long it would be before this whole area exploded. Haley stirred the brew of war, probably at Fleming's direction. Surely they must know the devil's pot would boil over! Dan made a grimace. They didn't care, none of them, clear back to Washington, if Blaine's guess was correct. They'd cause massacre and war and then run to the army to save them.

Back at the Agency, Dan reported to Haley. The agent leaned back in the chair before his desk and listened to Dan's report of what he had seen, except the encounter with the young warriors.

"They don't like us," Dan finished.

Haley chuckled grimly. "We'll keep 'em tame."

"We will?"

"The Army, then. No worry." Haley abruptly changed the subject. "You'd better get familiar with the goods in the warehouse."

"How about records?"

"Learn the goods first."

The warehouse was a long, low building facing the empty stock pens. It was dark, the few windows small and high. Grime and filth cut to half what little light they normally would have admitted. Dan's job was to inventory. He spent two days moving slowly from shelf to box, to bale, to barrel.



He saw the same cheap goods the Indians wore. Each container was correctly labeled and yet Dan could not believe this was government issue.

The third morning, Haley told him to defer the inventory for an expected beef herd. Haley glanced toward the trail that led to the Indian villages. "The redskins'll be showing up soon. They're here before the beef. They must send out scouts to pass the word when the herd shows up."

Dan leaned against a porch post, giving only a glance toward the trail and then looking again toward Broken Bow. He saw a lifting plume of dust on the horizon. Haley saw it at the same time. "The beef. The Indians'll show any minute."

Just then the Indians appeared. They moved down the trail toward the tangle of pens—men, women, children, dogs, horses—and Dan swore that every Sioux in the country converged on the agency.

The next hour was bedlam and madness. The herd came driving in and, on Haley's signal, was headed into the series of stock pens. Dust and noise lifted to the skies as wild-eyed beef thundered by. Riders appeared and disappeared in the dust and, beyond the cloud, Dan had occasional glimpses of the silent, waiting Indian horde.

At last the cattle were penned. The trail boss gave Haley a tally-count and was invited into the office along with his crew for a drink while the Indians patiently waited. Dan knew none of this bunch but judged them to be another of the innumerable crews that Fleming had gathered.

A drink around, a few words, and the punchers clumped outside and mounted. They wheeled their horses and, no longer burdened with the herd, raced off toward Broken Bow.

The beef issue to the Indians was sheer, bloody bedlam. Haley placed a table and chair near the pens and called the head of each family. One or more of the bony animals was released and raced bawling from the pens. Instantly the man and his sons, if he had any, raced after the steers with screeching yells. Bows twanged and arrows sank deep, or lances

flew. Here and there an ancient musket thundered and the steer dropped.

The squaws and children instantly rushed forward, knives glittering in the sunlight and dust. Within a matter of minutes a Sioux family was called by Haley, its quota of beef on the hoof turned loose, butchered, cut up and carted off. It was all over by midafternoon.

Haley wearily gathered up the papers, gave Dan a dust-streaked grin. "I reckon you could do with a night in Cribtown?"

"I surely could. And a drink."

Two days later, a wagon train came into the agency from Broken Bow and the warehouse filled with supplies for the Indians. Haley gave Dan a list with orders to look it over, and the material. Within half an hour, Dan found differences between the actual material and the list. He went to Haley's office. The agent waved him to a chair and Dan held up the list.

"This shipment's all wrong, Greg." Dan indicated an item. "Fifty wool blankets. There were thirty, and they're thin as cotton."

Haley leaned back in his chair. "How'd you get the job here?"

"Why, through Fleming."

Haley flicked the sheet with a careless gesture. "These lists are always right. I guess I forgot to tell you. Just store the stuff away and then we'll have a drink."

Haley blandly met his eyes. "In fact, let's have a drink before you go back to the warehouse. Just leave the list. I'll look it over."

A few moments later, Dan returned to the warehouse. He stood in the doorway, looking at the boxes and bales. He thought of thirty cheap blankets and then of fifty of good quality wool. Where were they?

He knew. He remembered the transfer of goods of the wagon trains. He now had a link in the chain of theft and

embezzlement. He corrected himself. He knew it, but this was not enough. He must find the stolen government goods in Fleming's warehouse.

Dan pulled his hat brim low over his eyes as he looked about the warehouse. There was only one way to get his proof. He must take a dangerous gamble.



## VI

IT TOOK several days to stock the new shipment just at the time Dan wanted to get to Broken Bow and look at Fleming's activities. Nor did he get away the following morning, having to issue rations and cloth to some Sioux families from the villages. It was nearly noon by the time he had finished, so he decided to cut directly across range to the distant town instead of taking the regular road to Broken Bow.

He felt a sense of relief when the low Agency buildings were out of sight behind him. The open, pleasant country made him feel free. Dan took a deep breath of clean air and felt the whip of wind on his face. He had a sudden longing for his ranch far to the south, but he saw twin headboards above sinking green mounds. Some of the brightness left the sun. The ranch would have to wait until Dan found vengeance.

The miles passed and Broken Bow was not far ahead. He still rode open country, the main road off somewhere to his right. Suddenly he saw something moving far ahead. The object grew larger and he decided it was a man afoot. That always spelled trouble in the range country. He set the spurs and raced forward.

Dan's keen eyes began to make out details. He gave a start of surprise. That was a woman! She had seen him and she waved a signal. The horse raced on. She had stopped now and waited. Dan raced up and saw it was Janey Lang.

She wore riding skirt and jacket, both badly rumpled, a smear of green grass stain along one shoulder. She had lost her hat and her raven black hair spilled over her shoulders. Dan reined in, swung out of saddle.

"Janey!"

"She brushed a wisp of hair from her face. "You're a welcome sight!"

"What happened?"

She pointed off at an angle toward distant Cribtown. "I lost my horse four miles or so back."

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"Throw you?"

"No," she said shortly. "I felt like a run and he stepped in a hole. Broken neck."

Dan shook his head. "Too bad. Broken Bow's not far ahead. Mount up and I'll walk along."

"Nothing of the sort! We'll ride double."

He tried to argue but she'd hear nothing of it. At last he helped her into the saddle and she sat it like a man. She disclosed trim ankles and a bit more of shapely calf than was considered acceptable. But she paid little attention as she reached down to help Dan swing up behind her.

He reached around her to take the reins. He gently touched the horse with his spurs and it moved slowly forward, Dan very much aware of the trim figure his arms encircled.

"How will you get back?" he asked finally.

"Fleming will take care of that."

"Fleming? I didn't know you were friendly."

"I have to be. He takes as much of a cut out of Criبتown as anyone else."

"I thought Evans—"

"He pays off on all of it."

"Looks like Fleming's corraled everything in sight around here. He ought to be rich."

"Should be, but—he's not head man."

Dan waited until he could speak with only faint curiosity. "You sure surprise me."

"I'm certain of it."

He asked casually, "Who could it be?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe we can figure it out."

"Not me, Dan Mitchell. In this outfit you get too curious, you get a forty-four slug. I wouldn't like that." She added abruptly, "I hear you left Evans."

"Indian Agency."

"Up another step and in deeper. Somehow, I thought you'd break away while you had the chance."

They came into Broken Bow, heading down the street toward the business district. Janey did not notice that people stared and women showed their disapproval of her ankles by indignant sniffs and frowns. Dan again became very much aware that his arms encircled a lovely body and a couple of times his cheeks turned warm when he met the angry eyes of women or of frankly admiring men.

They started past the Holman store. Neither Cathy nor her father were in sight and then, a few stores down, he saw Cathy Holman on the walk, staring in shocked surprise.

Dan hastily looked away. Then he angrily wondered why he cared. His back stiffened as he rode on toward the Fleming office. When he pulled into the rack, Millard Fleming walked out the door. He stopped short in surprise as Dan swung off the horse and assisted Janey to dismount.

"Janey," Fleming said. "Something wrong?"

She explained about the accident. The alarm left Fleming's eyes to be replaced by cold irritation. "This is a bit too open a visit for my liking, but we'll have to put up with it. I'll see you in the office in a few minutes."

"You're quite the gentleman, Millard."

"On the right occasion, yes."

She walked stiffly into the office and Fleming turned to Dan. "What are you doing in Broken Bow?"

Dan resented the harsh disapproval but he hid it. "Greg said I could come in."

"Greg knew better. The more of you hang around, the more we call attention to ourselves. Get a drink and then head back. Come to Broken Bow only on business, understand?"

Dan's lips flattened. "If you say so."

"I say so."

Fleming strode into the office. Dan glared at the closed door and then mounted his horse. He rode slowly down the street to the Red Cloud Saloon. He went inside, ordered a drink and loafed over it. Then he went to the end of the bar and saw an open door on a narrow passage that led to the alley. No one paid any attention to him and, in another



moment, he moved along the rear of the buildings to Holman's store.

There was a loading dock in the back, the wide doors open. Dan entered, moved along an aisle to the store proper. Holman stood at a nearby counter and, up near the front, Cathy waited on a customer. Holman looked around and his deep grooved face went slack with surprise. But he hurried into the stockroom at Dan's signal.

Back here, they could talk without interruption, free of prying eyes. Holman looked sharply at Dan. "I didn't expect you."

"I had to come in." Dan told him of what he had learned at the Indian Agency.

"Theft on a big scale," Holman said. "Where's it going?"

"I think it's in Fleming's warehouse. I figured there'd be no trouble loafing around there and keeping my eyes open, but Fleming ordered me back to the Agency."

"Then how will you do it?"

"Wait until tonight and try to get inside."

"That's a big chance, Mitchell."

"I have to take it. If I can find Agency goods in Fleming's warehouse, we've tied him into the ring with solid proof."

Just then Cathy entered the stockroom, surprised and alarmed as she looked at Dan and then questioningly at her father.

"Come in, Cathy," Holman said, "and close the door. Mitchell doesn't want to be seen."

"He didn't mind it out in the street."

Holman cleared his throat. "Mitchell wants to slip into the Fleming warehouse after dark. He has to keep out of sight. I'm sending him to the house and he'll stay for supper."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"There's a watchman," Holman warned.

"I figured I can slip in and slip out without meeting him. But I'm not so sure about going to your house."

"Nonsense!" Holman snorted. "Stable your horse and

slip into the house. It's open. Make yourself comfortable. We'll close up early."

Dan accepted and left the store. A few moments later, he appeared on the saloon porch. He mounted his horse and, following Holman's directions, he circled the town, drifted in and found the house. He had supper with the Holmans.

Not long after, under the cover of night, he rode slowly along side streets toward Fleming's warehouse. He thought of Cathy and wondered what might have happened had they met under normal circumstances. He had the rueful hunch that he might have ended courting her.

