

HIGH FURY

HE HAD TO KILL THE ONE MAN WHO
COULD SAVE HIM FROM A HANGROPE
HARRY WHITTINGTON



Landers stood over her trying to think what he could do. In her condition a bullet in the head seemed kindest.

Her bruised face was puffed with sun-poisoning, eyes swollen closed, lips bulging and cracked, blood coagulated on them. He knelt beside her, listened to her animal whimpering. Dress and underclothing had been ripped away. Her body was raw, hideously discolored from three days' exposure to blistering sun and cold mountain nights. It didn't make sense that she was alive.

. . . In the saddle-bag he found the tin of salve he'd bought from a Laramie veterinarian as remedy for insect bites and screw-worm cuts on his horse. He spread the greenish salve on her cracked lips and over the exposed body. Probably it was axle grease with some kind of green coloring in it.

He waited, holding his breath.

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TRAP FOR SAM DODGE
SHADOW AT NOON
CROSS THE RED CREEK
VALERIE
MAN IN THE SHADOW
VENGEANCE VALLEY

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High Fury

Harry Whittington

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— 1 —

WHEN THE FEVERED WHISPER FIRST TOUCHED AT HIM LIKE fingers brushing across the nape of his neck in the vast badland silences, he shook it off.

"Aiyeee"

It didn't make sense because there wasn't even a trail on this lava-scarred high mesa, tormented and tortured into ridges and ravines by a million suns and ceaseless winds. He was stalking upward across it with savage intentness, following *something* as if his life depended on it.

"Easy," he warned when his tan horse flinched nervously at the curious sound, prancing on rock slicks.

He pushed the whispering from his mind and continued ascending the long, wrinkled brow of the slope toward a treeless escarpment of sand-mottled boulders, thinking that if the three men had made camp, this would be its site.

A cresting August Wyoming sun made him and his horse a blaze-blur on slate outcroppings so they were almost lost against charred browns and dung-heap grays.

Far below him lay dry plains, and above reared higher plateaus, yellowed crags jutting against bleached sky, incredible pinnacles beyond them, whole massive ranges lost inside distant circles of vivid blue cliffs where a gray-green haze promised shade and water but always retreated ahead like the hope of heaven.

"Aiyeee"

Even hearing that mewling again, he ignored it as if afraid to admit its existence in his own mind.

He was alone on this rocky promontory, that sound had to be a trick of the wind, or some lonely cry from his past reaching after him across long, empty years. God knew he hadn't forgotten the way that Clevenger woman had wept.

He shivered in stifling heat because he'd never forget how the sound had chilled him.

Now he barred this sick whimpering from his thoughts as one of those things a man so far from towns and traveled trails had better not let himself dwell on too heavily, ignoring it as he'd reject whirring whistle of deadly rattler on Central Avenue Southeast at Cheyenne. A man could unravel at the seams when alone too much like this.

When his quarter horse stopped quivering from the relentless climb through sandstone spikes, Landers pushed black, flat-crowned beaver hat back and squinted, seeking a patch of shade.

Finding none, he prodded the horse forward again, resigned to thirst and heat but undefeated by it, never looking back, instead letting his gaze circle ahead in set perimeter on crusted terrain.

That mewling clawed weakly at him again.

Landers reacted now, quivering slightly, bracing himself and waiting for it in the hot shroud of silence. He cursed himself tiredly and without rancor because he was so fine-drawn, sweated to the brink of exhaustion.

He tilted his head. The sound—if it were reality and not a sunstroke hallucination, came downslope on the wind.

He waited, a lean-bodied man, wide-shouldered, with seared hollow-cheeked face and haunted eyes of a saddle-wanderer, unwanted, and belonging nowhere. Deeply embedded in shadowed planes of his face and eyes was a terrible yearning that he believed he kept well hidden. Plainly, there was a magnificent quality of goodness about him, and a gentleness buried under scar tissue of hard-learned lessons of rough back country and hostile towns.

Abruptly, Landers spotted the black bowels of a dead fire ahead, carelessly quenched by men who didn't even know they were being trailed.

He swung down, tall, long-legged, checking the campsite. Neither pleasure nor triumph showed on his bleak face. This campfire was three days dead and the three men who'd made it had pushed on, going further into the sun-hazed distances. They were ahead of him and he'd overtake them, but he didn't hurry; he did not relax, either.

He shook out the makings, rolled a cigarette, carefully scanning the abandoned campsite, reading every indication of their presence that remained carefully. He scowled, trou-

bled because he'd been following three horses and saw there had been four people around this fire.

He fired up the cigarette, going over it in his mind. Sweat leaked from his hatband, drying before it got through the alkali dust to his eyes.

He tried to place them around the fire, the scuffling fight, wondering about that fourth one and how he'd gotten here.

The cry struck him, distressful like an animal's death whine. He crushed the cigarette in his fist, hand moving instinctively toward the Colt. 45 on his thong-holstered thigh.

Gun in hand, Landers looked around cautiously. He stepped past burnt-out ashes, and in the squat shade of a boulder he found what looked like a crouching animal.

He caught his breath, stomach roiling. He shook his head, unable to believe it even when he saw it was a woman, half-naked, mindless, broiled by sun and exposure, more dead than alive.

He moved forward. She was whimpering, not because she hoped to be heard, but because she couldn't help it, no longer even knew she did it.

"Kindly God! A girl. A young girl."

Landers stood over her trying to think what he could do for her. In her condition, a bullet in the head would seem most merciful. Her bruised face was puffed with sun-poisoning, eyes swollen closed, lips bulging and cracked, blood coagulated on them.

Mother of God, and I figured I had troubles.

He knelt beside her, found her barely breathing, whimpering, unaware of him between her and the sun. Dress and underclothing had been ripped away. Her body was raw, discolored from sun and exposure to cold mountain nights. Her flesh was bruised and she was dehydrated. It didn't make sense that she was alive.

He stood up, strode to his horse. This explained that fourth person around Clawson's campfire. Where had they latched on to her, riding double until they climbed up here? They'd left her for dead—that was for sure. Why wasn't she dead? Sunstroke, exposure was enough to kill her, not even reckoning what Clawson and his pals did to her before they abandoned her. That fire was three days cold . . . Sometimes it was insane the way a human being could cling to life.

He pulled loose saddlebag, poncho and saddle roll, returning with them to the girl.

Landers shook out the blanket, stretching it five feet high between boulders to make a small oblong of shade. Rationing water into his palm from canteen, he dampened the inside of his poncho, then spread it beneath the blanket.

Lifting the girl, he moved her as gently as possible upon the poncho. Her flesh was raw but she was beyond the place where physical pain could reach her.

Cupping his hand under her head, he poured a few drops of water between her broken lips.

She whimpered but didn't turn away. She made no effort to swallow, either.

"Come on girl, you got to help a little."

Then he cursed. Why? Why should she want to live now?

He unwrapped a pair of his Levi's, hesitated. He'd have to put something on that flesh before it could endure the touch of rough fabric.

He dampened his neckerchief, dabbed her cheeks and eyes, then dampened it again and left it on her mouth though it became fever-warm on contact with her flesh.

He found greasewood, made a fire, boiled coffee from a bag of Arbuckle, then set it aside to cool. When the coffee chilled, Landers soaked his neckerchief and patiently laved her blistered body until all the liquid was used.

She stirred faintly, but wasn't aware of him yet.

In saddlebag, he found the tin of salve he'd bought from a Laramie veterinarian as remedy for insect bites and screw-worm cuts on his horse. Its healing qualities might help this girl. In her condition, it couldn't harm her.

He spread the greenish salve on her cracked lips and over the exposed parts of her body. Probably it was axle grease with some kind of green coloring in it. He waited, holding his breath.

It seemed to Landers that she relaxed slightly. He worked her legs into the Levi's then, but left them unbuttoned to allow air on seared skin.

He hunkered against the boulder beside her, staring across sun-struck hills. How did you put sense in it, finding her in the badlands? Made no more reason than her being alive after three days.

Strange. You could hit a man with your fist and kill him; one bullet and he fell dead; thrown from a horse and his

life was slapped out of him. Yet, you looked at this girl, saw what Clawson and his friends had done to her, what sun and exposure and mountain cold had done. Still she was alive.

He broke out the quart whisky bottle from his saddlebag, glanced at the sleeping girl with twisted smile.

"This won't make me believe it any more," he said aloud. "But I won't care as much."

He took a quick gulp, sat staring at the bottle.

He got a tin spoon from his bag, filled it with whisky and tipped it between the girl's lips. She made no effort to swallow. Landers pinched her nostrils closed, forcing her to drink involuntarily. He nodded, satisfied. After a few moments, he repeated the dosage.

"Might revive you, girl," he said. "If not, it'll help you die happy."

The Brent Landers' philosophy of life, and you're welcome to it. Simple and to the point. Fight as long as you can, then figure a way to die happy.

He fed her another spoonful of whisky, sat back glancing into the wild land where Clawson and the other two had gone. He'd been a long time on their trail, had a long way to go.

He pulled his gaze around, moved it across the girl, honey-brown hair matted and snarled, face warped out of shape, eyes closed, mouth torn and shapeless.

He winced, fingers tightening on the bottle. You started out looking for three men. You wanted only one of them. You wanted Gil Clawson, but you learned he'd thrown in with the other two, and you started looking for them, but not hating them.

Not yet.

He took a deep drink. *Now* he hated them. He'd learned the hard way that men could be the cruelest animals, killing for pleasure. No other animal on earth would leave a creature like this—except men. The same three men he was looking for. Men like those ought to be strung up by the toes and left hanging until they were dead, so they would have plenty of time to think about why they were dying.

Still Clawson was his only hope to beat an old murder charge. Never forget that. He glanced at the girl. No matter what Clawson had done, he wanted Clawson alive.

He stood up, face twisted. Girl. You hear me, girl? This

fire's three days dead. Three days. Clawson's on the run. If he gets away from me this time, I may never find him. God almighty. I done for you all I can. Almighty God. You couldn't make it any way.

Landers glared at the girl, at his horse, at the empty rock benches ahead of him, at the way the sun was waning.

"If you had one chance in God's world, it would be different," he said aloud.

He cursed, placed canteen, salve tin, blanket beside her. Then he turned abruptly, striding toward his horse without looking back.

The girl whimpered, crying out.

Landers found water just before nightfall.

He plodded slowly downslope with her in his arms and wrapped in his poncho. She had chills; she shook; she cried out mindlessly, but she never opened her eyes.

A clear pool of water gleamed blue-green in the sump of a dry creekbed. Willows ringed it and it had the faintly acrid taste of alkali but his horse drank from it greedily, snuffing in the silences.

He laid her down on blanket and poncho beside the pool, bathed her with chilled water. She did not respond.

He stood up, staring at her. He cut willow poles and it was almost dark by the time he had made a litter with a doubled blanket secured between the six-foot limbs.

He built a fire, checked and found he'd used most of his coffee bathing the girl. "Oh, fine," he muttered, returning the almost empty sack of Arbuckle to his saddlebag. He took a drink of whisky, decided to bed down without eating. It wouldn't be the first time in these past three years that he'd gone to sleep with stomach growling.

He filled his canteens ready for travel, stacked in a supply of greasewood and spruce for a morning fire. Then he lay down near the girl, pulled off his boots, feet aching and sweated, putting his head on his saddle.

He closed his eyes but they throbbed heavily as he thought about Clawson and the other two and the widening distances. They weren't running from him, but they were on the run. As long as he'd stayed on their trail, even when it grew cold, he felt as if he were getting somewhere, but now he had lost them for sure. The trail signs that even cautious men don't

realize they leave behind them would fade, dry, rot on these rock ledges, in this sun and night wind.

He cursed aloud.

He shifted on the chilled ground. He had to rest, and forced himself to go on lying there refusing to think at all, drifting in the darkness, drifting——

The screaming ripped the night to atoms and brought him lunging up to his feet, trembling.

Landers shook wisps of sleep from his clogged mind. The girl was writhing, twisting, flailing about on the blanket.

He knelt beside her, put both hands gently on her shoulders. When he touched her, she threw her head back and screamed, trembling all over. Good Jesus, she thought he was one of the three who had raped her and left her for dead up there.

"Easy," he whispered. "Easy. It's all over, girl. Easy . . . you were just having a bad dream . . . you hear me girl? A bad dream——"

She gulped, gasping, and her body shook convulsively. But some instinctive memory of his gentleness to her in these past hours coated her terror and slowly, slowly, she settled back on his poncho.

She was icy cold. He covered her with his sheeplined greatcoat and stayed beside her, hand lightly on her shoulder, until she finally quieted and sank into normal, restful sleep.

"That's fine, girl. You're sleeping now, but what about me?"

He got up, walked to the pool, got a drink of water in his cupped hands, returned to the saddle. He stared at the sleeping girl before he lay down again.

Landers said aloud, with some awe in his voice, "Well, you're getting better, that's for sure—anybody with strength enough to scream like that."

His voice was light, but his fists were taut, white-knuckled. That girl's screaming brought it all back. It wasn't this hurt girl's screaming at all, it was Maude Clevenger in the street at Johnson City

Three years ago in Johnson City, but Maude's rutted face and her heartbroken screams were more real than the smell of spruce in the night.

He stared at his clenched hands. He'd been running away from those screams for three years. Yet he hadn't done anything any other man wouldn't have had to do, pushed

the way Stan Clevenger pushed him. He hadn't done anything except to save his own life.

But Stan Clevenger was dead. The big man in the Johnson City area, a wild steer of a man who took the law into his own hands—Clevenger was violent, opinionated, obstinate. You couldn't head him off once he set out on a path, but the town respected him because he'd driven out lawlessness, wasn't a lawman at all but just a rancher who wanted a decent place to call home.

This was the man Brent Landers had killed in the soggy clay street at Johnson City, but he had killed in self-defense.

It had started out in such a terribly ordinary way. Brent had come to the Johnson City country and ridden for Stan Clevenger for a while. Then he found himself a place with grass, a natural winter shelter, a flowing well, a shack.

He bought a few head of cattle, stocked his place, borrowed some money at the Johnson City Bank, put up a windmill and cut some feed against the winter—a young kid with dreams, plans and no troubles.

One night, Gil Clawson stopped by and offered him a fifty head of feeders for a price that didn't make sense. It took all the cash Brent could scrape together, but they rode out to a small place thirty miles east of Johnson City and sure enough here was this discouraged old man who had lost his wife and his will to ranch, just the way Gil told it. Brent paid his money, got his bill of sale and, alone, started back to his place in Sage River Valley west of the Johnson City settlement.

He came on to Maude and Stan Clevenger at the east edge of town. Both of them were on horseback, Maude looking brown and hard as a man, the way most western women got, and Clevenger was already trembling with rage.

Like the whole settlement, Brent knew Clevenger was a violent man, knew he'd killed a gun-slick outside the town bar. He was a man you couldn't reason with.

Clevenger had been rustled, unmarked cattle driven off just ahead of roundup.

There were no brands, no earmarks, no signs to show they were Clevenger's cattle. There was just the fact that Clevenger had lost cattle, this was his breed, and, though he raged like a bull that he had no time to brand everything running loose along Indian River, still he knew these steers like he

knew his own children. There was no doubt in his mind, they were his cattle and he was taking them over.

All Brent knew was he had no money left, a winter ahead and a bill of sale on these animals.

Clevenger ripped the paper and threw it at him.

"You want my advice, Landers? You sell out. You drift. No man stakes his land with my cattle. No man cons me with no phony bill of sale."

"We'll have to settle it some way," Landers said. "But they're mine. I bought 'em——"

"You stole 'em," Clevenger raged.

And right then, Brent Landers got the empty, sick feeling of doom. Clevenger had made up his obstinate mind, nobody was going to change him, and he was moved now only by his violent temper.

Maude spoke to Stan; Brent prodded his small herd forward. Behind, he could hear Maude's voice and Clevenger's raging tearing through it.

Brent got a few hundred yards inside the town, moving across it. It was a hot, muggy afternoon after a rainy spell. People stood unmoving along the muddy, discolored boardwalks, staring.

He heard Clevenger yell behind him. "You got one choice, Landers. You give over them cattle and clear out, or I'm going to kill you."

Brent swung down from his saddle and his horse stopped instantly, waiting in the sun.

He turned, watching Stan Clevenger with that big gun in his hand.

Brent set himself, sick at his stomach, but ready.

"Don't be a damn fool, Stan," he said.

Clevenger swung down, gun fixed on him. "You giving over?"

There was something regal and arrogant about the way big Clevenger stood as if he were the man who invented right.

His face was rigid, set like granite, the same way his mind was set and closed and impregnable.

"These cattle are mine, Stan. You got better sense than this."

But Stan wasn't listening any more—if he ever had listened to anybody. He said, "I'm naming you a thieving cattle-

stealing son of a bitch, Landers. I'm making a citizen's arrest. You put your hands up or I drop you where you stand."

Brent shook his head, his rage matching Clevenger's now. He was seeing Stan Clevenger the way he never saw him before, a man who didn't need always to be right, but who needed to walk over people, striking them down like he was the wrath of God, almost as if this meant as much to him as being right.

"I warn you, Stan. Put that gun away."

Stan laughed at him, his voice shaking with rage and phony laughter. "Sure, cattle thief, I'll give you a chance to draw."

He made a move to replace his gun in its holster, but he didn't do it. He made a downward arc and Brent should have been dead because Clevenger fired as the gun snout tilted up again.

But Brent was too filled with hatred for this self-righteous man to trust him. A man got too good, you couldn't trust him any more at all. And he knew that Stan had killed before, and would kill again, because he put himself above other men, with the right to judge them—and execute them.

When Stan Clevenger's fist tightened on his gun, bringing it up, Brent saw the slight movement. He lunged hard to the right, going down on his knees, making a moving target, and he shot Clevenger through the chest from his kneeling position.