He pushed the thought out of his mind when he saw the dark shadow of the warehouse and fence just ahead. He suddenly drew rein. A light burned in the office and he saw the faint glow of a lantern beyond the fence. He cursed under his breath. There was more than the watchman around.

He did not dare risk chance discovery. He reined about, turned in the next dark alley and drew rein behind a store building. Darkness protected him. He dismounted and set himself to wait.

He gave it an hour and then drifted out to the street. The lights still glowed from the warehouse. He saw a wagon pull out of the yard, roll across the street and halt. The driver hitched the team and returned to the yard.

The lashed-down canvas told Dan the wagon was loaded, driven out here to wait for others being loaded beyond the fence. He knew beyond a doubt that stolen government goods were being shipped out. By dawn the warehouse would be empty.

Dan dismounted, led the horse just inside the alley and ground-tied it. He moved out to the street again, staying to the shadows. The glow from beyond the fence gave him a faint light and he saw that the street was empty. He slipped along a building, close against the wall, eyes held on the closed gate across the street. He approached the wagon and one of the horses looked incuriously at him.

Dan moved swiftly and silently to the wagon. The canvas

was tight and Dan fished in his pocket for a knife to cut the lashing and expose at least a corner of the cargo. The blade sliced into the hemp. A strand parted and he bent to the task.

A gun muzzle pressed hard into his spine.

A harsh voice spoke in Dan's ear. "Stand hitched, friend."

He felt the pressure of the gun muzzle relax as the man reached for the colt in Dan's holster. Suddenly Dan whirled, his elbow knocked the menacing gun aside and his fist slammed into the man's surprised face.

The man fell back, the gun flying from his hand. Dan bore in, struck again, catching the man on the jaw. He catapulted back and down, striking the wagon wheel with a sickening *thunk*. He fell to the ground, unmoving and slack.

Dan jumped to him, reaching for his mouth. His fingers touched something sticky and wet. He jerked his hand away and, in the dim light, he saw that blood had streamed from the corner of the man's slack mouth.

Dan felt for heartbeat and found none. The man's skull must have struck the thick iron rim of the wagon wheel. Dan straightened, wondering how long it would be before the next wagon rolled out or the guard was missed. He heard noises beyond the fence and knew the gate would soon swing back for another wagon. He moved swiftly along the shadowy building to the alley and mounted his horse.

He faded into the darkness, expecting at any moment to hear an alarm. He moved directly to the edge of town and then set the spurs, lining out for the distant Agency. The night was far too quiet to suit him and he knew the dead gunman must have been found by now. He again headed directly across range. A little after midnight he approached the Agency.

He drifted in and sat his horse, searching the dark buildings. Satisfied, he moved to his small cottage. He sharply watched Haley's house but there was no light or sound. In a few moments, Dan was in his bed. For a long time he listened for the sound of riders but it did not come. At last he drifted off to sleep.



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He was braced for trouble the next morning. He went to the Agency office and Haley jovially asked him how he liked Broken Bow. Dan told him about finding Janey and of Fleming's displeasure.

"So I tore the town apart on two drinks," Dan finished disgustedly. "Bought me a bottle and started back."

Haley was disturbed. "Fleming can get pretty mad sometimes. But never mind, you came right back."

"Took my time. Killed the bottle on the way."

Haley dismissed him and Dan went to the warehouse where half a dozen Indians waited for supplies. He took care of them and was entering it on the records when he saw Millard Fleming's buggy wheel to the Agency office and halt. Haley appeared at the door as Fleming climbed out. He saw Dan in the door of the warehouse and imperiously signaled to him.

When Dan halted a few feet away, Fleming looked at Haley. "Mitchell came into Broken Bow yesterday. Said you told him to see the town."

Haley spoke uncomfortably. "He's worked good and I saw no harm in it."

"You saw no harm in it!" Fleming's handsome face grew dark. "Since when do we work by what you like?"

"Now look, Millard—"

"Greg, I've told you to keep gunslinging riffraff away from Broken Bow, and especially from the warehouse. They hang around and people wonder why. That leads to suspicion." Fleming paused, added slowly, "You know what happens when a man makes a mistake, Greg."

Haley looked both angry and frightened but Fleming turned to Dan. "I hope you followed orders?"

"Had a drink, and then another to get me started back. Bought a bottle and worked on it all the way home."

Fleming's hard eyes probed at him. "At least that's something. What time did you get in?"

Dan thoughtfully screwed up his face, judged the time the guard was killed. "Oh, I reckon it was about nine."

"Nine! You did take your time!"

"No reason to hurry. What's here?"

Fleming grunted and then his voice became slightly more pleasant. "I returned Janey to Cribtown this morning. She asked me to thank you."

Dan nodded. Fleming dismissed him with a wave and strode into the office. Haley, still alarmed, followed him and closed the door. Dan stood a moment and then wandered to his own cottage. He sat on the porch until Fleming came out, jumped in his buggy and drove off.

Haley came out and stood on the porch. Dan slowly walked back to the office. Haley gave him a glance as he came up and then looked after the buggy, his mouth pinched under the yellow mustache.

Dan shoved his hat back from his face. "How long a whip does Fleming crack?"

Haley's head swiveled toward him, eyes narrowed. Dan scowled toward the little plume of dust the buggy made. "I always figured a man's time is his own to spend where he pleased and when."

"You figured wrong," Haley snapped.

"How come? I do my job. That done, what more can you or Fleming ask of me?"

Haley's anger bubbled. "I ask no more, but you can bet Fleming—Forget it."

"But I don't like it."

Haley looked speculatively at Dan and then turned to re-enter the office. "Forget it. Have your fun at Cribtown after this."

"Wait up, Greg." The agent reluctantly turned as Dan indicated the distant dust plume. "What's eating him? Was he mad about something and taking it out on us?"

Haley suddenly cursed Fleming. "He was, Dan. He was shipping some stuff out of his warehouse last night. A guard was killed."

"Hey, now!" Dan whistled softly.

"Fleming thinks someone is trying to find out what we're

doing. A while back, there was a newspaper man nosing around but he left with a bullet in his spine."

"Is that why Fleming was checking on me?"

"No, just taking his mad out on both of us."

Dan stayed close to the Agency for the next week, knowing this was no time to suddenly center suspicion on himself. The death of the guard had alerted Fleming and that meant the whole organization. Finally, Dan rode to Cribtown with Haley and spent a night. He had a few drinks, played some poker and generally acted like a man with nothing on his mind. He saw Sean Sullivan but avoided him.

Back in the routine of visits to the town, Dan felt less restricted. He chafed at delay but warned himself not to push, even to hint at handling the main Agency records that Haley had not yet turned over to him.

Then one night, he saw Doc and Butch and they made him welcome to their table. Dan bought drinks around and said he hadn't seen them in a while.

"Busy," Doc Lear said shortly.

"Trouble up in Montana," Butch offered.

"Long ride," Dan commented.

"We got paid for it. And a bonus for a little gunsmoke. Man up there was holding out money for himself."

Dan bought another round. Butch had disclosed that the ring's operations stretched far and wide. A double-crosser turned up in Montana, so two gunslingers were sent from here to kill.

Two gunslingers sent from here! These two were hired for death, and later that night, before he could seem to fall asleep, a thought broke into his consciousness: these two were the operation's paid killers. Would they do the work close to home too? Had they been the so-called Indians behind the massacre of his sister and her husband?

He saw Butch and Doc several times within the next week but he got nothing more from them than bad liquor. There was no indication of further activity and Dan wondered if Fleming, like himself, had decided to move cautiously.



And more and more he became convinced, as the idea grew on him, that these two toughs could tell him plenty about those two headboards and the razed cabin.

One night Dan moved toward the lights of Criptown's garish street, wondering how he could make sure about Butch and Doc and not arouse the suspicion of the ring. He stepped up on the porch of the saloon, knowing Butch would be here.

He saw him with Doc at a corner table but, wisely, moved on to the bar and had a drink. Dan pretended to seek a table. He wandered toward Butch and Doc, seemed to see them for the first time. Butch signaled him over.

They had a drink from the bottle on the table. Doc only nodded to Dan and his feverish eyes showed his strange mood. Butch, though, needed companionship and was genuinely glad to see Dan. They loafed over the whiskey. Then Dan asked casually, "Getting the Montana dust out of your hide?"

"Drowning it," Butch grinned, lifting his glass.

"Sure wish I could've gone with you."

"Thought you'd quit gunslinging with the outfit."

"I have, but there's no excitement at the Agency."

Butch poured drinks again. Dan toyed with his glass as he spoke of the dull days. "Even the Indians look half dead, and I didn't expect that."

"We like 'em that way," Butch said.

"But I heard they broke out some time back. Raided a rancher and killed him and his wife."

Butch chuckled. "Do you think them sick, scrawny redskins could'a done it?"

"They sure don't look able."

"Now I could tell you something about that—"

"Butch!" Doc Lear's voice cracked like a whip. "You lost your mind?"

Butch glowered but Doc's cadaverous, chilling eyes quelled an angry outburst. He grabbed the bottle and filled Doc's glass, the liquor slopping on the table.

"You talk too damn' much," Doc said evenly.

"Dan's one of us."

"Sure, but *that* happened *before*."

Dan grunted and stood up. "Didn't mean to start anything. I'll ride along."

He left them and, from the door, saw Butch angrily talking to Doc. Dan went out on the porch, grinned tightly in the darkness.

He had no further chance to talk to Butch until the following week. Haley sent him to the Sioux villages to determine if there had been any noticeable drop in the number of men of fighting age. There had been whispers of a stir among the tribes to the north and Haley feared some of his own people might slip off to join the marauders.

Dan took the trail to the villages. Once again, he met with silent hatred. He saw Stone Nose, gave him a greeting but received only a grunt in reply as the sub-chief walked off. Dan did not linger, but rode on to the second. So far as he could see, there was no change in the population and he knew his report would make Haley feel better. Dan started back toward the distant Agency.

About a mile out from the village, he saw a rider coming from the direction of Cribtown and Dan moved to intercept the man. He should be warned to stay to the main road while crossing the reservation. He drew closer and saw that the rider was Butch Kennedy. Dan drew rein, face grim, waiting for the man to ride up. By the time Butch drew rein, Dan appeared friendly as usual. He warned Butch, told of his own experience.

"Where you heading?" he asked.

"Broken Bow. Fleming wants me."

"Better ride into the Agency with me and take the main road. These Sioux'll ambush you sure and then hide you where you won't be found."

Butch scoffed but agreed and the two men rode side by side at an easy pace. After a time, Dan said, "Speaking of Indians, what about that raid?"

"What raid?"

"The one you started to tell me about in Cribs town."

"Oh, that one. Nothing to tell."

Dan looked scathingly at Butch. "Afraid of Doc?"

Butch frowned and Dan kept silent. At last Butch said, "There's a lot I could show you about that raid."

Dan only grinned disbelievingly. Butch looked off the trail, the smile goading him. "We ain't far from the place. You don't believe me, I'll show you."

He reined off the road. Dan followed him by a few feet, his dark face grim and tight. They rode for some distance, finally splashed across a narrow creek, broke through trees and bushes and sat their horses not far from the black remains of the ranch buildings.

Butch rode toward the pile of ashes that had been the barn. He pointed beyond it. "The raid came from that way, but a bunch of us—"

"Us!" Dan exclaimed.

Butch grinned. Suddenly he gave a screaming war whoop. "Think an Indian could do any better?"

"Our bunch?" Dan asked in mock disbelief. "Why?"

Butch told him how Hansen had tried to sell his beef to Haley. His story was almost word for word that of Colonel Ames, but told from a completely opposed viewpoint.

"So we had to take care of 'em," Butch finished. "Might be you'll get a job like this someday, someplace. You never know with this bunch. Who'd've thought I'd ride clean to Montana to do a job?"

"You were here?"

"Sure, a whole bunch of us."

Dan looked toward the wooden headboards. "Did you kill them?"

"I don't know. There was a lot of shooting. They died in the house yonder. Then they were drug outside and treated like Sioux did the job. The cavalry found 'em later. Run all over the country looking for the renegade band. Questioned every Indian on the reservation." Butch chuckled. "And all



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the time the 'Indians' were getting drunk in Cribtown."

"Who ordered the raid?"

"Fleming, I reckon. But it was Crag Marsh led us. Crag was smart, whatever else. He sure fooled everyone here."

Dan wheeled his horse and rode to the graves. Butch, puzzled, followed him. Dan looked down at the mounds. Butch broke the silence. "You sure act funny."

Dan looked up and Butch flinched at the blazing glare of his eyes. Dan spoke through set teeth. "You're going to have a better chance for your life than these two."

"What do you mean?"

"The woman was my sister."

Butch's jaw dropped. He sat motionless for a long second and then, a cry choking in his throat, his hand streaked for his gun.

## VII

DAN'S Colt fired, the muzzle lined on Butch. The slug caught the man in the chest, knocking him back over the cantle, the spasmodic tightening of his finger firing his gun, the bullet whining harmlessly into the air.

Butch fell, one foot caught in the stirrup. His horse bolted and Dan raced after it, seeing Butch's body crash and bounce along the ground. Dan brought the animal to a trembling halt. He dismounted, freed Butch's foot. He was dead, probably a few seconds after the slug smashed into his chest. Dan straightened, looked toward the distant headboards.

"One for the tally, Marylou. I didn't know Crag Marsh was another but we can count him, too. There'll be more—Fleming and the man who gave him orders."

He considered Butch's horse a moment and then unsaddled it, removed the bridle. He slapped it on the rump and watched it gallop off. He doubted if the animal would get far without keen Sioux eyes seeing it. Once in a village herd, it would not easily be found.

Dan found a rusty spade, the handle burned, but enough remaining for his own use. He moved a short distance into the tangle of bushes and went to work. Some time later, Dan smoothed the ground over Butch and the saddle and bridle buried with him. Dan threw the excess dirt in the creek, pitched the spade after it. He looked around at his work. There was no trace of a grave.

Satisfied, he untied his horse and swung into saddle. He spurred away, heading directly toward the Agency. He rode in at sundown and Haley, seated on his porch, waved him over.

"What'd you find out?"

"None of our Indians have left the villages."

Haley showed his relief. "Light and rest your saddle. There's a drink waiting."

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Dan stabled his horse and came back. Haley had the bottle and glasses ready. "I figure a couple of lonely bachelors could share a drink."

"Sure Fleming would like it?" Dan asked on impulse.

"To hell with him. Drink up!"

Nothing more was said about Fleming but later that night, in his own cottage, Dan thought of it. He recalled the tension between Fleming and Haley the last time the two had met.

The next day he went about his work unconcernedly on the surface, but watched for the approach of riders. That evening, Haley suggested they go to Cribtown, winking broadly when he said that they were getting too lonely. Dan left him to search out his own companions and went into a saloon.

He spotted Doc seated alone at a table. Doc shoved the bottle to Dan as he sat down. Dan poured his drink, looked around. "Where's Butch?"

"You're about the hundredth that's asked that. Including Fleming. I don't know. Day before yesterday, he left for Broken Bow. He never showed up. He might've headed toward the desert country. He always wanted to go down there. That's one idea. The other is he's dead."

"Dead!" Dan sat quite still.

"It'd be like the damn fool to cut across Sioux range. Butch always got real mean when he met an Indian. Couldn't stand 'em. Maybe he done it once too often."

Two days later, Fleming again drove to the Agency. Dan braced himself for questioning but Fleming's business was with Haley. They were closeted in the private office for a long time and when Fleming stormed out on the porch, he had no more than a glance and a grunt for Dan. He climbed in his buggy and drove off.

Dan watched him go and then heard a slight sound behind him. He looked around to see Haley, frowning, his lips working. There had been an argument here.



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Dan pointed after the buggy. "Always riding around, that one. Must be nice to have enough money to do it."

Haley blurted angrily, "He lives off those who work for him."

"I've noticed that myself. Seems like the less he does, the more he's worth."

Haley's voice grew sharp. "You seem to know a lot about it."

"Why not? I'm not blind or deaf." Dan looked straight at the agent. "I can see you don't share equal with Fleming."

Haley shrugged. "I think that's something we'd better let drop."

"Sure, but sometimes I wonder if I ought to stay with the bunch, unless there's some way of getting more than Fleming gives."

Haley looked off down the road as though to make sure Fleming's buggy had disappeared.

That afternoon, Haley rode off with no explanation. He returned that night, again without a word. Later, he invited Dan for a drink. Their talk was idle until the very end. Then Haley poured a nightcap, handed it to Dan.

Haley lifted his glass. "To better things."

"Amen to that! And about time!"

"Unhappy here, Dan?"

"Not with you or the job."

"The pay then?" Haley studied his empty glass. "Sometimes more pay means more chance."

"I've taken chances before and I'll take them again. Is there something coming up?"

"Why, no. We're just talking."

"Oh? Well, 'night, Greg. Thanks for the drinks."

Haley only nodded and Dan left.

The next morning, Haley asked Dan to come to the office. Dan saw a saddled horse tied outside the building and, when he went in the inner office, Grant Evans looked around.

His moon face was impassive but there was a sharpness in the small, dark eyes, a slight purse to the lips. Evans only

nodded as Haley indicated Dan should take a chair. Haley cleared his throat. "Dan, we were talking about better times last night and about the chances we have to take."

Dan waited. Haley's voice grew sharp. "How far are you willing to go?"

"Far enough to get my share."

"Suppose a friend of ours wouldn't like it?"

"Fleming?" Dan chuckled. "Why should he know what I do on the side?"

Haley asked, "Well, Grant?"

"You're sure of him?"

"I'm sure. And we need someone else. Fleming can watch us too close."

"All right, tell him."

Evans' consent removed the last barrier. Greg Haley spoke fast. Dan would keep a special set of records and would transfer goods from both the Agency and sutler's warehouse to a store in a nearby town. Both men had combined to steal from Fleming. Money was held out, inventories falsified.

"A little at a time," Haley explained, "so that it's not noticeable. Crag Marsh worked with us but he tried to hold out for himself and got caught."

"Your doing," Evans said harshly.

Dan shrugged. "Crag would be caught sooner or later. Someone was bound to talk so I figured I might as well get a deal out of it."

"You're damn cold-blooded," Evans snapped.

"Why not? I'll be the same way about this. Cut me in and keep me happy and you'll have nothing to worry about. Nothing surprising in that. Each of us knows the other'd cut his throat if something could be gained from it."

Haley gnawed at the end of his mustache and Evans' beady eyes held unwaveringly on Dan. At last he slowly nodded. "All right, Mitchell. Dog lick dog until it's more profitable for dog to eat dog. We'll cut you in like we did Crag—even split. You handle records and the goods. We

overorder and make up false invoices. Each of us takes a risk one way or another."

Dan nodded and the pact was made.

Dan's work started immediately. A big shipment came in for the Agency and once again manifests and material had no connection. Haley had him pull out some stock from a previous shipment and load it on a wagon. He drove quite openly to the sutler's warehouse and Evans indicated a load of merchandise in a far corner.

"Fleming thinks that's damaged material to be returned. Every time a big delivery comes in, I use some of it to cover the stuff we take out."

"You never did this when I worked here."

"Of course not! But half those items you entered I made up myself. Our books were mighty straight then. I figured you were here to check up on us. Same way over at the Agency. Watch things change now."

Dan drove the loaded wagon to a town thirty miles away, delivered it to a pinch-eyed rail of a man in Evans' pay. It would be sold and the money find its way back to Evans and Haley.

On his return, Dan reported to Evans. He had just left the store when he saw Sean Sullivan going toward the distant stables. Dan waited a moment or two and then sauntered after him. He found the sergeant inspecting harness. The Irishman looked up as Dan entered the stable, empty except for themselves.

"Lad, ye take a long chance."

"No one paid any attention to me."

"Ye have news?"

"Yes." Dan swiftly outlined the new developments. Sean listened and then whistled.

"Thieves steal from thieves! 'Tis a twisted mess."

"But I think we can use it. Get the Colonel's permission to go to Broken Bow. Tell Holman I'll try to get in to report as soon as I can. Tell him things'll happen once I reach Fleming."



Dan slipped out of the stables. No one had noticed him and, shortly after, he rode back to the Agency.

His chance to see Fleming came sooner than he had hoped. Another shipment came and, after it was checked in, Haley called Dan to the office and gave him a sealed report to take to Fleming.

Dan rode into Broken Bow the next day. Fleming scowled angrily when he came in the office but accepted the sealed envelope, slit it open and read its contents.

"Why couldn't Greg bring this in himself?"

"Busy with the Indians."

"Busy with a Cribtown lady, more likely." Fleming leaned back in his chair. "Is that the way you figure it?"

"Now why should I figure anything?"

"Because I remembered Crag Marsh. Do you still have that sense of loyalty to whoever pays you?"

"What's to change it? You gave me a lift."

"So I did." Fleming waited a moment. "What do you think of Haley?"

Dan sensed the faint note of suspicion. "Personal or business?"

"Either way."

"Well, there's something about him I don't like. Grant Evans is worse." Dan threw out the bait. "I read them both as tricky men, Evans worse than Haley. But maybe that's why they have their jobs."

Fleming didn't directly answer. "I think I can trust you with a special job. Do it right and you'll get another lift."

"Always welcome."

"Things are not exactly right at the fort or the Agency. Our take has dropped and we can't figure why. I've been told *someone* is coming out to look around. But I'd like to know first. I think that Haley and Evans are double-crossing us in some way. I'd hate to have someone besides me find out how and why. It'd make me look bad. I want you to find out for me. Haley and Evans would not be as careful around you."