There wasn't anything really clear after that. Gunfire spooked the steers and they broke in every direction. The stunned people on the walks seemed incapable of motion. Brent stayed where he was on his knees, smoking gun in his fist.

Only Maude Clevenger moved. No stricken animal ever wailed the way she did. She half fell from her horse and hurled herself into the soggy clay beside Stan. She caught his head in her hands, sobbing. She saw he was dead and she wailed deeply from the pit of her stomach.

The sound tore at Brent. Time ground to a halt and only Maude's screaming was real. She was some distance from him, but he saw her stricken, twisted face, the way she cradled Stan's kingly head against her flat chest, swaying.

She sobbed; then she screamed again.

It got rugged because Brent saw what he had done. He'd killed the most respected man in the settlement. His wife was screaming vengeful accusations, and he saw he had no

chance. A respected man was dead. He had killed him. He no longer had any ranch, anything, all he had was panic. Self-defense wasn't going to buy him anything. They'd round up those steers and Maude Clevenger would swear they were hers, and they'd hang him. Murderer. Rustler.

And her screams beat at him so he couldn't think. He pressed his hands over his ears, but he couldn't shut out her heartbroken wails. Then he was on his horse and he was running, three years running.

Landers got to his feet, sick and empty-bellied. He felt hungry, but he couldn't have eaten even if he'd had food.

Hands shaking, he walked down to the pool. He sprawled beside it, pushed his head down into the cold water. No sense trying to sleep any more tonight. Here he was in this Godforsaken lost mesa, gut-sick with running away, seeking the one man who could swear he'd bought those cattle and had not stolen them, so he could return with him to Johnson City. He wanted to go home again.

He drew in a deep, ragged breath, standing tall and staring up at the infinite sky, the limitless spaces, the stars gleaming chill. What now? Gil Clawson was always just ahead of him, and now he'd lost his trail in the lava ridges up there.

At daybreak, Landers saddled his quarter horse and secured the litter on each side of his saddle.

When he turned he found the girl's swollen eyes were open. He could not determine what color they were.

She watched him intently. Her face was gray, but, for the moment, there was no terror in it.

She spoke.

He said, "What?" and moved toward her.

He saw her withdrawing as he neared, saw panic swirl in her eyes. He paused a few feet from her, waiting.

Gradually she quieted, and she said it again. "You—you're—not one of them?"

"No." Brent shook his head. "No, I'm not much. But I'm not one of them."

He watched her hold her coffee with hands that trembled. He held his breath, afraid she'd spill it, but he didn't say anything. She lay on his poncho watching him prepare to break camp.

He came to her. She no longer trembled when he walked near, but watched him warily, the way he'd seen caged animals poise—tensed and agonized with bottled fear.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

"No."

Well, thank God, she believed him. She'd come a long way.

"I'm going to pick you up now."

She shivered. "Why?"

"I'm going to tie you on the litter. Best way I know to get you down out of here."

Her teeth chattered. "Why?"

"For hell's sake. I'm taking you to Sage Crossing."

She cried out involuntarily, a keening wail so the horse quivered and a whisky-jack screeched in the willows.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

Speech was painful for her, her broken lips bled faintly. "Not . . . a town."

"You got to have a doctor."

Her mouth trembled. "Please . . . don't . . . I—don't want to see people . . . I don't want to see anybody."

"Well, you got to have a doctor."

Her voice rose in a keening wail. "They'll *look* at me . . . I don't want *people—looking at me.*"

— 2 —

SAGE CROSSING WAS STRUNG TOGETHER OF NECESSITY, AND hauled-in timbers, on the eternal stage road between Farson and Greybull. Frugally constructed buildings looked like weathered cubes rolled out in a hollow by some giant crap-shooter for whom everything came up snake-eyes.

It was hot and the folks who gathered in sweated groups at General Mercantile talked about the weather or spoke, awed, about the brutal attack on the stagecoach the week before. Posses had gone out, found no traces of the robbers, and the settlement chewed it over, wondering when those vicious men might strike again.

People came spilling out of stores and houses when Brent Landers rode into settlement limits with the battered girl lashed to a willow-pole litter. They burst out, crossing walks, boots and heels heavy on the boards, but, when they came close to the litter, bumping in painful slowness on the hard street, they slowed unwillingly.

The crowd walked beside the horseman and the litter. They stared at the sweated man, the alkali-dust-caked horse, but they stole only quick, pained glances at the girl on the carrier.

Dust puffed up from the trailing poles.

The girl had an arm across her eyes. She did not move it even when the man slowed the horse and looked down at the people ringing him in the street.

Their voices were awed, half-swallowed, stifled behind their hands.

"It's the Tillson girl."

"He's found Rosemary Tillson."

"That's the Tillson girl, all right."

"My God! *That's* the Tillson girl!"

Brent punched his hat back on his forehead with the side of his hand.

He stared down at the gray faces. "Where do I find a doctor?"

One of the men pointed to an unpainted house at an angle ahead of them.

"Doc Barfield right yonder, mister."

Brent sank his heels in the pony's flanks and moved forward, turning toward the weathered house and the small shingle outside: VERNE BARFIELD, M.D.

The people hesitated a moment, then moved forward as one person.

The man who'd spoken to Brent asked, "Where'd you find her at, mister?"

Brent didn't answer. Outside the doctor's house, he swung down from the saddle. The doctor's front door was thrust open and Dr. Verne Barfield crossed his narrow stoop, came down the steps and across his yard.

Brent was bending over the girl on the litter. Her arm was pressed down with all her strength across her eyes, as if she believed that, if she could not see, she could not be seen.

"My God, man," Dr. Barfield whispered across the litter from him. "What happened?"

Brent glanced up. In these past days coming slowly down out of the badlands and across the plains on the straightest line he could set for Sage Crossing, he'd come to know this girl. Sometimes, she was calm, almost serene; sometimes, she seemed to have turned to stone inside. But you couldn't count on it. The hysteria built up in her and, when it did, it had to come out. It was like that right now.

"We better get her inside," Brent said to Barfield. "I think she's just about to break loose screaming."

Barfield nodded, slender face showing he understood. He saw, too, that the lean young man had been through some kind of hell that showed in his face. His eyes were dry, with wildness in them, and he was drawn fine, ready to snap, himself. But the doctor was fifty-two, gray, elderly for that town and those years, and he was a wise man, even if not nearly as wise as he longed to be. He said nothing about the stress he read in the young man's face.

Instead, he made his voice light. He said, "They break loose like that—women—sometimes the least little thing sets them off."

Brent Landers was loosening the poles, but he paused and his gaze struck across the older man's. He nodded faintly, as if thanking him for something. And Dr. Barfield saw in that instant he'd made a friend of an innately kind and gentle young man, a magnificent young man of great strength and courage. He ignored the other signs he read from his vast experience with people of all kinds, the yearnings and the look of the hunted he saw was none of his affair, it was a personal matter he had no right and no desire to probe.

Dr. Barfield jerked his head, ordering some of the bystanders to help carry the litter.

But Brent spoke quickly, sharply, so the other men stopped. "Don't think we'll need them, Doc. Think it'll be better if just you and me handle this thing. . . . And quick."

"Of course," the doctor said as if he saw exactly what the young man meant.

The girl was sobbing, twisting under the cloth lashes which bound her to the litter. Dr. Barfield and Landers hurried across the stoop. Landers flicked the door open.

Barfield said, "That door, there, on your right."

She was screaming as they went into the doctor's office.

Brent Landers closed the front door, the office door. The girl wailing on the examination table seemed not even to know where she was.

"We're in for a good one this time," Brent said.

Dr. Barfield nodded, working swiftly with hypodermic syringe, drawing a colorless liquid up into the marked tube.

"She's been pretty quiet the last day or so," Landers said. "Reckon this was building up." He looked at her and the doctor saw the pity in the lined face. "Reckon she's got it coming to her."

Dr. Barfield lifted one of the girls sun-seared arms. He winced at the heat-spoiled flesh. He dabbed at it with cotton saturated with alcohol.

"What's that?" Brent asked, watching him administer the needle with quick, practiced thrust.

"Something to quiet her," Barfield said. "She's got that coming to her, too."

Brent Landers nodded, and the doctor, glancing up, saw relief smoothing some of the tension in the tired face.

"You're exhausted," the doctor said. "You waiting to fall over on your face?"

Landers failed in trying to smile. "That's one way to get to sleep, ain't it?"

At the sound of Landers' voice, the girl quieted, her sobbing lessened.

"She's not afraid of you," Barfield said.

"No. Reckon she's got kind of used to me. We had a pretty bad time of it at first. She'd wake up screaming in the night. She'd fight me, no matter what I did. She'd get it in her mind I was one of men who attacked her. Kind of rugged."

The girl was gulping now, sobbing quietly.

Dr. Barfield said, "There's a bed in the room across the hall. Why don't you get some sleep? If I need you, I'll call you."

Landers glanced at the girl. "Might just test your mattress," he said, uncertainly. "You—going to examine her now, Doc?"

"Yes."

Brent's thin jaw was a hard line. "Don't reckon you need to examine her to know what—what happened to her?"

"No. . . . But I do need to know—extent of damage. What I can do for her—if I can do anything. . . ." He probed at her arm. "Bad burns. You've put something on her. Likely saved her life. What did you use?"

Brent shook his head. "Probably axle grease. Vet in Laramie told me it'd soothe deerfly strings on my horse and cure up screwworm."

Barfield nodded. "Probably axle grease."

Landers said, "Take it slow, Doc. Don't expect it to be easy—she's had a rough time."

Barfield waved his hand. "Go ahead. She'll be quiet with this laudanum in her. Don't you worry. You got her here alive—I'll try to do as well as you did, even if I don't have any axle grease to work with."

"You can't have everything," Landers said, yawning.

He turned toward the door.

The girl lunged upward against her fetters, throwing out her arm toward him, fingers extended, trembling, grasping. She cried out from her throat, an unintelligible sound.

"My God," Barfield said. "She's been in hell."

"She's still in hell," Landers said. He walked back to where the girl lay on the litter. Her fingers closed, white-knuckled, twisting upon his shirt. Her bruised face was gray.

"I ain't sleepy after all, Doc," Landers said. "Go ahead with your examination."

Dr. Barfield moved around the examination table. He touched the denim shirt Landers had put on the girl. They could both feel her quiver, but she didn't speak.

"Listen to me," Dr. Barfield said in a calm, mild tone. "I'm a doctor. I want to be your friend, like this good man. I want to do all I can for you. Do you understand?"

The girl's gaze was fixed on Landers as if fearful that if she looked away from him, he'd disappear and she'd wake up on that rock ledge.

But when Barfield asked again, "Do you understand?" she nodded.

Gently, Dr. Barfield removed her clothing. She trembled under his hands, but as long as she clung to Brent's shirt she did not protest or cry out.

Dr. Barfield glanced up at Landers and smiled. "We're doing fine now."

Landers' shoulders were slumped round. He nodded. "Sure, Doc. Fine. We've come a long ways. A long ways. You got no idea how far we've come."

But the doctor shook his graying head. "I begin to see how far," he said. "I begin to see."

Landers came awake, struggling against the thick hands on his shoulders.

He came up, flailing out with his arm.

"Take it easy, son."

Landers sat up on the mattress, trying to make out where he was. It came back slowly. The drug had worked, and finally, the girl had slept. He'd staggered across the hall from the Doc's office. He remembered thrusting off his boots, falling across the mattress. But it was as if the mattress dissolved under him and he kept plunging downward into warm darkness. The next thing he knew, somebody was shaking him, telling him to wake up.

"Sorry to do this to you, mister," the man bending over him said. "Doc told me you was dead on your feet. I thought we better talk."

Landers yawned, his vision clearing. The man wore a badge, an age-greened Stetson, denim shirt, black vest and Levi's pushed into oversized boots. At six-four, the man was

oversized. He looked to be in his early thirties, five or six years older than Brent, but eating high, going to lard.

"I'm sheriff here in Sage County," the huge man said. "Name's Ox Slaughter."

Landers tried to smile. "Your maw name you that?"

The sheriff laughed, jerked his head toward his deputy, a slender man, thin-faced, something of a dandy with leather vest and gleaming belt buckle. "Deputy Sid Fallon."

Landers nodded, waiting.

Sheriff Ox Slaughter had pulled a straight chair beside the bed, now he hitched it an inch closer. "You mind saying your name, mister?"

"My name's Landers. But—what difference does it make?"

Ox Slaughter drew the back of his hand across his mouth, a gesture that meant nothing except that he was taking time to think.

Slaughter said: "I best tell you right off, Landers. This whole settlement is in an uproar. . . . We've had a bad time. That girl over in Doc's office has been raped and hurt—bad."

Brent felt himself drawing taut. "And you think maybe I had something to do with it?"

"Take it easy, mister," the deputy said.

Slaughter jerked his head, silencing Fallon. "We ain't making no accusations. We're willing to trade you—what we know for what you know. First off, I better tell you about the girl."

"All right."

"Her name's Tillson." Slaughter talked to the hairy backs of his thick hands. "Rosemary Tillson. She's eighteen. She's the daughter of Reverend Henry Tillson. Until a few months ago, Reverend Tillson had a mission church here in Sage Crossing. Then his church transferred him up to Greybull. His daughter—Rosemary—she'd been in school at Laramie. Then she come here to visit some of her old friends on her way home to Greybull."

Ox Slaughter stared at Brent's boots on the floor as if the quality of clay caked on them could answer questions for him. Brent waited.

"Rosemary was on her way to Greybull on the stage when it was held up by three hardcases. Now these men—and we got no proof who they were—they was drunk at the time of the robbery. You ask how we know that?"

Brent shrugged.

"The driver. The other passengers. They told me that them men were whooping and laughing like it was a party instead of a robbery. And they said something else. They was cruel jaspers, rough—even more interested in ways they could hurt the passengers—and the driver—even more interested in that than in the money they took."

"And they took quite a haul," Deputy Fallon said.

"They took quite a haul," Ox Slaughter agreed. "They shot and killed Lon Parrish. Lon was riding shotgun. You know the reason they give for killing him? Just because he didn't move fast enough to suit them."

Landers was aware both Slaughter and Fallon were gazing at him intently. He waited, and when neither of them spoke, he said, "Then they rode off to the badlands and your posse lost their trail."

Slaughter nodded. "That's right, Landers. They got to kidding around, grabbing at the Tillson girl, and when they rode away, they took her with them."

Landers waited. The room was hot, like an oven, and there was no breeze through the opened window. Outside, children laughed in bursts of excitement and a small dog barked.

"Stage turned around, come back to Sage Crossing," Slaughter went on. "Just happened we had some real fine men trading in town, and I got me up a good posse—even among them Mr. Clayton Ranchester."

"Mr. Ranchester's the biggest rancher around here," Fallon explained. "We was stirred up. All of us. Even Mr. Clayton Ranchester. Murder. Robbery. Kidnapping. We was stirred up."

"But you lost their trail in the rocks." Brent Landers said it for them.

This remark didn't improve Slaughter's attitude. "That's right. They had a five-to-six-hour jump and they lost us clean. We made every human effort possible to track them because we knowed that Tillson girl was with them, but they lost us clean. Nothing but ridges, rock ledges, badlands, a hundred places they could lose us."

"You don't have to apologize to me."

Slaughter's face paled. "We offer no apology. We had nobody could track them, that's all. Trail gets that old fast—an Indian might track them. We couldn't do it. We knowed

it was impossible. They headed into them high mesas. Impossible for us."

"We want to ask you——" Fallon continued, face showing his tension, "is that where you found the Tillson girl—up in them badlands?"

Landers met the deputy's gaze levelly, nodded.

He heard Ox Slaughter exhale. "You mind—saying why you was up there?"

"I wasn't one of them," was all Brent said.

"You must have had some reason for being up there. God knows nobody goes up there without some almighty powerful reason," Fallon said.

Slaughter jerked his hand in a downward slashing gesture toward Fallon without turning his head.

"Time passed, Mr. Landers," Slaughter said in a mild tone. "So much time that we give the girl up as dead, and I wrote to her father and told him what had happened to her. Reverend Tillson is a forty-year-old man, but he looked broken and sick when he come in off the Greybull stage. It's been a sad, sick town. Everybody done what they could for the Reverend, but wasn't really anything anybody could do. After a couple days, he went back north to Greybull, but he was like an old man, brokenhearted."

"We'd like you to say what you were doing up in that country where you found the Tillson girl," Fallon persisted.

Ox Slaughter stood up, exhaling, studying Landers. "That can wait a while, Fallon. It can wait." He forced a rigid smile. "Doc Barfield says you had a bad time getting her down here alive."

"I've been on easier runs."

"I reckon you know this town feels you've done a fine thing, getting her here alive—from up in that bad country." Slaughter's mouth smiled, but his eyes remained troubled, puzzled. "You'll be around awhile, eh, Landers? You—won't leave town without talking to me, will you?"

"No," Brent said. He sank back against the headboard and watched them walk out of the room, the huge sheriff, the slender young deputy, two men encased in tensions like something you could see through their skins.

Brent was shoving his feet into his boots when he heard the cries from across the hall.

He recognized Rosemary's voice. She was crying out, "No. No. No!"

Brent crossed the hall, opened the door of Dr. Barfield's office.

His gaze went to Rosemary first. Being on guard over her had become instinctive in the past grueling days and nights.

She was awake, sitting up on the examination table. Her hair was no longer matted and snarled. Brushed, it gleamed with red-gold sheen in the dimly lighted office. She wore a white flannel nightgown some townswoman had donated. Her body was covered with an ointment and some of the bruises and lesions had faded.

The doctor was preparing new sedation for her and she sat tense, the back of her hand splayed across her face like a curtain between her and the four townswomen grouped around her.

Rosemary's head jerked around when the door opened. She relaxed slightly at the sight of Brent. But she kept her hand covering her face.