Dan spoke slowly. "I can try."

"Report to me. Do it as quick as you can. I don't know when we'll have an important visitor." His eyes grew cold. "I depend on you, Mitchell." Then he waved affably toward the door. "Have a night on the town on me."

He gave Dan a bill and dismissed him.

Out on the street, Dan grinned. So there was suspicion in the ring. Dan strolled along the walk to the Holman store, stopped to look in a window. Then, as if on impulse, he went inside. There were several customers but Cathy saw him, excused herself and hurried forward.

"Can I help you?"

"Sure. Cartridges, forty-fours."

She led him to the rear. The nearest customer was far down the aisle. He spoke low. "Did Sean come in?"

"He did. Dad's excited with the news."

"There's trouble inside the ring. The 'higher-ups' are sending someone out to look into it. This proves the ring's more than local."

"What will you do?"

"I can split the local bunch easy enough by exposing Haley and Evans. But I want to wait until the big trouble-shooter's here. Maybe the blowup will lead us to people higher than Fleming."

"You're taking a risk," she warned.

"I've done that since I hired on."

The next morning, Dan rode out of the town, taking the long road to the fort. Weary from the ride, he dismounted before the Agency office and went inside. Haley came out of his inner sanctum.

"Back, eh? How was the town?"

"All right. Fleming didn't look happy with that report, though."

Haley frowned. "Did he say anything?"

"No." Dan slapped the dust from his clothing but covertly watched Haley. Fleming was already suspicious of Haley and Evans. Now if Dan could get them worried about Fleming,

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the organization might fall apart and expose the whole scheme.

Dan said abruptly, "Something is bothering Fleming. He asked a lot of questions but I didn't tell him much."

"Now why would he do that?"

Dan faced the man squarely. "Are you sure you and Evans covered *all* your tracks? I think he's suspicious of the reports and the setup. Whatever it is, you and Evans had better check back."

"I guess you're right," Haley said hollowly.

Not long after, he rode out of the Agency to Fort Adams, a very troubled man.

The next day, several Indians came in for supplies. They were never communicative or friendly, but Dan felt their silent hatred had deepened. He watched them go and his uneasy feeling was still with him that night when he rode to Cribtown.

Dan went to the largest saloon and found it busy. He stood at the bar a time and then saw Doc Lear across the room. He started toward him, when suddenly he realized someone stood not far from him. He made out the big shape of Sean Sullivan. The sergeant inclined his head toward the street and moved on. Dan waited a moment and then casually followed.

The sergeant turned into a dark alley and was waiting when Dan came up. "Had to have a word with ye. Have ye seen signs of trouble at the Agency?"

"Nothing open. But I don't like the way the Indians act."

"That ye'd not, from what we hear. 'Tis said the Sioux hold secret council. Some ask for war and some would not have it."

Dan swore. "It's the raw deal they've had from the Agency. Sean, if they could just wait a while longer!"

"And who would be askin' them?"

"I'll try to see Stone Nose. I know he wants peace."

"And more want war."

"Still, I have to try. It's so close to the end up here, Sean."



Tell Holman I've got Fleming, Haley and Evans suspicious of one another. A wrong move by any of them could blow the Fort Adams bunch apart. I'm going to try to force that wrong move."

The following day, Dan was kept busy on reports and Haley hovered close, strained and worried. He brought out a ledger and, for the first time, Dan looked at the record of thefts from Fleming himself. Haley insisted they check the figures against the false ones given in the secret reports to Fleming.

When they were finished, Haley asked anxiously, "Do you think Fleming can catch on?"

"You've covered pretty well between the three sets of records. I think the drop in profits is what stirred him up."

"But they can be explained."

"Then there's nothing to worry about."

"No," Haley said dubiously. "I suppose not."

That night, Dan rode to Cribtown to see if Sean had made his report to Holman. He strolled toward the hotel and the small bar near it. A few moments later, Sean followed.

"Trouble, lad," Sean said in an urgent whisper. "The colonel was off the post and the exec officer wouldn't give me leave. Ye said get word to Holman right away so I wrote a note, sealed it and gave it to a lad in my troop who had a pass. He decided to have a drink before he saw Holman. He got in a fight and was knocked out."

"The note, man!"

"The lad was dumped in the alley and they robbed him. The note was gone with his money."

Dan bit his lip. "It was an unlucky break, Sean. Not your fault."

But Dan knew that note could be anywhere, cast aside, destroyed, or in the wrong hands. It looked as though his time ran out.

## VIII

DAN TRIED to reassure Sean, but the sergeant left blaming himself for a bad mistake. It could very easily be a deadly one, though the note had no mention of Dan. But if it came to Fleming's hands, the man would know of Haley and Evans' doublecross. He would also guess that Dan Mitchell was the only man who could have this information.

Dan finished his drink and, loosening the Colt in the holster, returned to the saloon where his horse was tied, mounted up and reined out into the street. Hand never far from his gun, he rode out of Cribtown and back to the Agency. That night, for the first time, Dan locked the doors of his cottage and slept with his gun close at hand.

Nor did he relax his vigilance the next day. It passed without incident and Dan felt a slight increase in hope, but did not depend on it. He was ready for trouble under any disguise and a day of peace did not let him relax.

There was also the problem of the Indians and the secret councils Sean had mentioned. Dan again spoke of the rumors of unrest in the north to Haley.

"But you said none of our Sioux have pulled out!" the agent said irritably.

"The time I checked. But I heard a whisper of trouble in Cribtown. Maybe I'd better take another look."

Haley shrugged. "All right, might not hurt."

The next day, Dan rode into the first village. Though he was used to hostility, it was nearly raw and open now. Squaws sullenly stared. The men silently watched and he saw the flame of hatred in each pair of eyes. As he rode toward the center of the village, he realized that the men followed slowly behind him. Each held a lance, a club, a bow or gripped the handle of a knife.

Dan moved slowly on as if unaware. He found the village headman, and Dan dismounted, ground-tied the horse. The

man did not move as Dan approached. He watched Dan with steady, narrowed eyes, lips pressed close, the mouth pulling down at the corners. Dan became increasingly aware of the ring of silent warriors behind him and checked the impulse to look back.

"I seek Stone Nose," he said shortly.

The chief took his time in answering. "What you want Stone Nose?"

"Talk," Dan said flatly.

The chief grunted. His eyes flicked to the men behind Dan, judging whether he should give the signal to attack and destroy this lone white man. Dan waited but gathered himself for trouble. At last the Indian spoke indifferently.

"Stone Nose not here."

"The other village?"

"Maybeso, not here."

The Indian gave his attention then to the village street. Dan had been contemptuously dismissed and he knew it. He turned on his heel and walked to his horse. The warriors watched as he mounted, heading for the next village.

They followed, a distance behind, to the end of the street. Dan rode straight in the saddle, eyes held firmly forward. He checked an impulse to hurry and rode steadily on. Only when he was well beyond sight of the village did he let the tension leave his shoulders and back.

He had certainly found confirmation of Sean's fears. The Sioux seriously discussed war, and their councils were close to decision. They would not otherwise so openly display hatred. The warpath was all but decided upon. Dan checked a thin chill of fear as he rode on to the second village.

Here again was hatred, thinly veiled. Here again the warriors gathered as he addressed the village head. He asked for Stone Nose. No one asked why, so Dan knew a fast riding messenger had brought the news of his coming. He was answered with stony ignorance that he knew was a lie.

He struck off for the Agency on a trail that would take him in a more direct route than the regular road. It passed by a



long line of trees and Dan saw a single figure standing near one. He rode up and drew rein.

"Stone Nose!"

Dan swung out of saddle and extended his hand. The Indian's eyes flicked briefly but he did not accept it. "I wait here. It is not good talk Agency man in the villages."

"I don't understand."

"Council think of war. Stone Nose want only peace. Warriors and chiefs do not like what Stone Nose talk. Now, what you want?"

"Peace."

The Indian grunted disdainfully.

"Can't you keep your people in the villages for a time?"

"Why?"

"Because changes are coming. There will be more beef, better shirts and blankets. There will be justice for the Sioux and the treaties will be kept."

"Big words," Stone Nose said scathingly.

Dan cast desperately for some means to persuade the sub-chief. He recalled the pride of the Navajo fighting men and the Apache war chiefs. "Is Stone Nose blind? Is he deaf?"

The muscular figure drew up. "I watch. I listen."

"Then look at me. Am I like Agency chief? Does my tongue sound crooked? I have seen what has happened to your people. It is not right. I work to change it."

"How?"

"I cannot tell you. Wait and listen. If the Sioux send a scout to spy on the enemy, does the scout then tell the enemy where he is?"

Stone Nose studied Dan closely and grunted, no more. Dan pushed even this slight advantage. "I have trusted Stone Nose because he is a warrior, a chief. I ask Stone Nose to trust me. Will he keep the Sioux from the warpath?"

The Indian eyed Dan from head to toe, and Dan silently met the searching scrutiny, knowing that he could say nothing more. Stone Nose finally nodded. "I will trust you—for a

time. I will talk peace. Maybe they will listen, but our tempers grow thin as our bellies hunger."

The Indian turned on his heel and disappeared into the bushes. Dan expelled his breath in a long sigh and then his mouth grew grim. There was not much time in which to prevent bloody Indian war.

Back at the Agency, Dan reported that none of the Sioux fighting men had left but that there was a dangerous mood among the Indians. Haley worriedly listened. "I'd better report this to Colonel Ames. He could strengthen his patrols."

"You can bet he knows. He probably blames you for it."

"Me! The Indian agent?"

"He knows about the poor Indian issue. Don't bother with the colonel. Just figure how to get out fast with our hair if the Sioux break loose."

He left Haley pondering.

The next morning, Dan looked out the office window to see a familiar buggy rolling toward the Agency. He loosened the Colt in his holster. Millard Fleming might be coming on routine business, but he could also be coming because of a note found in Broken Bow.

Dan called to Haley in the inner office. The agent joined him on the porch and watched as Fleming rode up and stopped. As he climbed out of the buggy, Haley said, "Surprised to see you, Millard. This isn't your regular time. No reports ready."

Fleming smiled tightly. "Nothing like an unexpected check to keep things going smooth, is there?"

Haley's careless laugh was not quite convincing. "You're wasting your time, but come on in."

Fleming mounted the steps, nodded to Dan, eyes flashing him a sharp look. Dan could see no sign of anger, but this man would never be direct and open. Fleming went on to the door, suddenly stopped. "Mitchell, when did you last see Butch Kennedy?"

"Why, Cribtown. He was with Doc Lear."

"No other time?"

"How could I?"

"A good question. I want to see you later."

He left Dan puzzled and a little worried. He had thought the matter of Butch's disappearance had long since been forgotten. He heard the door to the inner office close and then he wandered slowly to the warehouse.

He worked there at straightening stock, always with an eye to the door. Fleming finally appeared and, as Dan came up, glanced toward the office. "Haley thinks I'm asking about Butch, so he's not suspicious. Have you found anything on him and Evans?"

"There's something going on. Reports and stock don't tie in."

"You made an inventory?"

"Yes."

Fleming glanced toward the office again. "I'll arrange for you to come to Broken Bow. Bring it then."

"Sure."

Fleming nodded and left. Shortly after, Greg Haley came in and morosely asked, "Do you know anything about Butch?"

"Not a thing I could tell Fleming."

"He wants you at Broken Bow."

Dan pretended surprise. "What for?"

Haley chewed on the end of his mustache. "Said it was special work for a few days. Funny, he pulls you to Broken Bow. Maybe he's onto something. Taking you off the job here worries me."

"Hell, it could be anything! Special job?" He suggestively touched his holstered Colt. "Could be that, or he needs an extra hand at his warehouse."

"Maybe that's it. But keep your eyes open and be careful what you say."

"When do I go in?"

"Leave in the morning."

That night, Dan went to Cribtown, certain that he could contact Sean Sullivan. The town again bubbled and seethed



along its garish street and the saloon was crowded. Sean entered, approached the bar and found a place at the far end.

The sergeant made a silent question with his eyes and Dan made a slight move of his head toward the batwings. Sean spoke to the man beside him, and then left the bar. Dan waited a moment and then also pushed away.

When Dan came out on the porch, Sean stood at the head of the steps. He immediately descended them to the street and pushed his way through the crowd, Dan a few paces behind him. Sean turned the next corner and waited in the shadows. Just beyond, was the shadow-black area of an alley in which nothing moved. They entered it, feeling their way along a high fence that enclosed a yard behind the dark buildings. Sean halted and Dan came up.

"Have ye heard of the note that was lost?" Sean asked.

"Nothing, and I've had a visit from Fleming. He gave no sign that it had come into his hands."

"Glory be! But ye have news?"

"Tell the colonel I met Stone Nose. I persuaded him to trust me and work for peace among the Sioux. He promised, but said it would not last long unless things changed."

"The colonel will be pleased."

"Fleming has called me into Broken Bow tomorrow. I've hinted I have some proof of theft. He wants it. I've got Haley suspicious and scared that Fleming is onto something."

"Then what do ye plan?"

"I'd hoped to wait until the ring's trouble-shooter came out before I blew things up. It looks now as though I'll not be able to stall, but I'll try, saying there might be other records. Fleming may not wait for that."

"He'd gun Haley and Evans?"

"Try to. But they're already watching for trouble. Killing them won't be easy and that means they'll blow this whole thing apart. Tell the colonel to be ready for it."

The sergeant looked about. "We'd best part then, lad. 'Twould not do to be caught this near the end."

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Dan waited until he saw Sean's shadow in the mouth of the alley. Then it vanished. Dan gave him time to reach the street then sauntered along the fence, paused to look along the side street. It was empty and he stepped out, became aware of a narrow gate in the fence, slightly ajar.

He gave it a glance and moved on. He had taken but a few steps when he sensed someone behind him. He turned. Light from the main street revealed Grant Evans' round face and glinted from the gun he held leveled on Dan.

"I heard all you said back there, Mitchell."

Evans had only to pull the trigger but he wanted to savor his control of the situation. "I was up on the balcony and saw you and that sergeant make signals. It struck me damn funny that two men who'd been fighting not so long ago should be friendly now."

"So you followed me."

"Saw you go down the alley and then saw the gate. I was within two feet while you talked, on the other side of the fence."

Suddenly Dan looked beyond Evans. "Get him, Sean!"

Evans whipped about, realized he had been caught by the oldest trick in the world, and swung to face Dan again. Dan's Colt blurred from the holster and he fired. The bullet caught Evans in the chest, spinning him half around before he fell like a lumpy sack.

The shot thundered. Dan heard a shout of alarm from the far corner. He jumped over the big slack body and darted through the narrow gate, kicking it shut behind him. He faced a long, narrow yard, bounded by the fence. He raced toward its far end, scaled over it and dropped on the other side.

He saw a narrow way between two buildings leading to the main street. He darted along it, paused at the far end, and looked out on the busy thoroughfare. Excited people rushed toward the far corner. A military patrol hurried by and

Dan stepped out and hurried after them. No one paid him any attention.

He stabled his horse, darted into his cottage and swiftly undressed without lighting the lamp. He tousled his hair, jumped into the bed and lay waiting in the darkness.

The time dragged but little more than half an hour passed before he heard the expected sound, that of a horse racing toward the agency. The rider swept by the cottage and Dan heard a call for Haley.

He hurried to the door and flung it open. He heard steps and called, "Who's there? What's happened?"

Haley and another figure appeared in the circle of yellow lamplight. Dan saw the death's head feature of Doc Lear. Haley said, "Grant Evans was killed tonight. Doc brought word from Cribtown."

Dan stared in pretended amazement as Doc told the story. Dan shook his head in mock surprise and waved them inside, closed the door. "When did this happen? I was in Cribtown for a while. Must have been right after I left."

Doc told him and Dan looked at Haley. "What'er you going to do?"

Haley sensed the double meaning in the question. His lips moved fretfully. "Janey sent Doc to tell me and Fleming."

"Maybe you'd better tell him, Greg."

Haley caught Dan's meaningful look. "Yes, maybe that's best. Get back to Cribtown, Doc."

"Janey said—"

Dan cut in smoothly. "Evans' killer might still be in Cribtown. You're needed there, Doc."

"That's right," Haley said with more forcefulness. "I'll handle the rest of it."

Dan hurried to his kitchen, returned with a partial bottle of whiskey. He poured drinks around, handed a glass to Doc. "For your trouble, until Greg can pay you better."

Haley took the hint. He drank, asked Doc to go with him to his place. Dan heard their steps fade into the night and



he had another drink. He heard a horse move by the cottage at a slow, steady pace in the direction of Criptown.

A moment later, Haley entered. He was plainly frightened by this new development. "Dan, do you think Grant was killed by Fleming because he found out what we're doing?"

Dan let the man worry a few moments then thoughtfully shook his head. "No. Fleming would want everyone to know who was killed and why and by whom, as a warning."

Haley regained some confidence. Then his eyes clouded with a new worry. "Fleming will replace Grant at the Fort. He'll appoint someone he knows in Grant's place. He'll be at the store to check up. I know Fleming."

"You figure he'll find something?"

"How do we know what private records Evans kept? Fleming might find them and then you and me would be shown up."

"He wouldn't—"

Haley spoke in impatient anger. "No matter what the laws and rules say, Millard Fleming is our boss. He has the ear of the big boss and *he's* the one with connections in Washington."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know, except a man named Al Steed shows up when something goes wrong. He's the trouble-shooter."

Haley reached for the bottle but a new light came in his eyes. "Dan! Maybe it's not as bad as we think!"

"How do you figure?"

"You tell Fleming what happened to Grant. Break the news and let him know you can handle the store until he gets someone permanent. That'll give you a chance to find if Grant left any records."

"Do you think Fleming—"

"Sure! You're right there. A hint will do it. Head out now. Come morning, someone else might give Fleming the news. We don't want that."

Dan pretended reluctance but Haley insisted. At last he sat his horse while Haley looked up, the faint starlight

making his long face a blur. "Make him send you to the store, Dan. Make him!"

Dan nodded, spoke to the horse and rode out, leaving Haley hopefully peering into the night after him.

Dan rode with a mounting exultation, coming into Broken Bow well after midnight. He rode to Fleming's house and found it dark and silent. His knocking brought immediate challenge from an upstairs window. He identified himself.

"Trouble in Cribtown," he added.

The window closed and a few moments later the door swung open. Fleming faced him, gun leveled. He lowered it as soon as he saw Dan. "Come in, Mitchell."

Dan stepped in. He quickly gave Doc Lear's account of Evans' death. Fleming listened, frowning. He was obviously irritated at being awakened and this news about Evans brought an angry outburst.

"What was the damned fool doing!"

"*Quien sabe?* Point is, he's dead. Doc Lear's trying to find out who did it and why."

"He'll find nothing! I'll have to get out there myself."

"How about the sutler's store?"

Fleming thought, looked keenly at Dan. "You've handled the records. Think you could hold the job down?"

Dan managed a blank, surprised look. "Me! Taking Evans' place?"

"Until I can get this mess straightened out."

"But how about the colonel?"

Fleming snapped, "I'll take care of the colonel. Open up the store in the morning. I'll be out."

The next morning, the store clerk was surprised that Dan was in charge but Fleming's name stopped argument. Later, Fleming showed up briefly. "Colonel Ames doesn't like you, but there's nothing he can do. I'm going to Cribtown. Then I have to be back in Broken Bow to meet someone."

"I'll handle things," Dan promised.

"While you're about it, dig for a connection between Evans

and Haley. If they held out on us, there'll be some record. This gives you a chance to find it."

He rode off and Dan Mitchell found himself post sutler at Fort Adams.

Word of Evans' killing had come to the fort, so Dan had little time to himself, for curious soldiers filled the place and the clerk was swamped. This continued until the last trooper hurried away to his barracks to beat Taps.

It continued the next morning but at last Dan had a chance to go into Evans' private office. There was a huge desk and a small, locked safe. Dan wondered who besides Evans' had the combination. He had just sat down to the desk when Haley walked in.

The agent was a bit more cheerful. He sat down unbidden and looked around the small office in approval. "Can't think of any better man I'd like to see in here."

"Any news about Evans?" Dan asked.

Haley sobered. "There's no line on who did the shooting. Janey's in full charge of Cribtown, now that Grant's gone. A step up for her, I'd say." He leaned forward. "Did you find anything?"

"No time, until now."

"Look hard, man."

Haley soon left, Dan seeing him to the door. He then returned to the office and searched through the desk but found no secret records. Suddenly the clerk called him. Dan found him standing at the outer door. "Here come Fleming and Janey Lang. Stranger with 'em."

Dan went out on the porch as a surrey pulled up, Fleming at the reins. Janey Lang sat alone in the back seat, and her eyes and smile were slightly mocking as she looked at Dan. Fleming signaled him to the surrey.

When he walked up, Dan had a better look at the man beside Fleming. He was tall and slender, quietly dressed in gray. His gray bowler hat faintly suggested "dude" until Dan looked into the unnaturally pale face.

He felt the harsh impact of black eyes as hard as agates.



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There was no warmth in them or in the faint smile the man gave as Fleming made the introductions.

"Al, this is Dan Mitchell. He'll handle Evans' job for a while. Dan, this is Al Steed. He'll be around in a few days after we look over Cribtown and the Agency."