"I don't want to go with them," she cried out. "Any of them. I won't go with them."

"Dearest child," one of the women said in a soothing voice. "We're only trying to help you. We're only thinking about you."

"I won't go!" Rosemary was trembling.

Dr. Barfield turned, holding the hypodermic syringe. He said, "These ladies want to do all they can for you, Rosemary." He glanced up then, saw Brent.

Brent heard the doctor speaking the names of the women, introducing them to him, but they meant nothing to him, and he didn't even listen. The doctor's voice droned, mumbling, and the women mumbled, and he nodded, smiling woodenly, watching Rosemary. These people believed she'd come back from hell, but looking at her, he found himself wondering if hell was behind—or ahead—of her.

Rosemary refused to sleep unless Brent was sitting in a chair near her. He sank onto the doctor's swivel chair and watched her slowly drift into sleep, troubled and fitful, even here.

While Rosemary slept, Dr. Barfield talked, and Brent listened. Dr. Barfield had read everything he could find, and he wanted more medical knowledge than he had, than any other physician he knew had.

"Being a doctor isn't a career, or a profession," Doc said,

"it's a disease. You got it, you're never cured. Nothing as wonderful as the human body. Nothing as mysterious as the human mind. Only reason I hate getting old, dying. There's so much they're going to learn about our bodies, and what we got inside our heads. I'd love to possess all that knowledge. But I don't. Went to the best schools I could, and the best hospitals—the dirty pigsties. Sometimes, I feel I know no more than any saddle sawbones that carries his book of remedies in his saddlebag and cures you or kills you. I don't know. That's what hurts me. I'm fifty-two years old, and I don't know."

He poured whisky for them.

"You bring me this poor girl. You've saved her life somehow. I do what I can for her—for her body. . . . But what about what happened to her—to her mind? She's afraid of people—these good people who love her. A lovely, outgoing girl who laughed all the time. Now she's turned in on herself, like a badly hurt animal that snarls at anything that comes near and even bites itself. I can make her body well, but what can I really do for her? She goes over and over and over it in her mind. What do you do for somebody like that? How do you make them well? My God, what do you do?"

Brent Landers took a long drink, shook his head. He studied the girl sleeping near them. "Her father. He's a minister," he said after a few moments. "Maybe he can help her."

Suddenly Dr. Barfield hurled his glass across the room. "Don't you believe it. You know what was worrying her father—even before he left here, you know what was in his mind?"

Brent stared at the sleeping girl, did not move.

"I'll tell you," Barfield said. "Jesus H. Christ! I'll tell you. Her old man was wondering what she was going to be like—if they found her alive. He was worrying about how people were going to accept her—if she had been attacked. You think I'm lying? I ain't lying. I need another drink. Where's my glass? Oh, the hell with it! I can drink out of the bottle better, anyhow. . . . Oh, and Landers, don't worry about any germs, drinking after me. Alcohol. Alcohol kills germs something wonderful."

— 3 —

ROSEMARY WAS SITTING IN A ROCKING CHAIR BESIDE A WINDOW in one of Doc Barfield's bedrooms when Brent walked in and stood across the room from her. He carefully avoided meeting her eyes when she turned her head because he—and most of the settlement knew by now how upset she could become when anyone stared at her.

"You look fine," Brent said.

She didn't answer, but it was true. She no longer resembled the girl he'd found in the high mesa country. Women who had been her close friends previously were now barely tolerated strangers; they came in daily and brushed her hair, did what they could for her—what she would let them do.

Rosemary didn't want them to do anything for her. And she hated their looking at her.

She was watching him, and Brent frowned slightly because he hadn't known how lovely she was. She was something you might dream about on a lonely trail. She was what he had had in mind once three years back when he'd found a ranchsite with flowing well and natural winter shelter. She looked like what every man wanted, and damn few of them ever got.

His mouth twisted. Well, he didn't have that ranch any more, and she was what was left after three vicious men got through with her.

He said, "I'm glad you're getting better. You're going to be all right."

She didn't speak, only went on staring at him as if waiting for something else—for the real reason he had come into her room. It was as if she erected an invisible wall between them and anything he had to say. He drew a deep breath.

No sense in delaying it. She'd had two quiet days; she looked fine.

Brent said, "What I came in for, Rosemary—I came in to tell you good-by."

Even now she didn't speak. She only shook her head. But she didn't need to speak. Terror showed in her eyes which were fixed on him. Tension like charged lightning filled the room. Lord God. Two days she'd been quiet. Enough screaming in her to bring the town down on them.

She shook her head again.

"Listen to me, Rosemary," he said, ignoring the shadows swirling in her gray eyes. "Please listen to me. . . . Nothing is going to hurt you now. You're all right."

She didn't speak. He held himself tighter, waiting for the wails to vomit from her. There was a desperate aura of silence between them.

"I done for you all I can, Rosemary," he said in a low tone. "You see that?"

She nodded, staring at her hands.

"Well, that's it. I got to be moving on."

She nodded again, and he waited for the screaming. But she didn't scream. Her slender shoulders in muslin gown slumped and her head sagged forward and she cried helplessly into her hands.

He stared at her. Why don't you scream, girl? I'd much rather you screamed. Screaming at least had hope in it, strength and rage. Her sobbing was the empty sound of hopelessness. He'd come to know that sound in three years.

Dr. Barfield came in when Landers summoned him, gave her sedation. When they were alone in the doctor's office, Barfield said. "She was coming along fine. What did you do to her?"

"I just did what I had to. I told her I'd done all I could, I had to be moving on." He stared at Barfield, daring him to dispute this. "It's the truth. I can't go on staying here."

Dr. Barfield poured them whisky in tumblers. "Have a drink," he said, "before you go."

Brent grinned despite himself. "You agree? You think I ought to head out?"

Barfield shrugged. "You know what you got to do, Landers. I don't. And I do know that girl can't go on depending on you."

"That's right. The sooner she knows that, the better."

The doctor took a long drink. "Right. If she's going to get well, she's got to take life as it comes to her. She's had a bad time, and she's come along almost like a miracle, but she's got to come all the way back. . . . You see, we don't know anything about the human mind except that once it's hurt—once it turns in on itself—why, if everything isn't handled just right, it might stay lost—forever."

Brent scowled. "There isn't anything I can do."

"No. I agree. That's true. You've done more than anybody—even that girl in there—has any right to ask of you. Ain't your fault she's come to cling to you, way some folks cling to sanity. Ain't your fault at all."

Brent finished off the whisky, set the tumbler down. "I can't just go on staying here."

The doctor poured him another drink, sloshing in an extra slug this time.

"You're right. How do we know that a couple more days would help her, anyhow? I mean, even if you stayed around. She might get to depend more on you, eh? Instead of less. How do we know she might not get stronger physically so her mind would be less depressed, more able to accept changes—changes like the loss of the one human being left on earth that she feels she can trust?"

"Why damn your soul!" Brent Landers said. He didn't touch the tumbler of whisky. "You ain't agreeing with me at all. What you're telling me is I ought to stay here—"

"No . . . not unless you feel you can spare her a couple more days. . . . You know better than I do what you got to do. And, like I say, we don't know she's going to get any more rational. You know what's important in your life. You know what you got to do."

Brent exhaled heavily and took a long drink. He shook his head. "Doc, what you are is a real son of a bitch."

Doc shrugged, looking smug. "Yeah," he said. "I'm like you. I ain't much, all right."

They walked slowly on the boardwalk in midafternoon sunlight. There was a stillness in the air so you could hear the buzz of flies, the distant barking of a dog. The atmosphere was tense. Brent knew people were behind the window curtains of the ugly houses, watching, holding their breath, the way he was, watching him and Rosemary walk downtown in the sun.

She had laid her hand on Brent's arm. It looked casual enough he reckoned, from those windows, but he felt her nails digging in.

"Some people walk downtown every afternoon," he said in a low voice. "They don't think anything of it."

Rosemary didn't answer, but he could tell by the way her hand tautened on his arm that his attempted pleasantry had been the wrong thing to say.

Everything was the wrong thing to say. It had taken him and Doc three hours to talk her into putting on one of her dresses and walking outside his house. They'd brought her small trunk from the stage office. She'd smiled faintly at sight and touch of one perky little hat, but showed no interest in any of her dresses.

She was a girl who thought nothing at all, or if she thought, it was to go over and over in her mind that her life was over, ended up there in the mesa where dying would have been too easy. So she had lived, and as far as she knew, that was the only reason she had lived.

"I want to get out in the sun," Brent said finally. "I'm tired of being stuck inside this house looking at nothing but you and Doc."

This had worked. Doc grinned his admiration when she nodded, face gray and rigid. She wore a dotted dress, fresh and youthful-looking, high-buttoned cloth shoes, and the perky little hat. But her face looked as if she were on her way to a hanging.

They walked past a church—perhaps the one where her father had preached—she didn't say one way or the other. They moved past the livery stable, the one-story hotel, the one-roomed school that was also courtroom and town meeting hall.

Earl Greenley's general mercantile store was the center of the settlement, the place everybody went. There were people there now, carefully avoiding Rosemary as if she didn't exist. Inwardly, Landers swore. This was as bad as staring at her, but he couldn't hate these goodhearted people. Doc had warned them not to stare at Rosemary, and they were obeying him, going to the other extreme.

Brent tried to turn Rosemary up the steps into the mercantile store, but refusing, she turned to stone. It was one of the easiest things she did.

"Thought you might like a bottle of iced strawberry," he said.

She shook her head. He shrugged, going along with her. It had been days since she'd exploded in hysterics. He didn't want it to happen in public.

At the bank, he turned her in against her will, left her standing a foot behind him while he bought a ticket on the stage for Greybull. She stared at the ticket, face ashen, body chilled and rigid.

At the doctor's house that night when Rosemary was asleep and Brent sat with the physician over tumblers of bourbon, Barfield asked, "You really think she'll use that ticket, get on that stage?"

"She's got a mother and father," Brent said. "Like you say, she's sick, but she must miss them. I'm counting on her wanting to go back to them more than anything else."

Doc shrugged and poured more whisky into his tumbler which was still almost full. "Just hotting it up," he said. "One thing I can't stand is cold whisky, or a glass that looks empty."

The drayman came with mule and wagon about ten the next morning and carted Rosemary's trunk to the stage office. She watched the men silently. She took a long time dressing. Brent rapped twice on her door to warn her it was getting late. At last Rosemary came out, face pale, hands twisted in knitted handbag.

"You'll be in Greybull tomorrow," Brent said. "You'll be with your folks again."

She didn't answer. She remained chilled and silent.

Dr. Barfield touched her cheek with his palm, holding his hand there a moment. "You've had an extremely bad accident, Rosemary. It's like a horse threw you and then struck at you with his hoofs. But that's all it is, a dreadful accident, and you're all right now. It was a bad accident, but it's all over."

She nodded, trying to thank him, but only shook her head, afraid to trust her voice in her tautened throat.

"It's all right, Rosemary," Doc reassured her. "You don't have to say anything. I understand."

"We better go," Brent said. "You're not coming down there with us, Doc?"

Barfield shook his head. "I'm pretty busy here, Brent."

She walked slowly, wooden and silent beside him. He put

his hand on her elbow to hurry her, but she would not be hurried. When he spoke to her, she did not answer. It was as if she didn't hear him.

Brent remembered what Doc had said when they had talked late one night. "She gets all curled up in a ball inside her own mind. She don't even know what's going on around her."

The stage had not arrived when they got to the bank. There were a half-dozen women, Rosemary's friends, down to see her off.

Brent saw Ox Slaughter and Deputy Sid Fallon leaning against the bank in a shaft of shade. He didn't glance their way, wondering if they were here to be sure he didn't get on that stage with Rosemary.

The women tried to talk to Rosemary. She had a tense, wan smile for everything, but no answers. Brent realized that her eyes had the vacant look he'd seen in them on the trail down from the high country. Damn Doc Barfield. No wonder he hadn't come down here to say good-by. The man was yellow, a stinking, college-trained coward. And he didn't blame him.

Chattering rose, and from the south they heard the ring of metal, the squeal of iron and wood, slap of leather against horseflesh.

"Here comes the stage!" somebody called and people pressed forward to the brink of the boardwalk, craning their necks.

Landers felt Rosemary retreat a step, withdrawing. She bumped against him, and her body trembled. He closed his hand on her arm, reassuringly. She quieted and he became hopeful. She was going to be all right. She'd get on that stage, get back home among her own family; she'd be all right.

The sweated horses minced past, slowing. The stage pulled along the walk, rocking on its high springs. The driver wrapped his lines and swung down, his boots striking the boardwalk.

"Sage Crossing. Here we are, folks!" he called. "Stage for Greybull."

He turned the handle, jerked open the door.

That was when Rosemary screamed.

Brent grabbed her in his arms, but he was too late. Her head went back; her hat fell to the street; her hair tumbled

as she writhed, screaming. The horses pranced, people backed away, and then closed in. Men came running from every direction.

Rosemary was shaking all over. Brent had been through these things with her before, but nothing like this.

He swung her up in his arms, speaking sharply, "Get out of my way!"

He strode along the street, carrying her. Her head was back and screams poured from her, but he made no effort to stop her screaming. Behind him in the hot afternoon there was only silence, people standing in numbed silence, staring.

Doc was holding the door open for him. Landers turned, carrying her, sidling past Doc.

"Been expecting you," Doc said.

Landers kicked open the office door, moved through it.

"Damn it," he said. "I don't want any smart talk from you. You knew this was going to happen. You damn well knew it. Just don't say anything. Just get that hypodermic."

"It's right here," Doc said. "I got it filled, right here, waiting."

Brent was having breakfast in Doc Barfield's kitchen the next morning, eating silently; the Arapaho woman who did Doc's cooking and cleaning padded around behind him.

Doc came in from seeing two patients, a boy who'd run a rusty nail in his foot, a leather salesman with a boil on his behind. Doc was rolling down the sleeves of his white shirt. He moved his head in some silent, time-saving signal and the Indian woman filled a thick mug with steaming coffee, set it before him.

"She had a good night," Doc said. "She had a real good night."

"How long is she going to be like this?" Brent asked. "Why didn't you tell me she wasn't going to get on that stage?"

Doc ignored this. He drank deeply. "She wants to talk to you."

"I got nothing to say."

"You get discouraged too easy. You know, Brent, a man can't save another person's life and then just walk away from him. It don't work that way. That's the hell of being a Samaritan."

Brent cursed. "I don't go to any church at all," he said in heavy irony.

Doc nodded. "That's what I figured."

Landers was surprised to find Rosemary dressed and sitting beside her bedroom window. He'd expected her to be in bed. Her face, which had been splotched, red and drawn the day before, was pale and serene.

"I've no right to hang on to you like this," Rosemary said. "Doc told me that. I knew it, but Doc told me, too."

"It's all right. You've had a bad time. You see, I just figured you'd be better off among your own people, your own family."

"No."

He frowned, but didn't speak. He sat on the foot of her bed.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she said. "I'm so full of shame."

"What?" The word burst from him. He stood up, staring down at her.

Her hands twisted in her lap. "Oh, I know the way you feel. You're good, and you don't see the way a woman is ruined—by—by what happened."

"No. I don't."

"Doc does," she said in a low tone, talking downward, not looking up.

"That's not true. Nobody thinks that."

Now she did glance up and there was almost a pitying look in her ashen face. "You don't know people," she said. "I do. I know the people who came to Papa's churches. I know what they think. . . . Maybe they can't help the way they feel—any more than I can—but I'm all—soiled, ruined. I know it! Everybody else thinks so, too—except maybe you."

"No. You're just all upset."

"That's what they think. That's what everybody really thinks!"

"Take it easy," Brent said. "Please take it easy."

She sighed. "Oh, I'm not going to—be hysterical. Don't worry—I just couldn't get on—that stage yesterday. I'm—sorry. It was like it meant I was—going on living. . . . And—I can't . . . I can't go on living."

"Don't talk this way. You had a bad time. You were in hell. I know that. But you'll get over it."

She sighed again, and shrugged, not answering him.

He asked, "Don't you want to see your folks again?"

After a moment, Rosemary nodded. "I'd like to—go to Greybull to see them."

"Fine."

Her head tilted. "I've got to tell them—poor Papa—I've got to make them see I'm not to blame for what happened——"

"Nobody thinks that!"

"Don't they? You ask them." Her eyes were chilled. "You ask Doc what they really think."

He spread his hands. "My God! But . . . your own father!"

She pressed her hands against her face. "He——can't help it. He's been trained by church people. He can't help it. He's been told what sin is. Sin is what happens to you. What you let happen. You ask anybody. In any church. They'll tell you. . . . He's been a minister all his life. He can't help it."

Brent's savage voice bounced off the walls. "But you're his own daughter!"

She did not look up. "You think that makes it better—for him?"

Sheriff Ox Slaughter paced back and forth in Dr. Barfield's small office, tumbler of whisky almost lost in huge fist.

"Landers, we agree with you. This here Tillson girl ought to go back to her folks in Greybull."

"Good," Brent said. "It ought to be easy to figure the way."

"We've talked it over—Doc and me. And we think we've figured a way."

"You've written to her father in Greybull," Brent said. "He's coming down here for her."

There was a brief silence in the office. Outside, the night had a chill in it, and a silence. The settlement people were in bed at midnight; the saloon was the only place doing business.

Doc said, "On the face of it, Brent, this would seem the simple answer. But I learned, an answer's too simple, you best check it."

"You see, Landers," Ox Slaughter paused, looking down at Brent, pushed back in Doc's swivel chair, "you see, what you

don't know is, you don't know Reverend Tillson the way Doc and me do."

"You don't know me, either," Landers said. "Either one of you. Yet I suppose you want me to take her to Greybull."

"I know enough about you," Doc Barfield said. "And you're right—in her present condition, the best thing for Rosemary is that you take her up to Greybull in a wagon."