"A pleasure, Mitchell," Steed said in a dry voice. The black eyes flicked over and dismissed him.

Fleming picked up the reins. "Get what Al wants, do what he says, Mitchell. I wanted you to meet him now so there'd be no questions later."

## IX

DAN RETURNED to the inner office, sat down and looked at the desk. If there was, by any chance, evidence here about the higher-ups, Dan wanted to find it before Steed.

In one of the drawers, he found a slip of soiled and crumpled paper with some meaningless scribbled numbers. Dan frowned at it and then suddenly looked at the safe.

Consulting the paper, he twirled the combination, working the numbers left and right and trying the handle. It would not budge. He started again, this time right to left. This time, the handle pulled back and he opened the door.

Here were more ledgers. He looked them over. One was for the store, including that "Transfer" account Dan had first noticed. The second was a smaller one and Dan saw that these were the accounts Evans had said were not for his eyes.

Dan carried them to the desk, compared one with the other. By nightfall, he had a clear picture of the way Evans paid off to the ring. This was something Blaine and the Colonel would need to support their charges of corruption in Broken Bow. Closing the safe door and spinning the combination, Dan took the books to his quarters and hid them.

There was a flurry of business the next morning that delayed Dan's further search for evidence. He had just sat down at the desk when he heard a step in the doorway and wheeled around to face Fleming. The man pulled up a chair and sat down. He looked at the littered desk. "Found anything?"

Dan did not want to disclose his discovery of the ledgers. "Nothing that shouldn't be here."

Fleming frowned. "There has to be, Mitchell. We had a steady income up to several months ago. Then it began to go down. Some of it was bad merchandise, Evans told me that. But that's not enough to explain it."

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Dan nodded toward the safe. "Maybe in there?" He gambled. "Do you have the combination?"

Fleming stood up. "I'll send someone out who knows safes and combinations. We'll have that open in a few days. But look other places. Ransack his house. Find the proof if you have to tear everything apart. Steed is at Cribtown now, checking it over."

"How about Janey Lang?"

"She's being very nice to Steed. It's his decision whether she runs Cribtown, now that Grant is gone. That's a windfall for her."

Fleming went to the door. "You've got several days before Steed gets here. After Cribtown, he'll look in Greg Haley's accounts. Greg's as nervous as a chicken around a hawk and that makes me sure there was something going on. Keep looking. Find it before Steed does."

He nodded and was gone.

Dan left the store and went to Evans' small but comfortable cottage beyond the warehouse. He pulled the ledgers from their hiding place and glanced through the pages, more certain with each moment that his new plan was right.

Suddenly someone banged on the front door. Startled, Dan looked up. The knocking came again. He hastily replaced the ledgers and hurried to the front room. He opened the door and saw Haley, long face drawn, eyes skittering fearfully.

"Can I come in, Dan?"

Dan stepped aside. Well within the room, Haley turned. "We're in big trouble, Dan. Steed will be at the Agency in a few days. I'm to turn all my records over to him. I'm to answer all his questions."

Dan nodded. "Then he's coming here."

"They're looking, Dan. They're onto something. Maybe the reports Evans fixed up would fool Fleming, but let Steed get ahold of one little suspicious thing, and he'll be like a pack of wolves on a blood scent."

The man's fright gave Dan a glimmer of a new idea. He feigned worry. "You can't cover all the traces, Greg?"



"No way once a smart investigator like Steed gets on the trail. How do you think that fellow up in Montana got caught? Al Steed! He looks pale and peaceful but he's a killer."

"You could ride out now, before he finds out."

"Where? The ring's everywhere. Do you think it'd let me live so long as I know what I do? What chance would I have against gunslingers and bushwhackers?"

"Who sent Steed?"

"He comes from the east, Chicago, I think. But I couldn't prove it."

"If Steed was caught and forced to talk . . ." Haley stared as Dan spoke swiftly. "Greg, suppose the whole organization was smashed clean to Washington?"

"You're not drunk, Dan, but you must be out of your mind! Now who'd do that?"

"You."

Haley's jaw dropped and he gasped. Dan pressed on. "It's easy when you think of it."

"Sure! get every gunman in the country on your trail! You *are* crazy!"

"No, listen! Suppose you told all you know about Fleming and Steed and the others to the right people? Local and Federal law would move fast. They'd be in jail or running and the whole outfit broken up. Do you think they'd have time to think of you?"

Haley licked his lips. "It'd work, maybe, but who would be the right people?"

"Suppose I know who they are, Greg? Suppose both of us went to them with records and facts?"

Haley looked fearfully about the room as though he expected to see Fleming's gunmen at any moment. Suddenly his face grew tight with suspicion. "How come you know about them? Why are you doing this?"

Dan spoke patiently. "You and Evans made a bad mistake when you started to steal from the ring. You never left a way open to run if you got caught. When you brought me in, I figured a way. I know who to go to."

Dan then added threat to the promise of safety. "I'm going to them, Greg. If I go alone, you'll be jailed with the rest of them unless they gun you down first. If you go with me, your evidence will go a long way to make a judge and a jury lenient. And it will save you from a bullet."

Haley paced up and down. Finally he whirled around to Dan. "These people you talk about—will they believe us?"

"Sure, I've got Evans' records—the false ones he showed the government, the real ones that show the cuts to Fleming. You've got records at the Agency that show how much the ring stole. Steed's in Cribs town. Let's ride to the Agency, pick up both sets of records and head to Broken Bow. By mid-afternoon we'll be safe from Fleming or his gunmen."

Haley still hesitated and Dan decided on a final gamble. He went into another room and when he reappeared, he held Evans' ledgers and his own gunbelt and holster. He placed the ledgers on the table as Haley watched and buckled the belt about his waist.

"Greg, I'm pulling out and taking Evans' records. You can do as you please."

He picked up the ledgers and started toward the door. Haley spoke sharply, "Dan! Wait! Are you sure these people will protect us?"

"I'm sure."

Haley shifted nervously. He swallowed, weighing fearful decision against fearful decision. "I'll go."

In a few moments they rode out of the post toward the Agency. Evans' records rested in bags behind Dan's saddle. They came to the Agency and Haley's fright mounted. They went into the office and Haley stuffed another pair of saddlebags with incriminating evidence. He tightened the buckles and then looked at Dan.

"This makes me as guilty as Fleming or any of them," he said as though he had just thought of it.

"But you're turning it over to the law. That counts. It's better than a bullet."

Haley shuddered. "Let's leave this place! I'll feel better."

They left the Agency, cutting directly across range to avoid chance meeting with Fleming on the road. The miles whipped by and they were at the edge of the reservation when Dan became aware of a new sound.

He drew rein and Haley pulled in beside him, puzzled and freshly alarmed. "What is it?"

"Listen."

They were silent. Then they heard it. It was less a sound than a rhythmic throbbing in the air that came from far off, back toward the heart of the reservation.

Haley's long face turned pale. "Sioux war drums! My God! they're breaking loose!"

The distant throbbing continued, sinister and deadly. Dan reined his horse about as Haley said fearfully, "We'd better head for cover. They could catch us out here alone."

Dan sensed how near Haley was to panic. But the drums did not mean immediate attack. The dance had just started and could easily go on for days, the warriors working themselves up to that final pitch for the first attack.

There was still a thin edge of time left. Maybe a parley between the Sioux and the soldiers would stop the impending war. Haley moved restlessly and Dan knew that the agent would only precipitate the trouble. There were also the ledgers in their saddlebags.

Haley said in a choked voice, "We just can't wait here to get our hair lifted!"

"You can't go back to the Agency." Dan extended the leather bags to Haley. "Take these. Ride to Broken Bow and go to John Holman. Give him these records. Tell him I sent you and give him the whole story. Holman will hide you."

Like all fearful men, Haley could not immediately face a decision. He looked about as though expecting to see Indians or equally deadly gunman at any moment.

Dan said quietly, "There's no place to run, Greg, except to John Holman. The longer you stay here, the sooner the Sioux will find you."

Haley's weak mouth tightened. He swung Dan's leather



bags atop his, reined the horse about and set the spurs. Dan watched him race toward Broken Bow and felt a touch of pity. Of all the demons that beset men, Dan thought fear is the worst. Haley became a dot in the distance.

The rhythm had not increased. They were still a rumbling threat of what might come. Dan reined his horse about and cut back across a corner of the reservation, heading for the fort. The drums rumbled continuously beyond the horizon.

He neared the boundary between the Indian lands and the military reservation and increased distance softened the sound of the drums. He now paralleled a watercourse, typically marked by bushes and small trees. Suddenly a band of barbaric riders broke through the bushes. Dan instantly drew rein and his hand jerked to his holster. The Indians had seen him at the same instant and bunched.

He grimly eyed the twenty or so Indians, realizing the odds against him. One of them rode forward. He lifted his arm high in the sign of peace and Dan recognized Stone Nose. Dan also raised his hand and rode to meet the Indian. They stopped a few feet apart.

"You hear drums?" Stone Nose asked.

"Yes. Is it war?"

"My people have two minds." He indicated the group behind him. "We council peace. We say have powwow with white chief at fort. Maybeso white war chief do something."

"He'll try," Dan promised.

"That is good. Young Sioux warriors listen to Brown Bear who has said that only warpath is left for Sioux. He will drive white man away for good. The young men listen."

Dan indicated the drums. "So there will be war?"

"Will white war chief listen to Stone Nose?"

"He certainly will! I'll take you to him."

Stone Nose whirled his pony about and rode back to the group. Dan waited as the Indians conferred a moment then rode toward him. They silently followed as he touched spurs and rode toward Fort Adams.

## SAVAGE RANGE

The ride was silent and grim. They came at last in sight of the buildings of the fort and Dan spoke to Stone Nose. "I will talk until we see Colonel Ames. Then Stone Nose will speak for his people."

## X

ONCE Colonel Ames and the Indians had finished their pow-wow, the colonel prepared to go with them. With Haley and the records, it seemed a change would be fast coming.

Dan and Sean Sullivan hit leather for Broken Bow, where the sergeant went to the Red Cloud while Dan went to tell Holman of his plans to see the inside of Fleming's warehouse before he returned. Holman went to send a telegram to the Federal Marshal.

When he got to the Red Cloud it was filled, but the moment Dan walked through the batwings, Sean pushed through the crowd and came toward him. He nodded toward the porch and Dan turned and walked out beside him.

Sean's voice was anxious. "We have a bit of a problem. Our friend has come back from Cribtown."

"Fleming! Alone?"

"Janey Lang and a man were with him. I was getting a bite to eat at the cafe and looked through the window as their surrey passed on the street."

"They went to the warehouse?"

"Yes, just before dark. Would they be scenting trouble?"