"Alone?" Brent asked. "The two of us?"

"Folks might talk a mite," Sheriff Slaughter said. "But even them that talk know you brought her down from the badlands."

He paused, and Brent saw in the big man's face that he wanted an explanation, a reason why Brent Landers had been up there in the first place. But at the moment Slaughter had something else on his mind. He didn't push it.

"Now, you're right," Slaughter agreed. "I don't know you, and being in the business I been in these past ten years ain't made me trustful of people—even them I know best. I'm always leery of strangers. I don't want to be. It's just something about the work I do. I can't help it."

"Yet you want me to take a young girl in a wagon to Greybull?" Brent asked again, watching the sheriff.

Slaughter drew the back of his hand across his mouth.

"Well, let me nail that one down first," he said. "The Doc here buys you. All the way. One hundred per cent. I go along with the Doc. Old as he is, if he don't know people, none of us never will. I'm a suspicious type, and the Doc is smart. So I figure if he says you're all right, I best forget to be suspicious and go along with him."

"Thanks for nothing," Brent said.

Doc poured Brent another big drink, and Brent was forced to smile faintly. Whenever Doc was going to give you the stick, he anesthetized you first with extra bourbon.

"We see it this way, Brent. It'll take you a couple, three days, to get up to Greybull in a wagon. It'll be quiet for her, just the two of you. Get her out in the open, in the sun, we send along good nourishing victuals, give her time to think, to get used to the idea of living again. This here girl has just about resigned from the human race, Brent. . . . Now don't waste your breath, nobody's blaming her. She's got plenty reason for what she's doing. But she can't go on like that, can she?"

"I don't know," Brent said.

"Now, come on, Brent. You want her with her folks in Greybull. You must—you bought her a stage ticket to get her there when I could have told you it wouldn't work."

"What about her father? Why can't you get him down here?"

Sheriff Ox Slaughter said, "We give this a lot of thought, Landers."

"We had Reverend Tillson down here once," Doc said. "Seemed to us—back of his grief, he was more worried about what people were going to think than about whether that girl was going to come back alive."

"This here is a plumb onery thing to say," Ox Slaughter said, "And maybe others might think it, but only an ornery cuss like me would say it out loud. . . . We both feel poor Reverend Tillson was almost relieved when we couldn't find his raped daughter—alive."

Brent took a deep drink, but they saw the contempt and doubting in his face.

"Reverend Tillson is a strange, unbending kind of man, Brent," Doc said. "I tried to be friendly with him. But I found him a man who believed things I couldn't believe, and he is unable to forgive anybody who doesn't believe strong in just everything he believes in. It ain't anything he can help, but it's just the way it is. Now, Henry Tillson is going to need time to get used to the idea of getting his daughter back—the way she is . . . and that poor girl needs time to straighten out everything inside her—before she gets there."

"That's why you taking her home seems the only answer," Ox Slaughter said.

"You're the only person she truly trusts," Doc explained. "Even me, she don't really buy. Not all the way. But she's talked to me a lot, and I've found out she has these memories of your being kind to her—I mean, it's like a dream, even part of the nightmare of what happened to her—but she recalls, in bits and parts, waking up and finding you taking care of her when she'd been alone in terror that was enough to drive a well person insane. And Rosemary was alone—after what them animals did to her—until you came along. She knows that no matter how low she was, how nearly dead, how helpless, you were kind—and gentle. Somehow she's got it fixed in her mind that you're the only one—who ever will be on her side—all the way . . . the only one she can really trust, all the way."

Brent took another drink. The doctor immediately refilled his tumbler.

"There's just a little bit more," Doc said.

"I was sure there was when you gave me another drink."

Doc smiled. "Reverend Tillson coming for Rosemary, way she is, might be the worst thing could happen for her right now. He'd try—but if he acted the way I'm afraid he would, we might lose her—for good. I mean that. She's frightened and alone, sure she has nothing to live for—it wouldn't take much to drive her—all the way out of her mind."

"Then you better keep her here until she's well," Brent said.

"You know better than that, Brent. The time it would take you to get her to Greybull—the peace and the calm and the chance to think might restore her, might at least give her the strength to—to try to take up her life with her family—and the people up there."

Brent shook his head. "If Tillson is as unbending as you say, what's going to happen to her when I get her up there?"

Doc smiled, slapped his legs and stood up. "I knew you'd take her——"

"I didn't say that. I got my own woes——"

"We all have." Doc poured him another drink. "But that's another reason Ox and I want you to take Rosemary home to Greybull. You see, when you get up there, maybe you can talk to Tillson first. Way you feel, why both Ox and me figure you could straighten him out in less than fifteen minutes."

"Oh, sure," Ox agreed. "Lot less than fifteen minutes."

A quick-twisting west wind came up just before nightfall. Brent held gently to Rosemary's elbow, led her out on the doctor's front stoop.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Want you to take a walk with me, Rosemary. You haven't been out of the house all day."

"I don't like people—looking at me."

She tried to withdraw, but he tightened the pressure of his fingers, just enough so she stopped resisting.

"Pretty as you are, you're going to have to get used to people gandering at you."

Wrong thing to say again. He felt her freeze up. He said, "Come on, Rosemary. Please. As a favor to me?"

She dampened her lips. "All right."

They went down the steps together. "Almost supper time. Nobody on the street anyhow."

She didn't speak. He heard the deep way she exhaled. No sense finding fault with her. Nobody knew what she was going through, deep inside her own mind.

They walked slowly, not talking. They went past the mercantile store and Mr. Earl Greenley, closing for the night, spoke politely, tipping his derby hat to Rosemary.

Brent felt the gazes of the four loiterers outside the livery stable fixed on Rosemary. For the first time, he saw what Doc meant. He must have been blind to have missed it before, but Rosemary had been so ill, so inhumanely used, that it hadn't been mixed up in his mind with sex at all, not what happened to her. He saw now, though, that it was in the minds of those men. It always was, he realized, thinking back to talk over campfires, across bars, around livery stables just like the one they had passed. Whenever anything happened to a woman, when she was attacked, no matter how it happened, there were always men who leered, and said that them women asked for it, decent women didn't get themselves in messes like that, a woman asked for it when she got it.

Brent felt as if somebody had chopped him with the side of a fist across the nape of his neck. God in heaven! No wonder Rosemary was afraid to go on living. No wonder she was knotted up with fear when she thought about living day after day among men—and women. Women might not say it aloud, leering and grinning about it, but they'd whisper it self-righteously over their sewing and fine needlework, fingers flying and mouths working.

"Let's go back," he said abruptly.

But Rosemary had gasped, pressed back against him, body rigid on his. He closed his hand protectingly on her arm so she'd know he was beside her. He looked around puzzled. She was ready to come apart at the seams again, and he saw nothing to cause it, no reason for it.

"Rosemary," he asked softly, "What's the matter?"

Unable to speak for the moment, she only nodded toward something at an angle across the street.

Brent's head tilted. She was staring toward the saloon, toward the three dust-caked men who were swinging down at the tie-rail, laughing and talking to each other.

She pressed harder against him. She was shaking, her whole body trembling.

"It's them," she whispered. "Oh, Brent . . . that's them—the three men—that's them, Brent!"

— 4 —

BRENT LANDERS STRAPPED ON HIS GUNBELT AND FLIP-TIED the dangling holster thongs above his knee. He heard Dr. Barfield talking gently with Rosemary in her bedroom. He couldn't hear the doctor's words, but knew what he was saying: Brent wasn't leaving her alone; she was all right, she was safe; perhaps those three men only *looked* like her attackers.

Walking along the early-dark main street, Brent scowled, trying to settle in his own mind if these were the three men who'd raped Rosemary, or merely three tired-looking men who triggered the horror in her mind?

He glanced across the street, seeing the horses those men had left tied at the leather-slicked railing outside the saloon. Rapists? Murderers? Were these the men? Was Rosemary rational yet? Could her judgment be trusted? Would she instinctively, unerringly, know the men who'd taken her from the stage and left her to die up there? Or would any three men together look like rapists to her if they were exhausted, trail-dirty—any three men together?

He wanted to believe her. It was hell being afraid that she was less than rational. But he'd seen what quick judgments and quick violence had done three years ago in Johnson City. It had ruined him.

He moved purposefully toward the sheriff's office. He'd never realized before what a cautious man he'd become in his judgments since that fatal gun fight with Stan Clevenger. It had proved bloodily what violent, unthinking rage could do. Stan Clevenger wouldn't listen even to his own wife, his mind was set and he was using his gun instead of common sense. God! the lives wrecked in twenty minutes of that one crazy afternoon!

When Landers walked into the sheriff's office, Slaughter was eating his supper behind his pinewood desk and Deputy Sid Fallon was cleaning a rifle with oiled rag.

Landers closed the door behind him, feeling sweated. Ox jerked his head up, staring at him as if astonished to see him, as if somehow he'd been sure he'd never seen him again. Ox Slaughter's face was troubled, and there was an odd, pained look in his eyes.

Deputy Sid Fallon let his chair down hard. "Come in for that talk, Landers?" he asked. "We been wondering when you'd get around to telling us about being up in the mesas."

"Not now, Fallon." Ox Slaughter's voice was hard. "Relax."

"Yes, Fallon, relax," Brent said. "I might *never* admit I raped Miss Tillson."

"You were up there," Fallon said.

Ox Slaughter jerked his thumb toward the front door. "Take a turn along Main Street, Fallon." And when the scowling deputy would have protested, he spoke sharply, "Now, Fallon."

Fallon laid aside the rifle, dropped the oil rag on the floor beside his chair. He took his time getting his hat, going past Brent and out the front door.

When they were alone, Brent hesitated, giving Ox Slaughter a chance to speak up, get whatever was chewing at him off his chest. Something was wrong, bad wrong. Slaughter was all business, the lawman, with tension in the way he sat there. He'd lost his appetite since Brent came in; he pushed his tray back on his desk. He looked up at Brent, eyes narrowed slightly.

"What's on your mind, Landers?"

Brent exhaled. "Trouble. It might be the three men who held up the stage, kidnapped Rosemary and left her up in the hills are here in town."

"Where'd you hear this?"

Brent frowned. "Rosemary. She and I were walking on Main Street—about thirty minutes ago. She saw these three jaspers tie up and go in the saloon."

"Thirty minutes ago?" Slaughter's frown deepened.

"That's right. She got pretty upset. I walked her back home, trying to play it down, but, whoever they are, they set her off, all right. Doc's with her . . . I thought I ought to tell you."

"I saw three men come into town about thirty minutes

ago," Slaughter said. "But I don't think they're your men."

Brent sighed. "That's all right, Sheriff. It's up to you. I just wanted you to know."

Slaughter stood up, chair squealing. He shifted his belt with both hands, picked at his teeth with a fingernail. He was watching Landers with caution; the tension had not ebbed.

"Oh, we'll take a walk over there," Slaughter said. "You'd know the three men she pointed out?"

"Yes. I didn't recognize them across the street—it was hazy dusk, but I'd know which three they were if you want to talk to them."

"Oh, I want to talk to them," Slaughter said. "Let's go."

They went out of the office and walked along the street without speaking. Whatever friendliness Slaughter had demonstrated the other night drinking with him and Doc was as dead as if it never existed. It was as if Slaughter held himself apart, keeping a faint but definite distance between them, a cold reserve.

Ox shoved open the bat-wings at the saloon and let Brent enter ahead of him. Instantly, Brent found the three men, lined at the bar.

"Those the men?" Slaughter asked, moving out of the doorway, leaning against the wall as he nodded, indicating the men at the bar.

Brent nodded positively. One of the men was about his age, in his middle twenties. His range clothes were dust-coated, but his boots, though dusty, showed little of the instep wear a cowhand's always did. It was the first time Brent had ever seen a man wear his Levi's so skintight the cheek muscles of his behind wriggled against the fabric like cords. He wore a wide belt, gut sucked in too tight for comfort, checked shirt, battered Stetson.

The man in the middle was slender, boyish, hardly old enough to vote. His boots, holster, belt, wristguards were hand-tooled. His white shirt, dust-spattered and sweat-soaked, was expensive linen.

The third man was laughing, his head back. He had straw-colored hair, lank over his forehead, wide shoulders, run-over boots and much-washed Levi's. Only his gun and holster seemed clean or new, thonged against his leg.

Brent felt his heart banging when he recognized Gil Clawson.

His throat felt tight, his hands sweated. This changed

everything. He had doubted Rosemary until this moment, but he believed her now. He'd trailed Gil Clawson and two other men into those hills. Whether the sheriff and his posse could do it or not, he'd done it. He'd trailed Gil a long time, knew his horse, his gait, the signs he left. These men had been up there, all right.

"Those are the men she pointed out, Sheriff." His voice was hollow.

Slaughter shook his head unbelievably. "There's some mix-up here, Landers."

Brent kept his voice muted. "I don't think so."

Slaughter's voice was even lower, but it was in cold control. "Listen to me. That kid in the middle. That's Avery Ranchester. He's lived right in this town all his life. He never robbed no stage. His old man owns eighty miles of this county. Rosemary Tillson's known this boy all the years her old man preached around here. If she pointed them out—how come she didn't know Avery across the street?"

"I don't know. I told you it was getting dark. I know that fellow on Avery's right—but I didn't recognize him, either."

"Listen to me. I thank you for coming to me. You done the right thing there. The fellow on Avery's left has got himself a gun rep. Name's Johnny Moffitt. . . . You may have heard of him?"

"No."

Again, an odd tension showed in Slaughter's voice.

"A lot of men have heard of him. He's a wild man. I give you that, but if he's with Avery, him and the other fellow must of signed on to work for old Clayton Ranchester."

"Gil Clawson drifts. He signs on where he can work a while. I don't think he's been working around here."

"Why not?"

"I just don't think so. You ought to talk to them. If they're in the clear—they got nothing to worry about."

Slaughter wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand.

"It ain't them I'm thinking about, Landers. It's me."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I'm not letting up on this. The girl pointed them out. Naturally, they got to give me straight stories. Only—I got to move slow, Landers."

"Clayton Ranchester's a big man?"

Slaughter nodded, sweating. "You don't accuse Clayt Ranchester's only whelp of rape and murder just like that."

Not and stay healthy. Now, I'll take care of it . . . but I'm just a guy working for a living, Landers. That's all I am. A poor guy trying to save up enough money to buy his wife the kind of house she wants. That's all. I'm sheriff, but it's just a job, and I could lose it a hell of a lot quicker than I got it."

"We all got woes," Landers said.

"You just take it easy on me. That Avery is old Clayt's whole life . . . and what have we got? You know one of them is a saddle tramp that might or might not be punching cattle for Ranchester. I know Moffitt's rep, and he don't work much. Still he could of signed on. They're in here drinking with Avery. What have we got to go on?"

Landers shrugged, staring at Gil Clawson. Funny, there was no blood on them, yet the girl had bled. There was nothing in their faces to show what they'd done. It was almost as if they'd walked out of a hook-joint, washed their hands and forgotten it, but they'd seared that young girl with cigarettes when they got tired of everything else. His stomach was tied in knots.

"What have we got to go on?" Ox Slaughter persisted. "I'm a lawman. I do my duty, good as any. But—you tell me. We got the word of an unsettled, half-crazed girl. What else?"

Brent moved his tongue across his mouth. Why shouldn't Ox Slaughter doubt Rosemary; hadn't he, himself, had the same doubts? Still, he no longer had them.

"Who'd know better?" he asked.

At that moment, Gil Clawson threw back his head laughing, and half-turned from the bar. He caught a glimpse of Brent Landers across the room, turned back and then heeled around, hoo-rawing.

"Brent Landers!" he yelled. "Brent! You dirty low-down son of a low-down! Brent! What the hell you doing around here?"

He pushed his way between the tables, men grinning, watching him move toward Brent. Men always laughed when Gil Clawson was around.

Brent watched Gil plow an unsteady furrow toward him. Three years hadn't changed him much. The laugh twisted on his face was the same. His blue eyes were set in laugh crinkles. He had the same big nose and weak chin, the same

high tenor laugh. Only he didn't look the same to Brent any more.

There was a secret, fine-drawn look about Gil that was new in these past three years, as if, somewhere deep inside himself, he didn't care for what he knew himself to be. That happens to a lot of us, Brent thought and forced himself to laugh.

"Hi, Gil."

Gil Clawson caught Brent's shoulders in calloused hands, pummeling him.

"What you doing in these parts, son?" Gil yelled. His laugh fluted up. "But I heard you been getting around a lot these past couple years."

"Yes."

"Well, hell, it ain't as serious as all that. Come on over and wet your whistle with a couple pals." Then Gil stopped talking, glancing at Ox Slaughter and the tin star on Slaughter's coat. "Who's the law-dog, Brent? He a friend—or has he got the arm on you?"

"He's a friend, Gil."

Gil's fluting laugh doubted this, but he said, "Well, every man to his own taste!" His self-pleased laughter rose so loud that every man in the room looked their way, smiling involuntarily. "Haven't seen you in a hell of a spell, Brent. How they treating you?"

"I been moving around a lot," Brent said. "Last few months I been looking for you, Gil."

Gil laughed as loud as before, but some of the high color paled under his dust-matted cheeks and shadows flickered deep in his sun-faded blue eyes.

"Yeah. Heard that around a few places."

"Did you?"

"Yeah. Beddin' down with a sloe-eyed half-breed in Pony Wells. She tells me a gent like you was through there looking for me."

"Well, you haven't improved your lying any."

Gil shrugged. "Well, hell, I heard it somewhere. But I figured, what the hell, if you was looking for me, we'd meet sometime, and it could wait."

"It was pretty urgent to me——"

"Didn't know you cared that much, old son!" Gil's laughter broke across Brent's words. "Come on over to the bar. Want you to meet some friends."

Brent looked up, found young Ranchester and Johnny Moffitt watching them closely, unsmiling. He glanced at the sheriff, thinking as far as he was concerned it was in their dirty faces, in their sweat glands, they had been up there, they were as guilty as hell. But Ox Slaughter didn't even look toward the bar at all. Instead, he went on smiling at Gil Clawson as if Gil were just what he looked and sounded: a happy fellow that made friends easily.

Gil tapped Ox Slaughter's arm. "Excuse us, Mr. Sheriff. I'd ask you over, but drinking with a lawman takes all the pleasure out of whisky for me. And I know you'll forgive me being like that, since I'm a poor, homeless kid that's been in trouble one way or another with gents like you most of my life. I just can't completely relax, you know?"

"I got to be getting back to my office anyhow," Ox said. "You boys planning to be in town long?"

Gil shrugged, laughing affably. "Who knows?"

"Maybe I'll see you around," Ox said. Then he lowered his voice. "You don't mind, Mr. Landers, I'd like you to walk back down to my office with me." He smiled at Gil. "Nothing important. Likely he'll be back for that drink in five or ten minutes."

Brent drew a deep breath. "I *would* like to talk to you, Gil."

Gil shrugged. "Hell, boy. I hope I see you again." He laughed, slapped Brent's shoulder. "Even if I don't, and even if there ain't no way I can help you, Brent, it's always good to see you."

Brent felt his stomach twist, like barbed wire drawn singing tight. "Sure."

Gil turned, went back to the bar. Brent watched him, saw the way Johnny Moffitt caught his arm, jerking his head toward where he stood with the sheriff. Gil's laughter geysered up above the other sounds in the room, and he gave Johnny a shove.

Brent's voice was low, tense. "There they are, Sheriff. They were up there——"

"Were they?"

"Gil was. Maybe they were with him—two men were."

Ox nodded, unimpressed. "Maybe. Now, I ain't doubting you. If they were up there, I'll find it out. I'll talk to them. But I got to go slow, and I told you why. Now, why don't you and me take that walk back down to my office?"

Brent met his gaze. "Do I have a choice?"

Ox shrugged. "Let's say I'm asking you—real pleasant—but insistent."

When they walked into the sheriff's office, Ox tugged off his aged Stetson and tossed it over a peg in the wall. He went around his desk, standing huge behind it. He thumbed through some papers on the desk top. He had not spoken after they walked out of the saloon, and he didn't speak now until he found the paper he wanted. He picked it up, flicked it across the desk to Brent.

"Recognize that, Landers?"

Brent stared at the paper, crinkled and dry with age. It was a wanted dodger sent out by the Sheriff in Johnson County, offering a reward for the capture of Brent Landers, sought for murder.

Brent did not move, or touch the paper. He stared at it, the pen-drawn likeness that had followed him, hounded him for these past three years.

"You know how it is," Ox said. "You been in this law work long enough, something doesn't look right, don't smell right, you can't sleep, can't think of nothing else. That's the way it's been since you rode in here the other day, Landers. I couldn't let this thing alone. I got out the files. I just kept looking through them. I knew I was going to find you. And I did."

"Yes."

"You know, a guy like me, instinctive mistrust of strangers. Can't help it. A man on the run, he looks different than other men, you might as well face it. He's like a rabbit that's eating easy enough, but he's ready to jump. He just holds hisself, ready to jump. Now when I come across this thing, I was ready to come on along down to Doc Barfield's and pick you up. But that hit me kind of hard. . . . I've also lived a long time—I've found out a man ain't all good, all bad, all white, all black. And there's two sides to every story. So I told myself I wouldn't even say anything about this paper to Fallon, he's already humpbacked about you because you were up in the mesa country and don't say why. . . . I figured you might want to tell me something about this."

"All right——"

"But I better warn you—even when I hear your side of the story, it ain't likely to change me from turning you over

to the sheriff in Johnson City. It ain't that I got anything against you—but there's three sides to this story. There's mine. I need this money. I guess that's the real reason I didn't mention it to Fallon—I need it all. . . . Like I told you, my wife Lenore don't like the three-room shack we live in. I don't make no fortune in this job. But Lenore's heart is plumb set on Judge Wilford Herrell's big old place. I want to live in peace, I got to somewhere come up with the down payment."

"That why you don't arrest young Ranchester?"

Ox shrugged. "Like I told you, Landers. This job is all I know. It don't pay much. But once I get a down payment on the Herrell place, I can pay off the rest from what I make, and I can live in peace with Lenore. . . . Living in peace, that gets to meaning a lot to a man when he comes on my age. So I don't make enemies of men like Clayt Ranchester. And, no matter what your side of your story is—or the sheriff's side—there's *my* side. I just wanted you to know it."

"Sure. Would you believe I was on my way back to Johnson City?"

Ox sat down, laughing coldly, shaking his head. "Up in that high mesa country? Not likely. Johnson City ain't that way."

"I told you. I was looking for a man. Trailing him. I'd been looking for him for a long time."

"Gil Clawson?"

"That's right. Gil Clawson." His stomach hollow, Brent told the sheriff how he'd bought the cattle from Gil, started home with them, met Stan and Maude Clevenger. Brent took his time, told it slowly, the memory hurting in his gut, the death, the waste, the terrible loss to all of them.

"Now, wait a minute, Landers. Before you get me weeping for you, and talked out of this money—like you had a chance of doing that—if what you just said is true—why didn't you stay there and take a chance on a trial—especially if, as you say, you're on your way back there now?"

Brent licked his tongue across his mouth. "Panic. That's all, Sheriff. Pure, gut-sick panic with that woman screaming to bring down the town. If you've ever felt panic like that, you know what I mean. If you haven't, I can't tell you, but, God, how I envy you. But if you ain't felt it, you won't know why I ran."

"Why did you run?"

"She was screaming. I had killed her husband. All I could think was that Gil Clawson was a liar and a cheat and maybe a cattle rustler, but he was long gone, and I knew the old man was gone with him, so if Stan was telling the truth about them cattle, Gil and that old man had played me for a sucker. And Stan Clevenger was the most important man in that part of the country—the way you talk about Clayt Ranchester down here—that's the way folks spoke of Stan——"

"And you'd stole his cows and gunned him down?"

"That's the way it looked. That was the way it was going to look to everybody. He'd torn up my bill of sale, thrown it at me, and I knew how worthless it was, signed by that old man and Gil Clawson. All I could think about was how I had to get out of there. Everything was wrecked, and they were going to hang me."

"So you went looking for Gil Clawson?"

"No. I didn't."

"You didn't?"

"No. I ran because I was scared. And, for almost three years, I moved around, working any place I could find work until this poster caught up with me, or people got nosy, asking too many questions. I lived in hell. I won't even try to tell you what kind of hell because you're on the other side of the law, and you won't even know what I'm talking about. But you're right. I was like a rabbit, ready to jump. . . . And all the time I was sick in my gut about the injustice—because I'd begged Stan to show some sense, try to settle it some other way—I didn't want to kill him. I had my own place up there, and that was all I wanted. Seemed like all I could think about was that I wanted to get back home. And I found out running wasn't getting me anywhere. I wanted to be cleared of that murder, or I wanted to be hung—either way, I had to face it, I had to end it. I was way down in Waco, Texas, when I made up my mind to come back home. Seemed like everything looked better once I made up my mind to do that."

"Just going to ride back up there to face what you'd run away from and tell 'em you weren't guilty of murder, eh?"

"Yeah. At first. It began to seem to me that people are pretty decent. Somebody had to believe me——"

"From what you told me, I wouldn't have bought it——"

"You don't buy it?"

"I didn't say that. I'm looking at it from the angle of the sheriff up at Johnson County. A man run the way you did—that must look like an admission of guilt to him, especially when the leading man of the town was killed."

Brent nodded. "That's why it took me so long to get back. Nights, I'd lie by a campfire and figure on it. Seemed to me Maude Clevenger was pretty wild that afternoon Stan got himself killed. She's probably a lot more bitter by now. Then, she wanted him to give me a chance, but after I—I shot Stan—I reckon she forgot all about that."

"Very likely. Right now she probably wants your eyes—and your skin."

"Just the same, I was sick for home, and tired running, and I was willing to take a chance on a hangrope just to be cleared. I figured I could clear myself by finding Gil Clawson. By then, I was sure Gil had stolen those cattle, but maybe he hadn't. He and the old man had given me a bill of sale. Anyhow, I could force Gil to swear I paid him for those cattle. Gil was the one man who could free me, and I knew I had to find him. There were people who saw Stan draw first, even Maude had seen that, but only Gil could tell them I had bought those cattle and why, when I shot Stan Clevenger, I drew in self-defense and I killed in self-defense."

Sitting in the swivel chair, the big sheriff shivered suddenly.

"My God, Landers, you put a man in one hell of a spot. Because it's been troubling me—why you were up there in the mesa country. When I found this dodger, I thought I had the answer: a man on the run—with just enough decency to bring a sick woman to a doctor, especially when he expected to clear town before anybody suspected him of anything except kindness to a poor, wretched girl."

"That's about it," Brent said. "Except I was up there looking for Gil Clawson. A man leaves all kind of signs peculiar to him—if you follow him long enough, look close enough. You know that, Sheriff. Gil and his friends did that . . . I trailed them up there, and I found Rosemary up there . . . and that's the way it was."

The sheriff's face was sickly gray. He reached across the desk, picked up the dodger, studied the reward offer on its face. "I'm a man with my duty, Landers, no matter what good things you've done for the Tillson girl."

"I'm asking for nothing."

"That's what eating my craw! You ain't asking for nothing. And I'm glad you ain't. From where I sit, I want to tell you, I believe you—I believe you acted—you did what you did in self-defense—if killing anybody is ever justifiable—then what you did was justifiable. But that don't change anything. They want you in Johnson City. They're willing to pay me to get you there. You see how it is."

Brent shrugged, tiredly.

"Damn it. Say something." Ox's voice shook.

"I got nothing more to say."

"All right. Looks like there ain't but one thing I can do to repay you for—for what you've done for the Tillson girl—I can arrest Gil Clawson before he gets out of town, and I can hold him—until you need him up in Johnson City for your trial. Yeah, by God! I can do that."

"On what charge?"

"Hell, I'll think of something. I'm sheriff here."

Brent's lips were colorless, but there was the unwilling flicker of hope in his eyes. "And Gil's a drinking buddy of Clayt Ranchester's boy?"

Ox Slaughter swore. "Now, don't push me. I'll hold Clawson. I said I would. I will." He tried to smile. "That way, I don't feel so bad when my old lady moves into that big house she's got her heart set on. Huh?"

The screams of women, the wild yelling of men from the street, struck Brent like a blow in the back, and he wheeled around, moving toward the door. Ox Slaughter was up and over his desk in one smooth, fluid movement.

"Hold it! Where the hell you think you're going?"

The door was thrown open. Deputy Fallon burst through, his face gray, cheek muscles rigid.

"It's Doc Barfield, Ox," Fallon whispered, gasping. "They pistol-whipped him—he's likely dead. . . . And that Tillson girl, she's screaming down there, she won't let nobody near her."

Brent shoved past Sid Fallon, almost knocking the slender deputy off balance, going through the door. He didn't glance over his shoulder to see if Ox Slaughter was going to shoot him in the back or not. At that moment, it didn't seem to matter very much.

— 5 —

LANDERS SPINTED, RUNNING ALONG THE DARK STREET toward Doc Barfield's house. He pressed his gun down in its holster with the heel of his right hand as he ran. He did not look back, he didn't have to, because he could hear Ox Slaughter's heavy tread a few feet behind him.

Ox was sweating, breathing in a labored way when they reached the lantern-illuminated veranda at Doc Barfield's. Townspeople were knotted at the door, spilled down the steps and into the yard, their faces ashen, silent or talking in whispers. Landers pushed his way through them, going up the steps, across the narrow stoop and through the front door. People snagged at Ox's arm, but he brushed them aside, following Brent Landers.

"In a minute," the Sheriff kept panting to them. "I'll get back to you. I'll talk to you people in a minute."

"Doc's in his office there," Deputy Sid Fallon said from behind Ox.

Landers heard the deputy, but ignored him. He saw the Arapaho servant woman leaning against the wall, crying, her apron pressed to her mouth with her balled fists. She stared at Brent hopefully, nodding her head toward Doc's office. Landers tried to give her a faint smile of encouragement, but failed.

He turned away from Doc's office and strode through the open doorway into Rosemary's bedroom. A single lamp glowed, turned low, its saffron light coating walls and furniture. At first, Landers didn't see Rosemary; his heart sank. Then he heard the girl whimper and found her crouched in a shadowed corner behind her bed. She was quivering and her face was pallid.

"Rosemary." He tried to keep his voice level.

"Oh, Brent. Oh God, Brent! I thought you were gone."

Crying, the girl stretched her hands toward him and Brent went to her.

Watching the look in the tortured girl's face, Ox Slaughter grimaced, sick at his stomach. He'd never seen such complete trust and faith placed in any human being as the Tillson girl put in young Landers. It was as if Landers, and only Landers, stood between her and all the terrors men could impose on this earth. He winced, drew the back of his hand across his mouth.

Slaughter spoke sourly. "You look to the girl, Landers. I'll—see about Doc."

Landers knelt beside Rosemary. He felt her body trembling. He said, "It's all right, Rosemary. They're gone now."

She nodded, but pressed her hand over her mouth to keep from being ill. She was unable to speak.

Gently, Landers put his arms under her and lifted her, standing up slowly. He felt her hands clinging to him. He laid her down on her bed, slowly disengaging her arms.

"Will you wait right here a minute, Rosemary? One minute. I'll be right back."

Terror swirled like black smoke in her eyes. Brent said, "Sid will stay with you. Right at the foot of your bed. Won't you, Sid?"

Deputy Fallon nodded, watching him. Landers turned up the wick on the lamp, brightening the room. He turned then, strode past Fallon and out of the room. He crossed the hall, entered Doc Barfield's office. The small room seemed crowded and Doc was still sprawled on the examination table where they'd brought him from the front door. Earl Greenley, a man Brent recognized as the town banker, and Ox Slaughter were standing staring helplessly down at Doc. Doc's head was bloody and strings of blood discolored his dark suit and white shirt.

Landers didn't go near him, taking all this in at a glance. He went directly to Doc's medicine cabinet, found the key in a small hideaway drawer, opened the chest. He took down the hypodermic syringe and the morphine, the way he'd seen Doc do a dozen times in these past days. Without speaking, he locked the cabinet and returned to Rosemary's bedroom.

He paused beside Rosemary's bed, aware that she had hardly breathed since he moved from the room. She watched

him intently, as did Sid Fallon. Brent filled the syringe with a solution of morphine, using approximately the same amount he had seen Doc use. He wiped Rosemary's arm with alcohol and cotton, pinched up the skin.

Fallon asked, "What you think you're doing?"

Landers didn't answer. Uncertainly, Fallon came around the side of the bed. But he made no move to stop Brent as he injected the drug into Rosemary's arm. Landers then placed the hypodermic on table beside her bed and stood looking down at her. Medicine, and what medical men knew, would never cease to please and exalt him. He saw Rosemary growing quiet, relaxing under the soothing, quieting effects of sedation.

Fallon saw it, too. He whispered, staring at Landers with grudging admiration.

"Well, I'm just damned!" Sid Fallon said.

Rosemary was asleep. The sounds of the townspeople rode through the house. Doc was sitting up on the edge of the examination table. Landers had washed the head wounds caused by the pistol butt, and he was now painting them with iodine under the doctor's direction. Doc alternated between long swigs of bourbon and curse-word combinations new to all of them.

"I'm still woozy, Sheriff," Doc said at last. "But I can tell you what happened here. I thought we'd lost that Tillson girl. I thought them men had come back to kill her."

"What'd they look like?"

Doc said, "I don't know, Ox. I don't know. It was dark on my porch. They knocked, polite enough. When I opened the door, I saw by the light from my hall that plenty was wrong. They were masked. They must have pulled them masks on after they came up on my porch."

"You don't know them?" Ox asked.

"I told you. They wore masks. It was dark."

"I know that, Doc, and I ain't trying to push you. I got skull-cracked in an alley one time. I was just hit once. I didn't make good sense for a week. . . . But I need all the help I can get."

Doc shrugged—a small, pained gesture—and took a long drink of whisky.

"You ever see them before, Doc? Their clothes, the way they looked?"

"I told you. No. I ain't sure. It all happened fast, I can tell you that. They didn't waste no words. The one in front, he grabbed the door so I couldn't close it. He said they wanted the girl. And I looked at them. I knew who they were, all right. I was sick enough to vomit. I knew what they meant. They'd come back here looking for Rosemary Tillson. They said they wanted to see the woman I'd been treating.

"I yelled over my shoulder for my woman, told her to get Rosemary out of there. Poor old Alma, she came running out of the kitchen just in time to see the big fellow crack me across the forehead—right here, with his gun butt. She started screaming. Rosemary stood in her door, and she screamed too." Doc Barfield shuddered. "I'd have screamed, too, like an old woman, but I was too busy trying to stay on my feet. I was trying to close that door against 'em. The women were screaming. The whole place was skidding around my head. I knew I was no good—I wasn't going to be able to stop them."

"You done fine, Doc," Ox Slaughter said.

"Yeah." Doc's agonized whisper was savage. "I done what I could—I made 'em beat me down to—get in here. . . . All I could think was—maybe somebody would hear the women screaming—and get here in time."

"Looks like that's what happened, Doc," Ox said.

Doc pressed his fingers against his eyes. "That's about all I can tell you. This devil in front, he started hitting me with his gun butt. Other two finally pulled him off, but by then it was too late to do me any good. I—was on my knees. I was on the floor. I'd of been begging him—to stop—only I couldn't talk at all. From like it was some far way off, I heard Rosemary and Alma screaming. I heard people running toward the house from outside. I saw everything, none of it seemed real. But I was on the floor, and I couldn't move, I couldn't do anything about it. The—men—must of got scared off. They—ran."