They probably heard the Sioux war drums," Dan said thoughtfully, "and figured Broken Bow safer than Cribtown. They couldn't have learned about Haley yet."

"It does not seem likely, but still . . ." Sean shrugged it off. "Will we be after looking at the warehouse?"

"First, we'd better make sure where our friends are. Let's check Fleming's home. That's where he'd take Janey and Steed. If they look settled for the evening, we can be pretty sure they won't be around the warehouse."

It was but a short walk to the street on which Fleming lived. Lamplight glowed from behind drawn blinds as they cautiously approached the dense shadows under the trees. Sean spoke in a low voice. "Now what would we be doing?"



## S A V A G E   R A N G E

Dan saw that one blind at a side window had not been completely lowered. Telling Sean to stay by the tree and cover him in case of trouble, he drifted across the lawn into the very shadow of the house. He cautiously approached the window, bent to look below the blind.

He first saw Janey and Al Steed. The man spoke forcefully to someone out of Dan's sight. Steed emphasized a statement by slamming his fist into his open palm. Dan changed his position and saw Fleming standing near a small liquor cabinet, a glass in his hand. His handsome face was tight with anger.

Dan could only catch a faint murmur but it had a tight and angry sound. Steed and Fleming discussed something at length, perhaps argued. They would be here quite a while, Dan judged. He moved away from the window, ghosted across the yard and joined Sean. "We're lucky. They're arguing while they drink."

"Then we waste time," Sean said.

They headed for the warehouse. Dan moved along the street to the high fence that surrounded the dark and silent building. There was no light, no sound to indicate even a night watchman. Dan and Sean studied the fence, the big closed gate.

"There has to be a watchman," Dan said tightly.

"Then he's asleep at his post, ye can depend on it."

Dan led the way into the alley. He halted and listened, pressing his ear at a crack between the thick boards. He heard nothing. "Against the fence, Sean. Boost me up."

Sean braced himself, tightly clasping his hands to form a stirrup. Dan stepped into it and, with a heave, Sean lifted him. Dan's fingers grabbed the top of the boards and he swung himself up and sideways, hooking a boot over the fence.

He looked into the dark warehouse yard. He saw big wagons parked for loading and beyond them the dark, silent bulk of the building. He reached down a hand to Sean.

In a moment, both men had dropped to the ground and crouched at the base of the fence, hands close to their guns.

Sean's boots had made muffled thumps against the fence as he scrambled up but apparently the sound had not carried. There was no alarm.

Dan signaled Sean to follow and darted to the nearest wagon. He moved to the next, and a third, and then faced an expanse of bare yard to the warehouse itself. He was about to dart across it when he saw a faint glow of light from within the building. He hissed a warning and pressed back.

A door creaked open and Dan could see the bull's-eye lantern in the hand of the watchman. He stood in the doorway a moment and then moved unconcernedly out into the yard. The watchman suddenly turned and came ambling toward them. Dan slid his Colt from the holster.

The man came closer and once lifted the lantern, flashing its light toward the wagons. The rays just missed Dan and Sean, circled on. For a moment, Dan thought the watchman would walk right on them. But at the last moment he turned, stopped and placed the lantern at his feet.

He looked idly around. With a final warning pressure against Sean, Dan eased away from the wagon. The watchman fished something from a shirt pocket. Dan edged forward, breathing shallowly, gun held poised.

A match flared and the watchman held it to a rolled cigarette. In the same instant, Dan took another step and his gun barrel descended in a short, chopping stroke. The watchman dropped without a sound.

With Sean's help, the man was carried into the warehouse. Sean retrieved the lantern, and helped Dan securely tie the man, his own soiled handkerchief serving as a gag.

Sean straightened. "He will sleep for a time, from the looks of him. 'Twas no gentle tap ye gave him." He looked beyond the circle of light toward the dim stacks of merchandise. "Take your look. I'll stay here by the door."

Dan nodded and picked up the lantern. He strode down the aisle between stacks of crates and boxes. He flashed the lantern on the stenciling here and there and, for a time, found nothing suspicious. He worked his way up another aisle and

came on unmarked containers. They looked too innocent.

Dan placed the lantern on the floor and worked a box off the top of a stack, turned it about. He took a look at the stenciling now revealed.

"Sean!" The sergeant came up and Dan pointed to the lettering. "Broken Bow Agency, Greg Haley, agent," he read aloud.

Sean whistled. "Ye'd think Fleming would be smart enough not to bring that here!"

"Transferred from a wagon train," Dan said shortly, "and he hasn't had time to repack it. That's why these boxes are stacked so the consignee doesn't show. This is what we wanted, Sean. When the marshal finds this—"

"If he finds it."

"He's on his way. Will be here tomorrow. We'll make sure this is the first place he visits." Dan's head jerked up. "Listen!"

The sound repeated, outside the building. Dan instantly doused the lantern. He snaked his gun from the holster as he moved quickly to the big doors, Sean at his back.

They both heard the wide street gates swing back and several men enter the yard. Lantern light glowed and Dan and Sean moved back to the towers of boxes. Sean touched Dan's arm and pointed to the bound and gagged watchman.

Dan nodded and the two of them darted to the limp form. The lanterns in the yard cast a faint glow within the partially opened door and now they could distinctly hear voices. Dan and Sean carried the watchman into the black shadow of an aisle and placed him close against one of the stacks, knowing they could do no more.

Steps approached and then Fleming called harshly to someone in the yard. "Get those teams hitched, fast! We have to get this stuff out of here."

Dan and Sean moved back as the door creaked open and yellow light fanned over the top of the stack behind which they stood. Fleming swore. "Where in hell's that watchman!"

Someone answered, "Not here, that's certain. I always



figured he sneaked a sleep or a saloon visit now and then."

"This will be his last," Fleming growled.

Dan heard their steps move down a far aisle. He heard the rattle of trace chains and the stomp of hoofs, an occasional oath from the yard. More men came in.

Dan drew his Colt, face grim as he signaled Sean to watch the far end of the aisle while he watched the near.

"This whole row goes. Move it quick and fast."

Dan heard men move about, grunts and muttered curses. Warehouse doors were flung wide and Dan heard a wagon backed just inside, then crash and scrape as crates were loaded onto it.

So far, all the activity centered two aisles over and at the doors, but Dan knew that stolen government goods might be stored anywhere. He dogged back the hammer of the Colt, the small deadly click unheard in the general noise, as he realized that men were just beyond the stacks behind which he stood.

A strangely familiar voice asked. "How about this row?"

Then Dan placed it. Doc Lear! Fleming answered, "Those four stacks. The rest is stock I bought."

"How'd you learn about the Federal Marshal?"

"I've paid the telegrapher for years to let me know of any suspicious wire. I'd have known of it earlier if we hadn't been in Cribtown."

Doc Lear started around the far end of the aisle. The lantern's light became bright and Doc's lean, grotesque shadow fell plainly on the splintered floor. Dan's finger imperceptibly tightened on the trigger of the Colt. The lantern light fell directly on the unconscious, tied watchman.

"Fleming!" Doc called sharply.

Dan heard Fleming's hurried steps along the far aisle. They halted and then he heard a gasp. Now Dan could see Fleming's larger shadow. The man lunged forward but Doc swung him back.

"Wait! How do you know what's waiting down that other aisle?"

Dan touched Sean and motioned back. The two men eased away, Dan intently watching the telltale shadows cast by the lantern. Fleming's voice raised.

"Jack! Hal! Over here!"

Dan and Sean continued a slow, silent retreat. Suddenly Doc appeared at the far end of the aisle and Dan's gun dropped, roared as he snapped off a shot. Doc spun around and back out of sight as the explosion boomed in the confined space.

Another man appeared, trying to swing around and fire. Sean's heavy gun blasted and the man fell back and down. Dan and Sean raced for the end of the aisle and whipped around it. For the moment, they were safe.

Dan looked grimly about. They were at one end of the building now and Dan saw a narrow door that must lead to the office. But to reach it, they must expose themselves as they ran across the open spaces between the rows of merchandise.

Dan tried to guess what Fleming would do next. He heard a small sound along the next aisle. He dropped to his knees and, gun ready, looked around the corner of the crates. He saw a gunman several yards down, pressed against the stacks as he tried to slip forward.

The man swung up his gun as Dan's Colt bucked and flamed. The man crumpled, leg knocked out from under him. Men shouted excitedly near the big doors. Sean whirled around his corner and sent three rapid shots up the aisle. There was a scurry and then all was silent.

Fleming's voice raised in anger. "Go in after 'em!"

"You want 'em," a voice snarled reply, "you get 'em. Doc and Jack dead, Hal hurt bad, and you want us to stop slugs!"

"I'm ordering—"

"Like hell! Me, I'm riding out, Fleming."

Dan heard the shuffle of feet. Fleming cursed. Steps sounded again and then faded away. Lantern light still glowed above the stacks from somewhere near the door.

## S A V A G E   R A N G E

Sean spoke in a whisper, "What'll they do next?"

Dan shook his head and listened. He cautiously peered down the aisle again. Except for the wounded gunman, the building seemed empty. Dan slowly stood up as Sean asked, "Have they run?"

"Maybe. We'll see."

Dan edged into the aisle. He watched the far end, gun ready to fire at the first movement. But there was none. He crossed over to the next stack and scouted the far aisle, again empty. He crossed it to the next and now he could see the wide doors, the wagon blocking it. Beyond, the yard showed dark, without life.

"Sean, they've pulled out."

The sergeant joined him. Dan holstered his gun. "Fleming's on the run. He's found out Haley's records are missing and so are Evans'. He came here to move out stolen government goods, probably on Steed's orders."

"And caught us," Sean finished.

"Or we caught him, you figure it. He'll cut and run, Sean. So will Al Steed. Get Holman and Marshal Haney. Bring them to Fleming's house."

"Dan, ye can't be going there alone. Wait for help."

"That might be too late. And, Sean, use the authority of those stripes to bring along any soldier you might find on the street."

Dan strode toward the doors opening on the yard. Lanterns still burned where Fleming's men had left them and Dan saw Doc Lear's sprawled form lying near the far wall. The slack face was turned toward Dan with a strange look of content. Dan moved on and through the doors.

Not long after, he cautiously approached Fleming's house. Faint light still glowed from behind the blinds and there was no evidence of turmoil or sudden flight. But Dan, re-loaded gun in his hand, scouted the dwelling from the shadows of a tree. He saw that one blind was still not fully drawn.

He moved across the yard, looking toward the rear of the house, searching the far shadows. He saw the dark form of



a stable but no light and the shadows seemed empty. He reached the house and once more peered below the blind into the room.

The room was empty. Then Fleming strode in from a hallway, handsome face drawn and tight. He dropped bulging saddlebags by the door, retaining a gunbelt. He buckled it on as he crossed the room to the liquor cabinet.