Sid Fallon said, "They rode out of town, Ox. Their horses was in Doc's yard. I took a couple of shots at them. I know I didn't hit them. . . . I stopped shooting because the street was full of people by then."

"They come back for her," Doc said, as if talking to himself, but his head was tilted, his agonized eyes fixed on Brent Landers' face. "They left her for dead up there. Somewhere, boy, they heard she was still alive—"

"They heard it in the saloon," Brent said in a cold voice. He heard Ox Slaughter's sharp intake of breath, but ignored the huge lawman.

"They don't mean to let her live, Brent," Doc said in that low, deadly tone. "They won't let her live. They figure they can't. She saw their faces. She must know them."

"Take it easy, Doc," Brent said. "Lie down."

"On this table?" Doc asked bitterly. "This thing's too uncomfortable for anybody but my patients——" He moved his head slowly toward the grocer and the banker. "Earl, you and Horace, how about helping me into my bedroom before the top of my skull comes off."

When they were alone in Doc's office, Ox said, "Sid, you might as well figure to stay here the rest of the night."

"All right, Ox."

"You don't let nobody in, Sid. You understand? *Nobody.*"

"Right."

Ox jerked his head at Brent and then moved out through the knot of townspeople to the yard. He paused, looking at them.

"You people break it up now," the Sheriff ordered. "I'll be in my office in the morning. Any of you got anything to tell me about what happened, you see me there, early as you like. . . . I want you folks to get on home now. Doc and the girl—they're both all right."

Silently, Brent Landers followed the sheriff a half block along the darkened street.

"Goddamn!" Ox exclaimed at last.

"Well, that covers it as well as anything."

"What else can I say, man? What else you want me to say? Them two people—Doc and the Tillson girl—as good people as ever lived. They're in danger, in hell—and I can't help them."

"Maybe you can."

"Yeah? What now?"

Brent nodded toward the hitching rail before the saloon across the street. "Clawson, Avery Ranchester, and your gun-slick named Moffitt. Their horses are gone."

Ox breathed in deeply. "That don't prove nothing, Landers. Not in itself. Not unless somebody saw them—or their horses over—at Doc's."

"You beginning to buy it, eh, Slaughter?"

Slaughter's shoulders sagged. He was silent for some seconds.

At last, he said in a low tone, "Somebody could have told them—about the Tillson girl over in the saloon."

"You buy it," Brent insisted.

Ox cursed. "I didn't say that. Don't go putting words in *my* mouth, Landers. Don't go costing me my job. I don't go off half cocked, Landers. I've learned that much."

"Sure. You do it your way. Give 'em one more chance at her. That ought to be all they need. They can't keep missing, can they, Ox?"

Ox turned, facing Brent, his body tense, fists clenched. "Don't push me. Goddamn it, Landers, a fellow could work up a real hate for you."

"It's you, you don't like, Ox. Don't blame me because you can't stand the truth."

Suddenly, Ox Slaughter nodded as if he'd made a fateful decision. "All right, come on, Landers. You and me. We'll nail part of this thing down right now. . . . If, when we get there, I ain't got the guts to tell him his only son killed a stagecoach guard and raped Reverend Tillson's eighteen-year-old daughter, maybe you can tell him. By God, I'll deputize you for the job. We'll ride out to Clayt Ranchester's."

Clayton Ranchester was nothing Brent expected to see, or pictured ahead of time on the long ride out to the ranch. The house itself startled him. In a way, it was early Colonial, but it was rough, and you saw where additions had been made, their roughness now partially concealed by time and money and paint.

Lamplight glowed brightly upstairs and down. Hounds yelped as Landers and Slaughter approached the place and a thin, sun-dried man limped out on the veranda, holding a lantern high. They dismounted and Brent followed Ox to the veranda where the man waited with the lantern.

Two stableboys came racing around the side of the house and the thin man called to them: "Rub down them horses, water 'em good, give 'em light feed, 'case these gentlemen mean to ride back to town tonight."

"Thanks, Stew," Ox Slaughter said. He spoke across his shoulder. "Stew was the first rider Clayt ever hired. He broke his leg so many times it wouldn't mend right. Now Stew

runs this big old house for Clayt Ranchester. That right, Stew?"

"That's right, Mr. Sheriff," Stew said.

Stew was in his fifties, dehydrated, withered and seared by old suns. His voice was high, almost a falsetto. He limped ahead of them into the house, lowering the lantern, turning it down, blowing it out.

Inside the front door, Ox Slaughter paused involuntarily, and Brent hesitated, too. This kind of elegance had been carted in across the endless plains, from how far east only God and the bill of lading could disclose. Brent had never seen anything like it because always there was the roughness, the way it had once been, showing through all the newer beauty. And there was no woman's touch anywhere. This was a man's house, with shotguns and rifles leaned carelessly in corners.

Clayt Ranchester came striding from the living room.

"Sheriff Slaughter! Come on in, Sheriff. Come on in. Got you a bottle of bourbon open and waiting."

Ranchester's voice was big and heavy, but it was also mellow. He had shouted orders on wind-riven ranges but the wind had never torn that voice apart—his orders were heard and obeyed. He had quieted some now. In every way, he was like a man who once had been rough and hard and was now getting old, obese.

Brent stared at him. Ranchester was of medium height, his legs were not thin, but they appeared spindly because his body was so keglike in rich whipcord trousers and linen shirt. His neck was thick, his chins, doubled and his face red; he had the look of a man who had devoured too many of his home-grown steaks smothered in gravy and had drunk too much whisky.

He was not yet in his fifties, but his hair was graying and he was going soft, giving orders and counting his money. He obviously was a man who loved the power he could wield, the way he dominated everything and everybody around him. It pleased him, and made him smile often, and drink a lot.

"Scotch. That's my drink," Ranchester said, leading them into his parlor. An unplayed piano gathered dust. A tired-looking woman in a huge portrait above fieldstone hearth and mantel gazed down on the cluttered room. He waved his arm

toward overstuffed chairs, bearing the wear marks of gun butts, metal-ornamented holsters, and range clay.

"Scotch. You got to really like whisky to drink Scotch. . . ."

He poured amber-tinted whisky into three glasses, turned, smiling with paternal pride, to Slaughter—one of his boys, another hireling, somebody to dominate, to treat in a patronizing, almost contemptuous manner.

"What you doing way out here, Ox?" Ranchester asked.

Ox Slaughter took a long drink, then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth in the way that meant he was taking time to think before he spoke.

"Came out to talk to Avery, Clayt. That is—if he's here," the lawman replied.

Clayt Ranchester laughed. Brent saw the swelling of pride in his red face, in the moist blue eyes. "Sure, Av's here."

Brent noticed the puzzled way Ox glanced at him. But Brent didn't share the sheriff's puzzlement. Why shouldn't Avery be here? Where would he go if he had a place like this to return to?

"We'd like to talk to him—to you both," Ox said, his voice weakening.

"I'll have Stew call him."

From the bar, Clayt took up a cowbell and shook it, the sound ringing, reverberating through the old house.

The thin ex-cowpoke appeared in the doorway before the din of the bell dissipated.

Clayt gestured with his Scotch glass. "Get young Avery down here, will you do that, Stew-boy? Tell him we got some guests."

Clayt drank, watching them. Brent saw that Ranchester had grown soft and slow due to his amassed wealth. There was no tension, no apprehension in Ranchester even though the law was in his house asking to see his son. Perhaps Clayt Ranchester had finally reached the place where he figured the law could no longer touch him, or anyone who belonged to him.

Clayt's voice was easy, level. He was a man with most of the money in the area and all the time in the world.

"I've lived in this one place a long time, Mr. Landers," he explained. "None of this was here when I came, I can tell you. And it ain't been easy getting it here, either. Eh, Ox?"

"No, sir, you've had your share of troubles, Mr. Ranchester," Ox Slaughter said obediently.

"Yeah. That's right. People look at a man like me, a man that's made a little money, bought up land, and put something aside for his heirs. They figure he has had it easy. Well, they don't know. They just don't know. My wife died before I could build this house like it is now, all comfortable and nice, the way I wanted it for her. This was a hard blow to me and it took me a long spell to get over it. People said I should marry again. But I never saw another woman I wanted after Nina died. A man sometimes finds the one woman for him. I know I did."

Clayt moved about on his thin-looking legs refilling their glasses from a Scotch bottle.

"Then you remember when my oldest boy—Clayt, Junior, died, eh, Ox? Oh, my God. When they come and told me that boy was dead, I just fell down on my knees crying because my legs couldn't hold me up under nothing like that. . . It was all so senseless . . . a Sunday afternoon . . . bunch of young fools, running down coyotes on their horses for the hell-sport of it. Horse threw young Clayt, Junior. God, almighty, I shot that horse myself . . . not in hate, mind you. But I figured that horse oughtn't live if young Clayt, Junior, was dead. No. I ain't had it easy. By God, I ain't!"

"You done a lot of good, Mr. Ranchester," Ox reminded him.

Clayt nodded. "Maybe I have." He struck his pot-belly with his fist. "I reckon I got fat in spite of the hell I've seen in my time—right here on my land. But a man can't stop working and building. Not if he's got it in him. You build something—way I have here. Pretty soon, it's not for yourself you're working any more. You start out, you want it all for yourself, but then you see you got to pass on and leave it behind you, and you feel proud, building for your sons. Then something happens, you lose one of those boys. Your heart breaks, and then everything centers on the one you got left."

"You ain't had it easy," Ox said again.

"No. But, by hell, I figure it's worth it. You build something you can leave for your son. . . . But, by God, Av's a good boy—I got no fears—not any more—when I kick in, I'll leave all this in good, strong young hands. Eh, Ox?"

Avery Ranchester came through the door into the parlor, and then hesitated, the barest shadow of doubt flickering

across his young face. It was there long enough for Brent to see it. Avery wore a fresh shirt and newly pressed whipcord trousers and slippers made of hides. He looked cleanly shaved, recently bathed. There was the look of paleness under the deep suntan in his cheeks.

Clayt spoke with pride. "Avery's just come down from the north hill's line shack, Ox. Just got down tonight. He's been riding line for me."

Ox stared at Avery, and young Ranchester winced. "Now, Pa! I didn't tell you, but I stopped off in town for a drink. Sheriff saw me in there tonight. Right, Ox?"

"That's right, Avery."

"Goddamn, boy, I don't mind you taking off to town, but why did you lie to me about it?"

Avery shrugged. "It wasn't that I meant to lie to you, Pa. Hell, it wasn't important enough to lie about. It was just I built me a real thirst up in the north section. When I got home, I didn't tell you because it didn't seem to matter."

"That's it," Clayt persisted. "It didn't matter. That's why I don't like you lying to me. I can't stand lying."

Avery's voice crackled, snapping like hot lightning in the room. "I didn't say anything about it because it didn't make any difference."

Clayt Ranchester winced, then he laughed. "All right, son. All right."

"Hell, if there's something wrong, tell me about it. Is that why you came running out here, Ox? To tattle to my old man I was in the saloon?" Avery asked challengingly.

"No, Av," Ox said. "Nothing like that."

"Forget it, boy," Clayt said. "Hell, Ox, you and me know, a young boy's got to blow off steam, eh?"

Ox looked ill. He set down his glass as though he could no longer hold it without dropping it. He glanced once at Brent, eyes agonized. He licked his lips, drew the back of his hand across his mouth again.

Avery saw all this, pushed him. "Go on, Ox. You been spying on me? You got anything more to tell Pa about me?"

Ox shook his head. "No, Av. No, I ain't." He took a deep breath. He appealed to Clayt. "Reckon what I got to say, Clayt, I'd rather say to you, if you could spare me a couple minutes."

"I sure to hell don't want to stick around for it," Avery said. "I been working hard up at that line shack. I need

some sleep. If you had some women with you, I might stay down here."

Ox tried to smile. "Maybe next time, Av."

Avery didn't even bother saying good night to Ox or to Brent. He winked at his father. Clayt watched with a faint, twisted smile of pride as Avery strode out and closed the parlor door loudly behind him.

"A boy's only young one time, Ox," Clayt said, pouring more Scotch into the sheriff's glass. "And maybe I have spoiled him. He'll grow out of it."

Ox didn't touch the Scotch. Watching the sheriff, Brent was afraid the big man was going to be ill, lose everything on Ranchester's shaggy carpeting.

"All right, Ox," Clayt said, and there was a shade of hardness in his tone. "It's something about Avery. What's on your mind?"

Ox pulled his hand across his mouth, his face gray. "There's been trouble, Clayt. We—I thought you ought to know about it."

Clayt Ranchester, no longer smiling, sat on the arm of an oversized divan, poised tensely, leaning forward, watching the sheriff's face, waiting.

"What kind of trouble, Ox?"

"It's not pretty, Clayt. Damn it, I hate to have to be the one to bring it to you. I know what kind of bad time you've had. You've always been my friend——"

"Get on with it, damn it!"

"Maybe Av's mixed up in this trouble, Clayt. Now, I don't say he is. But maybe. I mean—we got no proof, mind you, but Avery might be mixed up in it."

Clayt's voice was hard, filled with warning. "Be careful what you say, Slaughter. You understand?"

Ox nodded. "I understand, Clayt. I got my job and sometimes it ain't pleasant——"

"Quit beating around it, Ox. I warn you. You got something to say against my son, you spit it out. Just you be careful what you say."

Ox shook his head. His big hands shook visibly. "Maybe you—you'd rather hear it from Mr. Landers here, Clayt. I mean, I got no heart for this. Still, you got to hear it, and the sooner the better."

"Who's Landers?" Ranchester inquired as if seeing Brent for the first time. "What's he got to do with it?"

Ox shook his head. "You tell him about it, Landers."

"You bring a stranger out here to say to me what you can't say, Ox?"

Brent saw that Ox Slaughter was physically unable to say any more so he said, "I know what it's about. I can tell you what we know—what we think."

Clayt spoke sharply, not looking at him. "Go ahead."

"Your son was in town tonight, at the saloon, with a known gunslinger named Johnny Moffitt and a drifter named Clawson. You know them? They work for you?"

"Get on with it."

"All right. Clawson's been in all kind of trouble. I been looking for him——"

"You a lawman of some kind, Landers?"

"No."

Brent waited, but Clayt didn't bother looking at him, merely waited for him to speak his piece and clear out.

"Well," Brent continued, "I trailed Clawson and two other men into the badlands. I found a campfire up there. Signs the three of them were there."

"What's that got to do with my son?" Ranchester asked testily. "I told you where Av was—he's been in the north hills section, line-riding for me. Now, do you want to call me a liar, Mr. Landers?"

Brent met Clayt Ranchester's gaze, and his eyes did not waver. "If your son was where you say he was, fine. But, on the other hand, he was drinking in town tonight, and you didn't know that. Maybe you don't know where he's been."

Ranchester said, "Warn Mr. Landers to be careful the tone he takes to me, Slaughter."

Ox spread his hands, sweating. "Hear him out, Clayt. Please. You're going to have to hear it sooner or later. Hear him out."

Ranchester's fist closed on his glass, and he studied it as if he'd never seen glass of whisky before.

"A girl was raped up on that mesa," Brent said coldly. "She was misused, tortured, and she was left to die."

Clayt Ranchester trembled on the divan arm, but did not move, did not speak, visibly holding himself leashed.

"Tonight," Brent said, "this girl saw your son and Moffitt and Clawson enter the saloon. We were across the street. She said they were the ones who had raped her and left her to die up there."

Ranchester's head quivered, his red face paled. He asked in a chilled whisper, "Who is this bitch?"

"Rosemary Tillson," Brent said. "The daughter of Reverend Tillson."

Ranchester sucked in a deep breath, but some of the rage abated. He still did not look at Landers; it was as if he were afraid that, if he looked at him, he would kill him.

"You got anything more to say, Landers?"

"Yes. There's more. Sheriff Slaughter felt there was some mistake. That Rosemary Tillson was wrong—about your son. He wouldn't even question your son about it."

Ranchester nodded impatiently, waiting.

"Whoever those three men were—the ones who raped that girl and killed the guard on the stage she was riding—whoever they were—they pistol-whipped Doc Barfield tonight, and would have killed the Tillson girl, but her screams brought help and they were scared off."

Clayt Ranchester stood up. His voice was taut, but low. "There's something I want to ask you, Landers. What kind of proof you got my son was—mixed up—in any of this?"

"Just what I've told you. I've told you all of it."

"If that girl says Avery harmed her, she lies. If you say it, you lie. Now, Landers, you make of that what you want to."

Ranchester stood, hands knotted, eyes wild with the rages within him. Ox caught the older man's arm, but Ranchester shook down his hand.

"Nobody means to hurt you, Clayt. Or your son. Nobody lies. Not intentional. . . . We ain't here to lie, Clayt. All we want is to find out the truth."

Clayt Ranchester was silent for some moments, looking at everything in the room except Ox Slaughter and Brent Landers.

Finally, he said, "I think you better get this man out of my house, Slaughter. Off my land. Now, I say this to you. My son had nothing to do with this dirty mess. Nothing. I say that knowing nothing but my son. But I know that Tillson girl. I knew her father. I know that girl's good and pure. It sickens me to hear she was hurt. . . . So I try to think maybe people are upset, maybe saying things they know ain't true. So, here's what I'll do. I'll talk to my boy. I'll find out what he knows about this—you say 'Moffitt?'"

"Johnny Moffitt, Clayt," Ox said in a low voice. "And Gil Clawson."

"I'll find out from him. I'll handle it my way. When I get anything you need to know, Ox, I'll ride in to town with it. I reckon though, until I get it settled, I'd take it kindly if you—stayed away from me, Slaughter. I try to be a patient man. I try to be a fair man. But I'm also human. I got my limits. I got my limits, Ox. You understand me?"

— 6 —

WHEN LANDERS AND SHERIFF SLAUGHTER WERE GONE, THE hounds yelping a mournful farewell along the lane, Clayt Ranchester strode up the stairs, moving with the pace and vigor of a man twenty years younger. The upper hall was a gloomy barn. A slit of light showed under Avery's bedroom door.

Large head tilted, heavy-jowled jaw set, Clayt moved along the luxurious carpeting, caught the huge brass door handle in his fist and twisted. The door was locked. For a second, Clayt paused, gripping the knob. Then he spoke against the facing, voice hard and loud.

"Boy, let me in. I want to talk to you."

Avery didn't protest or delay. He knew better. He moved across the room, turned the key, held the door open. For the first time, Clayt noticed how pale his son looked. Clayt was aware of a queasy sickness stirring in the pit of his stout belly. He was looking for signs, bad signs, because those men had walked in here with their dirty talk against Av. He wanted the truth, but he wasn't going to prejudice the boy. Nobody was. Av was going to get every chance.

He asked, "You all right, Av?"

"Yeah. I'm all right. Sleepy. I been working hard, Pa. You know that. What you want? Is it some kind of lie Ox has told you?"

Clayt said, "It wasn't Ox, son. It was—well, what it was, was so bad, Ox Slaughter didn't have the heart—or the guts—to say it to my face. The other fellow said it, and there was an honest look about him. He might be wrong, might be lying, but if he is, he believes what he's saying. I could see in his face he was—a good man inside. Didn't want to hurt

nobody, make no quick judgments, but he didn't back down, either."

"That didn't make much of a hit with you, did it, Pa?"

Clayt said, "Don't try to talk around me, Av. I admit I like a man to know who I am, what kind of puddle I make. But this here is a bad thing. They say you rode into town with Johnny Moffitt and Gil Clawson. You drank with them. You three was—pointed out by the Tillson girl—as the men who dragged her off the Greybull stage and raped her."

"My God!" The words exploded across Avery's mouth as if he'd been struck suddenly in the stomach.

"Yeah."

Clayt paced the room, feeling the heavy-weak numbness in his arms and legs as if all his blood were congealed in his belly and his heart was too sick to pump it.

"This is rotten bad, boy. Rotten. Later tonight, three men jumped Doc Barfield, pistol-whipped him almost to death——"

"Hell, if I'd been there, anybody in town would of knowed me——"

"It was dark, boy, and them men wore masks." Clayt stared at his knotted fists. "My God, son, I ain't accusing you. I'm telling you what they said. Now, what they said was, you rode into Sage Crossing with two men of ugly reps, you drank with them, you rode out with them——"

"Who said that?"

"I'm asking you, boy, what happened?"

"Hell, I don't know! This here is the first I know of it. Any of it. I been lonely as a goddamned coyote up in that damn north line shack because you got to make a man out of me the damn hard way. I went in for a drink, sure. I tied up outside the saloon. I went in, had a few drinks, I got on my horse, and I rode home. That's all. I don't know no Johnny Moffitt—or—or what'd you say that other fellow's name was?"

Clayt caught his breath, the sound whistling. Before Avery could move, he struck out, backhanding him across the face.

Avery spun half around, toppled against the foot of his four-poster bed, caught himself. He wheeled, as fast as a weasel, his teeth bared, his eyes wild.

"Goddamn it, Pa! Don't you never do that again or, so help me God, Pa, I'll kill you!"

Clayt advanced upon him, and Avery, face starkly gray, did not move.

"Don't lie to me, boy."

"I'm not lying. Why would I lie to you? If you don't trust me, the hell with you. You got to be so powerful you can push people round—well, don't push me. Maybe it's because I'm your son, but I can't take it. You show somebody else what a big man you are. I won't take it, Pa."

Clayt took another step forward. His fists were clenched.

"You want me to beat it out of you, boy? You through bluffing? You through making threats? Big men have threatened me, boy. They lay dead. But I'm here. Nobody threatens me, Avery. Nobody. Not my own son. Nobody. Now, you listen to me. I want the truth. You knew them men. Everybody around here knows Johnny Moffitt, and this ain't the first time I've heard of you running around with him."

Avery shrugged. "All right. I know him. That don't mean I was with him——"

"Boy, maybe you don't hear well. I want the truth. All of it. Now, I mean to help you. No matter how bad it is, no matter how it turns out, you got me to back you, me to fight for you. But I *got* to know."

"I ain't done nothing!"

Clayt's voice continued, hard and relentless. "I got to know it all, Avery. I was in town the day the Tillson girl was—taken. That was a sick town. Gut-sick. I was a sick man. A good, sweet girl, pure and clean. We was all gut-sick, you hear me. . . . Now, men come in my house, telling me my son had a part in—in that filthy, cowardly business."

"I don't know nothing about that."

"Stop it, Avery! Goddamn it, stop it! If I have to get Stew up here and we tie you down, I'll lash it out of you. I mean to have the truth. You know them men. Clawson. Moffitt. You was seen in town—tonight—drinking with them. A good, pure-minded girl has accused you of—of being one of them—them perverted ruts—of raping her, and leaving her for dead. You hear me, Avery? You ain't talking your way out of this."

Avery tried to push past his father, his mouth twisted and head tilted as if he were above dignifying the accusations with an answer. But he found his father a wall, he could not pass. Suddenly, Avery sank against the bed, trembling.

"Oh, Pa, listen to me. You got to believe me. I was scared before, and maybe I lied some, but I won't lying now."

"All right, Avery. Take it easy, boy. Tell your Pa about it.

Tell me how it was, boy, and——” A shudder wrecked the thick body. “We’ll try to work it out.”

Avery licked his lips. “Ain’t nothing to work out, Pa. Gil Clawson and Johnny—they might have been up in the mesa——”

“There was three men up there, Avery,” Clayt said in a low voice.

“Maybe they was! I’m telling the truth now, Pa. I don’t *know* who was up there. . . . I was at the line shack, I was packing, getting ready to come back down when Gil and Johnny dropped by. They come to the line shack, wanting some whisky. Well, I didn’t have nothing but coffee. I was sick, fed up. They wanted to ride into Sage Crossing for drinks. I rode with them, Pa. I wasn’t in on that rape or murder—they might of been, *I don’t know*. All I know is, I didn’t hear anything about it until I got in town. . . . I knew Rosemary, too, and I was sick about it—I kind of lost my stomach for drinking. I came on home. That’s it, Pa. That’s the truth. Whether you believe me or not, that’s the truth.”

Clayt was silent for a long time. Avery stayed slumped against the bed, staring at the floor.

“There was three men up there, Av,” Clayt said stubbornly.

“I don’t know, Pa.”

“This fellow that brought her down from the hills—Landers—who is he? Anybody know him? Anybody know what he was doing up there?”

“I don’t know, Pa.”

Finally, Clayt Ranchester nodded. “All right, boy, that’s good enough for me. You give me your word you weren’t in on it, that’s good enough for me.” He exhaled heavily. “I feel better. I feel good, boy. What we’ll do, we’ll ride in to Sage Crossing early in the morning and you tell Sheriff Slaughter what you just told me. I’ll find out about this fellow who brought her down from up there, find out how clean his hands are.” He touched Avery’s shoulder reassuringly. “Don’t you fret yourself no more about it, boy. You try to get some sleep.”

Landers and Ox Slaughter rode into the livery stable. The town was a dark blur on the plains, the dim lantern barely winking over the livery door. They left their horses in stalls, moving silently, as they had ridden into town. Then they walked together out the front door.

Ox paused in the street. His face was drawn in the faint lanternlight.

He said, "You're going to be at Doc's tonight so you might send Sid home to get some sleep."

Brent nodded, moved away toward Doc Barfield's house. Ahead, he saw the faint glow of light in the wood-barred window of Rosemary's bedroom. She'd slept with lamp glowing since she'd been there; she was terrorized in darkness. Landers' heels crackled against the boardwalk. He turned in at Doc's.

At that moment, a man's sob clutched at him from the darkness, the front door was pulled open and Sid Fallon came through it. At first, it looked unreal, as if Sid had stretched a foot taller than natural, as if he'd become rubbery. The door fell away from him and Sid staggered across the stoop, moaning again.

Landers ran forward. But he was too late to catch Sid. Sid plunged forward, sprawled down the steps, head first. Landers stopped, transfixed, staring at the knife in Sid's back.

Brent drew his gun, vaulted up the steps and across the porch. He rushed through the open door into the night-lighted hall. First, he heard the slap of boot against wood, the cracking of metal, splintering of door. And then, behind the protective door, Rosemary screamed wildly as if wakened in the middle of a nightmare.

Brent recognized Johnny Moffitt's tight belt, skintight Levi's, the broad shoulders. Moffitt had his neckerchief pulled up over his face as a mask. As Brent came into the hallway, big Johnny Moffitt had lifted his foot for a second kick at the broken door lock. Behind the door, Rosemary screamed again.

Brent cried, "Moffitt——"

Moffitt flinched, catching his breath, but reacting instantly. He spun around, firing as he turned. He was wild. The bullet splatted into the door-facing a foot from Brent Landers' head.

The hall, the house, the town still rung with Moffitt's first wild shot when Brent Landers' pressed the trigger on his gun. It bucked slightly in his hand, but his firing was steady, and his aim perfect. The sound filled the hallway, deafeningly.

The bullet struck Johnny Moffitt in the chest, slamming him backwards. Moffitt, toppling, struck dead-weight against Rosemary's door and it gave way, opening inward.

The gun spilled from Moffitt's fingers. He slid off the broken door, struck the floor, half in Rosemary's room, half in the hall. His hands grasped for a moment at the carpeting, and then he did not move again. Moffitt was dead.

Doc Barfield came unsteadily from his room in trousers, barefooted. Alma came running from the rear of the old house. Doc stared at the fallen gunman.

Landers moved toward Rosemary's door. She had retreated to the wall, staring wild-eyed at the dead man.

Doc said, "My God, that poor child! I better get to her."

Landers was already at her door. He kicked Moffitt's big gun across the hallway.

"Sid Fallon's on the steps, Doc, with a knife in him," he said. "See to him. I'll go to Rosemary."

Doc nodded. As he moved toward the front door, Ox Slaughter yelled for him from the porch.

Rosemary shook uncontrollably, sobbing. Brent held her against him, his hand pressing her head to his chest. He felt her trembling abate, her ragged breathing subside. He felt his own stomach twist in knots from his pity for her. He stared across the top of her head at Johnny Moffitt's body, thinking about Gil Clawson, Avery Ranchester, the way he'd found this girl in the high country. . . .

Ox Slaughter spoke from the doorway. "Brent?"

Landers shook his head, clearing away the sick rage in it. He held Rosemary tightly so she did not look at the body on the floor.

"What can I do, Brent?" Ox asked. His voice shook.

Landers jerked his head toward Johnny Moffitt's body. "Get that out of here."

Ox nodded. He caught Moffitt by the boots and dragged him along the hallway and out the front door.

After he had gone, Landers drew Rosemary down on the bed beside him. She shivered, and he held her in his arms.

"It's all right, Rosemary. It's all right."

He winced, wondering if she believed him, because he no longer believed himself.

After a long time, Doc came in, sleeves rolled up above his elbows. Doc was still barefooted. Sounds of men talking, voices a hard rumbling, came from the hallway, the front porch.

Doc carried a filled hypodermic. He lifted Rosemary's arm, his face twisted.

"She can't exist forever on this—yet, what else we got to offer her in this town? God almighty, sometimes I wonder about men and the dirt they do. I wonder God don't wipe them off the earth and start new—with something else."

Brent didn't speak. Doc was right. She couldn't take much more of this.

Doc said, "I got that knife out of Sid. I treated his wound. Nasty business. Moffitt came up from behind him, slashed upward with the knife, driving it into his gut."

"Will Sid make it?"

"I got the bleeding stopped. I sutured the boy up as best I could. Sid ought to live. We can only wait and see. Sometimes the ones God chooses to take don't make sense—at least, like I always told Reverend Tillson—don't make sense to me."

Rosemary sagged against Brent, breathing raggedly. She whimpered, but she was asleep; but, even sleeping, she was still tormented.

Doc Barfield said, "You got to take that girl out of here, Brent. Out of this town. You got to take her somewhere she'll be safe."

Brent didn't answer. He lifted Rosemary, laid her down on her bed, drew a cover over her. Her lips moved, she whispered something.

Brent bent closer. "What?"

"Take me away," she said in an empty whisper. "Please, Brent, take me away."

"She's asleep," Doc said in a mild tone. "But she makes sense, even so."

Dawn came catlike, stealthily, into Sage Crossing, licking shadows from the streets and alleys. It was not quite daybreak when Clayt Ranchester drove his buggy and two gleaming blacks into town. He came in from the south and did not glance either way along the main street. The few stragglers saw him, and they stared, some of them pulling off their hats and holding them respectfully in their hands at his passing. That morning he didn't even look at them.

Outside the sheriff's office, Ranchester tethered his blacks and strode across the boardwalk into the building as if it never occurred to him there might be no one on duty at

this early hour. People were where he wanted them, when he wished it.

Ox Slaughter looked up, astonished when the door was thrust open and Ranchester strode into his office. Slaughter's face was gray from sleeplessness. He had not been home all night. Ranchester did not seem surprised to find Ox at his desk.

Ox asked, voice hoarse with weariness, "You—alone, Clayt?"

Clayt's red face paled slightly, and his voice was sharp. "Any reason I shouldn't be, Ox—or are you giving me orders now?"

Ox was tired. His hoarse voice lashed out, unthinkingly. "Don't push me, Clayt. Not now. You told me you'd bring young Avery in with you. I don't see him."

"I'll bring him. When the time comes." And then Clayt's voice hardened. "If it pleases *me*, I'll bring him, Ox."

By now, Slaughter had had time to think, and he wiped at his mouth. "Sorry I struck out like that, Clayt. You know I meant no offense to you."

"That's all right, Ox," Clayt said in the manner of a man who hears an apology without accepting it, or forgetting the insult it covered, but letting it slide for the moment. "I know we're all upset around here. Maybe, too upset."

"It's been a rough night, Clayt, since we left your place. Moffitt came back to Doc's. He knifed Sid Fallon. He might of killed the Tillson girl, but . . . well, he got stopped."

Clayt's face paled again. "You got him locked up? What does he say about that—that rape? Who was with him?"

"I ain't got him locked up, Clayt. He was killed. But that means he raped that Tillson girl, all right. Else why would he try to kill her?"

Clayt Ranchester nodded. He sank into an armchair, leaned forward. "Yeah. Means he was in it. And that's why I come in early like this, Ox. Now, I was rough on my boy last night after you left. I mean I bulled him hard. I got the truth from him. I know it's the truth. Ox, I want you to understand me. Avery was *not* up there in the mesa country with Moffitt. He was not with them—except to ride in town for a drink from my line shack. I'll stake everything I've got on that, Ox. You understand me?"

"There were three men up there," Ox said stubbornly.

"Yes." Ranchester nodded. "That's right. We know three men robbed the stage. They took the poor little Tillson girl.

We know they took off for the badlands. We know we lost their trail. So there *was* three of them up there. That's another reason I come hurrying to you. Who's this man Landers? Who is he? Why was he up there? Where does he come from?"

"Landers had nothing to do with it, Clayt," Ox said. "I'm sure of that now. I—I'll stake everything *I* am on that."

"Don't be rash! What do you know about him?"

"I know he brought that girl down here. He saved her life. He saved it again last night—when he shot Johnny Moffitt."

Clayt's mouth twisted. "I've given this hombre a lot of thought, Ox. We got to know more about him than this. Hell, what if he did shoot Moffitt last night? What does that prove? Does it prove he was trying to save the Tillson girl, or was he killing a partner he had fallen out with, and wanted to silence?"

"Good God, Clayt!"

"Well, you got to think about that. Three men rob a stage, kill a guard, take a young fortune. Maybe they fought—over the girl—over that money. They broke up. Moffitt and this Clawson—they could have followed Landers and the girl here, meaning to silence both of them."

"That ain't the way it was, Clayt."

Ranchester stood up, voice thundering. "How do you know? You know this Landers? You know anything about him? What do you know about him?"

"I know enough, Clayt."

"Then you better tell me what you know. If you won't arrest him, I will. I'll make a citizen's arrest. I'll get Horace Fellows from the bank and Earl Greenley to back me up in this thing. If you won't do your duty, by God, I'll do it for you."

"I'm sheriff here, Clayt. Don't forget that."

"Then you better arrest Landers—or give me a good picture of who he is, what he was doing up there, why you shouldn't put him behind bars. And I mean now."

Ox swallowed hard, scrubbing at his mouth with the back of his hand. He got up, tiredly, walked to the window.

"I got a reader on Brent Landers," he said at last. "He's wanted—up in Johnson County."

"What for?"

"Murder. But——"

"And you let a man like that walk loose? You don't arrest

him? God almighty, Ox, this ain't going to sound good when I tell the town about it. A known murderer. Just happened to be up there in them hills. And you don't arrest him! My God, Ox, you'd better have your head examined."

"I'm doing what I know I got to do, Clayt."

"I'll give you one hour to put that man behind bars, Ox. Otherwise, you're going to find yourself out in the street."

Ox shook his head. "I'm still sheriff here, Clayt. You're going to have to get me fired—or let me handle it my way."

Clayt's mouth was cynical. "Where is this Landers now? Or do you even know, *Sheriff*?"

"He's down at Doc's, Clayt."

"Come on. We'll take a ride down there. I want to watch you do your duty, Slaughter. I want to see what brand of man we got as sheriff in this county."

Doc Barfield met Ox and Ranchester at his front door. Doc's face was drawn with weariness. He did not smile.

"Ox. Clayt. 'Less you fellows are mighty sick, I ain't seeing anybody today."