Dan considered the situation. Fleming was on the verge of flight. If Dan could get him under his gun, he would then have control even though Steed might still be present.

Dan moved around the corner of the house and stepped lightly up on the porch. He ghosted to the door and carefully placed his hand around the knob. He pulled and slowly turned the knob at the same time. The door gave to pressure and Dan felt grim relief that Fleming in his haste had failed to lock it. He slowly pushed it open.

He looked down a hall and saw the stream of light from the front room. He could see the saddlebags on the floor. He listened, heard no sound from above. Maybe Steed had left and Dan breathed a silent, fervent wish that this was so.

He was equally thankful for the thick carpet that muffled his steps as he moved to the door. He heard a tinkle of glass at the liquor cabinet. Dan slid into the room. Fleming stood with his back to him, pouring a drink.

"Don't move," Dan said, leveling his gun.

The man jerked and then froze. He stood with the bottle in one hand, shot glass in the other. Dan moved further into the room. At his order, Fleming replaced bottle and glass and unbuckled his gunbelt. He let it drop to the floor.

"Now kick it aside," Dan ordered.

Janey's voice, sharp and brittle, spoke from the hall door behind Dan. "Drop *your* gun, Dan Mitchell!"

## XI

FLEMING looked back over his shoulder as Janey spoke again. "Don't force me to shoot. Drop the gun!"

Dan turned his head. She stood just within the doorway, dressed for riding, a deadly derringer in her hand and a look of hard determination on her face. Her lips had set in cruel lines and there was no warmth in her dark eyes. At this short distance, the derringer could kill and she held the hammer back ready to drop.

Dan lowered his gun and let it drop with a dull sound to the carpet. Fleming whirled about, scooped up his Colt and swung it to cover Dan. His handsome face became ugly.

"I don't know where you fit in this, Mitchell, but it's plain double-cross." He dogged back the hammer of his gun. "That gets you a bullet."

"Millard!" a voice crackled from the doorway. "Don't be more of a damned fool than you have been."

Fleming's face flamed as Al Steed stepped inside. He did not lower the gun. "We trusted this man, Al. I'm going to kill him."

"Later" Steed said evenly. He studied Dan. He still wore his gray suit but had strapped on a gunbelt under the coat. "Where do you fit in this, Mitchell?"

Dan thought of Sean and the help he should bring. Dan gambled on gaining precious time, gambled against a bullet.

"Maybe you can figure it out."

Fleming swore. "By God, we'll make you talk!"

Steed's gesture checked Fleming. "Not now, Millard. He'll talk later, when we have time to work on him."

Steed looked at Dan. "Since you've come, Butch Kennedy disappeared, Grant Evans was killed, and you shot Crag Marsh. Haley's on the run and someone knows enough to send for the Federal Marshal. There was a gunfight at the warehouse and I'm sure you had a hand in it."

He stopped but Dan said nothing, his lips flattening. Steed gave the ghost of a sigh. "Well, we'll make sure of this. Millard, put up that gun and get the horses saddled—an extra one for our friend."

"We're taking him!"

"Certainly. He will serve as hostage. Later, we'll work him over. At the next town, I'll send a wire to Senator Graham to meet us in Bismarck."

Dan's eyes flicked. Senator Graham—this was the name he wanted but he wondered if he'd live long enough to use it. Steed's voice cut in on his thoughts. "Janey, can you keep our friend quiet?"

"Very easy."

"Then I'll gather up some more records while you take care of the horses, Millard. Hurry it up."

Fleming reluctantly holstered his gun and moved around Dan to the door, careful not to step between him and Janey. The two men disappeared. Dan heard Steed mount the stairs while Fleming strode down the hall and a door in the rear banged faintly.

Janey made a slight motion with the derringer toward a chair. "You can sit down, but don't think I'm going soft. I'll shoot in a minute if I have to."

Dan sat down in a chair against the wall. Janey, holding the gun steadily on Dan, moved to another just beyond the doorway. Dan indicated the hall. "They're done, Janey, the end of the trail. You're a fool to string along."

She smiled. "I know what I'm doing."

"Do you? Greg Haley has talked. More than that, he has handed over the Agency records. I found Evans' secret accounts and they're in the right hands. So where does that leave them?"

She shrugged her slender shoulders. "I'll take my chances that they'll come out. They have a lot of friends in a lot of places, Dan Mitchell, and the friends have power."

"Enough to tell a judge and jury what to do?"



"Yes, and take the badges from the sheriff or Marshal Haney."

"This is Federal, Janey. I don't think they can do much there. You'll be implicated with them unless—"

"I let you go? No, thanks."

They heard the back door close and, at the same moment, Al Steed came down the stairs, saddlebags in his hand. The two men came into the room. Steed drew his gun and lined it on Dan. "All right, Janey. The horses are ready. I'll handle our friend."

Dan arose and, at Steed's signal, walked ahead down the hall several feet behind Fleming. He heard Janey's steps beside Steed's. Fleming pushed open the rear door and stepped out, wheeled, gun in his hand. Dan saw four saddled horses and Fleming curtly ordered him to mount up.

"One wrong move and I'll gun you down," Fleming said.

Dan carefully mounted. Fleming held the gun on him while Janey and Steed climbed in their own saddles and Steed leveled his gun on Dan. Only then did Fleming turn to his horse.

Steed spoke with quiet deadliness. "We'll ride to the street and out of town slow and easy, Mitchell. Don't try to get away, don't try to call attention to us. You'll die that minute."

He told Janey and Fleming to bring up the rear. They rode the length of the house down the dirt drive to the street, approaching the dense shadows of the trees that lined the thoroughfare. Dan, with a sinking of the heart, saw nothing move and the glow of lamplight from the few other houses had a peaceful quality that was completely lost on him.

Steed rode close beside him to his left, Janey and Fleming a short distance behind. They now came into the dense blackness of the trees. There was a sudden shifting of shadows all about and Sean's bellow broke the stillness.

"Halt and surrender! You're surrounded!"

Steed moved convulsively and Dan threw himself to one side out of the saddle, reaching for the man as Steed

spurred his horse. Dan's arms locked about Steed's waist as the horse bolted forward.

They were thrown from the saddle. Dan dimly heard shouts, the pound of boots. A gun made a flat, sharp crack and then a Colt roared nearby. Horses snorted and pounded near.

Dan had a wildcat on his hands. Steed wrenched savagely, breaking Dan's hold. The man came to his knees and stabbed for his gun, then Dan was on him, smothering the draw, pounding at the pale face with his free fist. Steed grunted as a blow landed and then brought up his knee in a vicious jolt.

Dan caught it on the upper leg but his grip loosened on Steed's gun hand. He grabbed wildly and his fingers taloned about the man's wrist. He twisted the arm back but Steed clawed for his eyes.

Dan swung, connected, and Steed tumbled back with the force of the blow. But still he struggled to break free. Dan's muscles bunched and he snapped the man's gun hand back, felt the fingers spasmodically open. Suddenly Steed brought his knees up under Dan's body and heaved.

Dan was thrown back and over, falling asprawl. He twisted about to his knees and saw Steed scrambling to his feet, dart toward the street. Dan saw the glint of metal near his hand and his fingers tightened on Steed's gun.

"Stop!" Dan yelled the warning.

Steed increased his speed, suddenly darting to one side. Dan lifted the gun and fired, snapped off the first shot, took a split second's time with the second.

Steed, legs still working, catapulted forward onto his face and then limply rolled over. His legs moved spasmodically and then fell limp. Men raced by Dan and he dimly made out a uniform. They stopped by Steed's body as Dan pulled himself to his feet. Sean came up.

"Are ye hit, b'y?"

"No," Dan said thickly.

"This'n's dead," a man by Steed's body called.

Dan slowly turned. The yard seemed to be filled with

men. Sean stood beside him, he made out Holman and then saw the star on Haney's dark vest. Fleming stood not far away with his arms reaching high in the air.

"Hey!" someone called near the edge of the drive. "Over here! The woman took a bullet."

*Janey!* Dan thought. He brushed by Sean and hurried over, bent down. Janey lay face down on the grass and Dan saw the spreading stain between her shoulders. She moaned, moved her head and Dan knelt down beside her.

"Janey?"

Her eyes opened as her head turned. He gently moved her so that she could look up at him. She had a strange pallor and her breath came raggedly. She frowned, like a small girl. "I—I've been shot?"

"We'll get a doctor. You'll be all right."

"Will I?" She searched his face and her eyes clouded. "Dan Mitchell . . . I'm . . . the fool."

She sighed gently and her eyes closed. She died as easily as a child might drop off to sleep.

Later that night, Colonel Ames paced eagerly up and down in Holman's parlor. Dan sat on a horsehair sofa watching him and Cathy sat beside him.

"Then when Sean came with news of the fight and said you had gone alone after Fleming—"

Cathy held his hand as they sat side by side and listened to Colonel Ames tell of the parley with the Indians. Greg Haley listened uncomfortably in a corner as Holman nodded now and then.

"The Sioux will wait," the Colonel finished, "and now we'll show them we mean to give them justice. I came directly into Broken Bow, knowing what Dan and Sergeant Sullivan planned to do. But I didn't think it would be all over so soon."

"Thanks to Dan," Holman said. "Between what Haley has told us and what Fleming told the sheriff to try to save his hide, we'll break up the whole ring. The sheriff's holding Fleming for the Federal Marshal when he gets here tomorrow."



There'll be an order sent to the Federal authorities in Chicago to arrest this Senator Graham."

"And he'll lead us right up the ladder in Washington," Ames exulted. "It'll spread all over the country, wherever the ring operates. Dan, this country owes a lot of thanks to you for exposing these grafters and embezzlers in high places. That's something we Americans hate."

Dan shook his head. "I had my thanks when I evened the score for Marylou."

Holman stirred. "That reminds me, Dan. Fleming told the sheriff it was Al Steed who ordered the Hansens killed and suggested an Indian raid."

Dan said slowly, "Crag Marsh, Butch Kennedy, Doc Lear, Al Steed—"

"And Fleming in jail for a string of years," Holman added. "All your doing, Dan."

Dan nodded and suddenly stood up, eyes dark. "Sure, and I'm glad. But Marylou's still dead."

He walked out on the porch. He stood there looking out on the dark street. He heard the door open and gently close, then Cathy stood beside him. After a moment, Cathy spoke softly, "Dan?"

He turned. "Yes?"

"What will you do now?"

He looked out on the street again. "I have a ranch in New Mexico, in the high country. I'll go back there. I want to build it up. The ranch house itself needs changing. It looks like a barracks now. I want to make it over into a home as pretty as the valley below it and the mountains beyond." He laughed and turned to her again. "Oh, I've got great plans now, when I get back there. But there's something more I have to do here in Broken Bow."

"What is that, Dan?"

"Marry you."