"We're coming in, Verne," Clayt said. "We want to talk to you, and there's a man here we come for."

"What man is that?" Barfield asked.

Clayt laughed. "You fallen for it, too, Verne? Am I going to have to make a citizen's arrest?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Doc said tiredly. "Do you?"

Clayt flushed. He walked past the slender doctor into the corridor. "Don't take that tone with me, Barfield. I came here to get Brent Landers. Where is he?"

Barfield laughed at him. "You ain't on your range, Clayt. And I'm no forty-and-found cowhand. This is my house. You walk soft in here, or get out."

"Where's Landers. Verne?" Clayt asked.

Barfield laughed again, with wry bitterness. "Well, I'll tell you. As you leave. He's asleep. We had a rough night around here. And you ain't disturbing him."

Clayt's voice lowered. "Now, Verne, don't interfere with something that ain't your line. We can take this man quiet, or come with a warrant. That's up to you."

"Get out," Verne said.

A door opened and Landers stepped, yawning, into the

corridor. Doc's shoulders sagged. Ox Slaughter's face worked in a bitter grimace.

"You yelling for me, Ranchester?"

"I ain't yelling," Ranchester said. "No. I ain't yelling for you. I come along with the sheriff. You're under arrest."

Landers glanced at Ox Slaughter. "That right, Sheriff?"

"Clayt's stirred up, Brent. I—had to tell him—about Johnson City. He don't buy the reason you were up there in them hills——"

"We don't have to try him here, Sheriff," Ranchester said sarcastically. "He'll get his trial. All we got to do is arrest him."

"Sure," Brent said. "I'll sit in the same cell with your son, Ranchester. Did you bring him in? Sure, you did. He's in jail right now, ain't he? He'll get his chance at a trial, too."

Ranchester could not speak for a moment.

"Did you bring him?" Landers persisted, moving forward, his gaze fixed on Ranchester's florid face.

"What the hell kind of a way is that for you to talk to me, you thieving murderer?" Ranchester bellowed. "You don't tell me what to do."

"Did you bring him in?" Landers' voice was like a steel lance thrust through Ranchester's raging.

Barfield grinned, pleased. Only Ox Slaughter looked miserable, helpless.

"He didn't bring him, Brent," Ox said.

"Why not?" Landers asked, staring at Ranchester.

"That's between the sheriff and me. I ain't answerable to no wanted killer. I'll bring my son in when the time is right. He don't have to sit in no jail because I go his bond."

"Hell," Doc Barfield said. "And I'm on Landers' bond. I'm as decent a citizen as you, Ranchester. At least, I didn't steal the land I have."

Clayt's face paled. "Arrest him, Ox."

"No," Doc said. "I'm this man's bond. That's the way it is, Clayt. Your son ain't the only man in these parts with friends."

Clayt Ranchester glared at Barfield. "I warn you, Verne. I hold you responsible for this man—personally—to me."

"And I think you better bring in your son. Now," Doc said.

Landers nodded. "The sheriff can arrest me. But if he does, he'll do it the hard way." He paused a moment, but neither Ox nor Clayt Ranchester moved. "On the other hand, when

you bring your son in today, why I'll come down to the jail quiet and easy."

"Ox." Clayt spoke the word, hard.

But Ox shook his head. "I'm the sheriff here, Clayt. That's good enough for me. You want to bring Avery in before dark?"

"Damn it, I can't." Clayt said.

"Why not?" Doc asked. "He's out to the ranch, ain't he?"

"Well, I sent him up to a line camp," Ranchester said.

"Send for him," Doc said. "You bring in Avery, Brent Landers turns himself in. Put up, Clayt, or shut up—for the first time in your life."

Ranchester's shoulders sagged. He moved his gaze from Ox to Brent to Doc. His face worked.

"The boy ain't home." Ranchester paused, but they waited, silently watching him. "He ran off. Some time during the night. I was rough on him. He got scared. I—told him I was bringing him in this morning. He—he's just a young boy. He got scared. When he's had time to think, he'll come in."

"Only, right now, you don't know where he is," Doc said.

Clayt raged. "All right. He ran. He shied, and he ran. That's no proof of guilt. He panicked. Got scared. He ran."

Brent Landers spoke quietly. "That's right. That's no proof of guilt—because he ran."

Clayt's eyes widened and he stared at Landers, the last man he'd expected to support him.

Doc scowled, and Ox showed his shock in his haggard eyes.

"Avery ain't guilty," Clayt said. "He give me his word. Avery had no part in it. He give me his word. His word's good enough for me."

Brent heard them talking, but he was barely aware of what they said. He was remembering that muggy, strange afternoon three years ago in Johnson City. Panic. He had run. No, running away in itself wasn't proof of guilt. It was worse. It was the way into hell, a road he knew personally, every twist and turn of it.

— 7 —

THE THREE MEN STOOD SILENTLY FOR A LONG MOMENT IN Doc Barfield's hallway. Screen-filtered morning sun slanted in a narrow shaft almost to their boots.

Clayt stared at Ox Slaughter, his face gray, eyes chilled.

"It ain't right when a known killer can walk free in your town," Ox said, almost as if speaking to himself. "I ain't through with this, you understand me? All of you."

Ox said, "Way I see it, Clayt, you got only one thing to do. Bring in Avery—as much for him as for anybody else—to clear him. A man can't live with guilt, or even the suspicion of guilt. It's a lot worse on a young boy like Av."

"My boy is innocent," Clayt said, "and I'll do what I have to, to clear him. I'll spend all I got. . . . But the bad thing, Ox, when it's over—I ain't going to forget that this man Landers walks free, and you oppose me in this way."

"I'm sorry about that, Clayt," Ox said. "I got a big responsibility. I got that—Tillson girl's life to worry about. I need help. I got Landers'—no matter what else he's been accused of—three years ago, in some other town. Three years ago, Clayt, Landers wasn't much older than your boy Avery is right now. Right now, I need him, and the help he gives me. I'd like your help, Clayt, and your friendship, because, no matter how raging mad you are, we're all on the same side, we're all working for the same thing. I wish you could see that, Clayt."

"I see a sheriff derelict in his duty," Clayt said coldly. "I see a known killer walking free."

"No," Ox said. "You see a man accused of murder walking free, Clayt. You see a man that, three years ago, made a mistake and, guilty or innocent, got scared and ran. Like your son did last night. Like Avery. When the time comes, Landers

will face trial in Johnson City. But we ain't convicting him here—any more than we are Avery."

"I don't buy all this," Clayt said. "No matter what good things you record to this man—he *was* up in the high mesa country—he *was* up there. My son wasn't up there. My son swears he wasn't."

"If Avery's innocent, Clayt," Ox said in a tired tone, "he's got nothing to be afraid of. You know that."

Clayt stared at them, his face set, his mind closed to argument. It angered him that these men didn't see he wasn't an evil, unreasonable man. He was a father, deeply troubled, bad worried about his only son and the ugly accusations against him. He'd do anything to help that boy, and the most urgent thing to do, it seemed to him, was to put Landers behind bars so the law would have the third man who had been in that robbery-murder-rape with Moffitt and Clawson. If Landers were permitted to walk free, he might get away, making it harder to prove Avery's innocence when the time came. Clayt meant to see that this didn't happen. But there was no sense talking to these men about it. They were bull-headed, stubborn, set against him, and he wasn't going to forget it. There were other ways to handle the Landers arrest.

Ranchester breathed deeply, nodded his head curtly, and turned on his heel toward the front door. Then he paused, turned, stared at Doc Barfield. "Doc, I'd like to see the Tillson girl a moment if I could."

"What good can it do, Clayt?" Dr. Barfield asked.

"I don't know. I always liked that pretty little girl. I can see her—lighting up that street out there just by walking along it in one of her pretty, fresh-starched print frocks. I was gut-sick when I heard what had happened to her. I guess maybe it'll just make me feel better if—I say to her how sorry I am all this happened."

Dr. Barfield studied Clayt's flushed face, haggard eyes.

Doc said, "You sure you don't reckon to hound her—in her condition—about whether it was Avery—up there with her?"

Rage gorged up inside Clayt Ranchester. It was visible in the vein that throbbed, pencil thick, along his temple, the deep reddening of his face. He managed to swallow the bile.

Clayt's voice shook. "I got no call to add to that poor girl's misery, Verne. My son's innocent . . . I can wait to hear what she's got to say. . . . I just want to see her a minute. . . . Please."

Doc Barfield winced, hearing that unaccustomed word come from Clayt Ranchester's mouth. *Please*. God in heaven, how few times in all his life had Clayt Ranchester used that word?

Rosemary was sitting up in her bed. Clayt Ranchester entered her room, walked to the foot of her four-poster with his big Stetson twisted in his fist. Doc stood beside him; near the door, Brent and Ox watched silently.

Doc said, "Mr. Ranchester came in to see you a moment, Rosemary."

Her dry eyes showed no warmth. She watched Clayt intently.

Clayt said, his baritone voice modulated, softened, "I've known you since you were a little girl, Rosemary. And your folks. I can't say how sorry I am you—you were hurt like this."

She swallowed, nodding almost imperceptibly, but not speaking, her gaze fixed on him.

Clayt gestured helplessly with his hat. "Anything I can do to help you, Rosemary. Anything. I want you to know, you got me to call on."

Rosemary tried to smile, failed. She tried to thank him, and couldn't do that. She seemed to withdraw, pressing back away from him as far as she could move.

Doc said, "Maybe you better go now, Clayt. Rosemary ain't had it easy. She—still ain't up to having much company."

Clayt nodded. He tilted his head, and tears glinted in his eyes for a moment. He bobbed his head toward her, and turned, walking out of the room. He moved slowly, suddenly looking like an old man, a very old man.

By the time Clayt Ranchester had walked down Main Street to the bank, he had pushed Rosemary out of his mind. His anger stirred again, and he thought about Avery, and all there was to do to protect his son. He was working against time, against the moment that *hombre* Landers hit the trail for parts unknown. The best defense Clayt could imagine for his own son was having the real culprit locked behind bars. If Ox Slaughter wouldn't perform his sworn duty, there were ways to force him to act.

Clayt entered the bank, hearing his name spoken with the deference he'd long grown to accept as due him. He nodded,

not even glancing at the townspeople who greeted him. There was a rancher at Horace Fellow's desk, but Clayt didn't even break stride. By the time he had reached the bank president's desk, the rancher had gotten to his feet, bobbing his head at Clayt and assuring him he was just leaving. Clayt didn't even bother to look at him. He sat down in the vacated chair, still warm from the rancher's bottom, beside Horace Fellows' roll-top desk.

"Hello, Clayt," Horace said with the phony equality in his voice that deceived neither of them. Both knew this bank would fail without the Ranchester accounts in it. Horace was a big man in Sage Crossing, but he was no more important than any other Ranchester hireling, and Clayt treated him with contempt.

Clayt asked without preface, "Do you know there's a wanted killer walking around this town, Horace?"

The bank president misunderstood. He punched his rimless glasses up tighter on the bridge of aduncous nose, nodding, face grave with concern. "Yes, Clayt, the whole town is stirred up—the way they pistol-whipped poor Doc Barfield, and that attempt on the little Tillson girl again last night—"

Clayt's voice lashed like a bullwhip, cutting him off. "I ain't talking about that, Horace. That's bad. Real bad. But we got something else. We got dereliction of duty in Sheriff Slaughter——"

"Oh, surely now, Clayt——"

"You opposing me on this thing, Horace?" Clayt's voice stung at the banker.

"Oppose you? You haven't even told me what's wrong. It's just that Ox Slaughter is a good man. Slow in his thinking sometime, but brave, and honest. He's been a good sheriff. It's just hard to believe he's derelict——"

"Well, he is. I say he is. I say we men with responsibility in this town got to act, got to do something about it when he lets a known killer walk loose——"

"A *known* killer? Ox has done all he could——"

"Brent Landers."

Horace's pale eyes widened, and his lips parted. He shook his head involuntarily. "Landers? Killer? Clayt, you must be wrong."

"I ain't wrong. By God, I ain't wrong. I got proof. Got it from Ox Slaughter's own mouth. Landers is wanted for murder up in Johnson County."

Horace shook his head, staring at the papers littering his desk. "Johnson County . . . they've had some bad trouble up there in past years, Clayt. Could be some—error."

"What the hell ails you, Horace? I'm telling you this man's wanted for murder up there."

Horace nodded. "It's just hard to take. He's—such a fine young man, Clayt. Fine looking—a look of magnificence about him. A goodness. . . . And the fine things he's done—for that girl—since he's been here. The whole town feels mighty warm toward Landers, Clayt, that's all."

"Yeah? What would this town feel like if I suddenly started shipping my beef from Horseshoe Falls? Huh? Maybe if I took my money to the bank over there? Huh? I don't like people that tell me how fine a man is when I say he's wanted for murder. No. I don't like it." Clayt stood up. "I want you to think on it. I want you to think on it good."

Earl Greenley was restocking his shelves with Arbuckle Coffee when Clayt Ranchester strode into the general store. Clayt felt slightly better because he had Horace Fellows seeing the light. Pretty soon the whole town would go along with him, whether they agreed with him or not, which was a hell of a minor point, anyhow. They'd go along because they had to.

Clayt said, "Earl, do you know Sheriff Slaughter is permitting a known killer to walk loose in this town?"

Earl stopped working, turned, wiping his thin hands on soiled apron. "They got the killer last night, Clayt, over at Doc's. Ain't you heard?"

"No. I ain't heard. I'm talking about this man Landers. He's wanted for murder and Slaughter ain't arrested him."

"Landers? The young fellow that brought little Rosemary back after them——?"

"Yeah. Landers. And it looks like he took you people in plenty, Earl."

"How you figure that?"

"Because it looks now like Landers might of been one of the three that took Rosemary from the stage."

"Oh, come on now, Clayt. What you been drinking? Would that poor little girl trust him the way she does if——"

"I didn't say he raped her. Maybe he fought with his two pals on that, maybe on the money, too. But we know he was up there, and we know he's wanted for murder in Johnson City."

Earl Greenley looked sick. "No. No, Clayt, I can't believe that."

"You better believe it. Before it's too late. Now, Horace agrees with me, we got to get the town leaders together and force Ox Slaughter to arrest Landers."

Earl grimaced, wiping his hands on his apron again. "This is all too sudden, Clayt. Too much a shock. I can't in good faith repay that young Landers for the good he done with——"

"Maybe you don't understand me, Earl. This is a matter I mean to see tended to. Now, we can be friends, or you can stop looking for Stew in here with orders from my place. Maybe that won't affect you, Earl, but——"

"My God, Clayt. You know better than that. This—whole town depends on—on your ranch."

"Then, by God, my word on a known killer ought to count for something, Earl. Now, you think about it."

Clayt turned and strode out of the store. For a long time, Earl didn't move at all, and then finally, he sagged against the counter, his face twisted as if he'd eaten something bitter and nasty.

From the general store, Clayt Ranchester walked across the street, climbed outside stairs to the office above a feed store marked. "Harold Quayle, Attorney-at-Law, Notary Public, Reading Taught. Learn to Write Your Name in One Hour. Guaranteed."

Clayt entered the office without knocking. Harold Quayle was drinking a cup of coffee at his battered desk, shirt open, boots off. He jumped up, smiling, when he recognized Ranchester.

"Harold, I got some work for you."

"That's what I'm here for, Mr. Clayt." Harold wiped at coffee stains on his rumpled white shirt.

"Couple things. First, my boy might be in a little trouble, and I want him cleared. We'll talk about that later, but I want him cleared, no matter what you have to do, no matter what it costs. You understand me?"

Harold nodded. "You can count on me, Mr. Clayt."

"All right. First though, I want you to draw up some kind of papers for me charging Ox Slaughter with dereliction of duty, incompetence—hell, anything you can come up with. I

want you to take your charges to Judge Sievers and get some kind of action started to remove Ox from office."

Harold looked pale. "This is pretty serious, Mr. Clayt."

"You're damn right it is. Would I come to you if it wasn't?"

"You want to give me some kind of idea about what Ox has done?"

Clayt's mouth twisted. "I'll tell you what he's done, Harold. He's been sheriff too long. He's begun to think he owns this town. Begun to think he can't be removed. But I'm going to show him, Harold, and I want you to get started on it right now."

An hour later, Clayt Ranchester left the lawyer's office and walked slowly down the stairs. He paused in the sunlight at the edge of the boardwalk outside the feed store, then angled across the street to the saloon.

Men glanced up, beginning to smile when Clayt Ranchester pushed through the saloon bat-wings. The bartender scrubbed more furiously at the bar top with his damp rag. Conversations ebbed, died, and nobody spoke until the rancher had walked to the bar.

Tom Hallison, tall, stoop-shouldered, fair hair lank over his forehead, smiled and spoke first. "Hello, Mr. Clayt. Good to see you in here."

Clayt glanced at the dusty-suited man, scowled faintly, then forced a wide smile. "Hello, Tom." He moved his large head. "Can I buy you boys a drink?"

Everybody crowded to the bar, thanking him effusively. Clayt waited until they were served and had hesitantly offered a toast to his good health. He finished off his whisky, neat, in one long gulp, set the glass down hard on the bar.

Clayt raised his voice, knowing he was heard the length of the room. "A matter has come up here in town, men, that I think you ought to know about."

"What's that, Mr. Clayt?" Tom Hallison asked almost as if he'd been rehearsed.

"Tom, fellows, it hurts me to say this, but I reckon you all know I sure hell got the best interests of this town in my heart, eh?"

"This town wouldn't be much without you, Mr. Clayt."

"Thank you, men. It's good to know you men feel like that."

"Whole town's with you, Mr. Clayt. You know that."

"I hope so. Because this here is a pretty serious matter. I want a man arrested, I want him put in jail, and to get him there, I might have to oppose my old friend Ox Slaughter, as much as it pains me. I know that Ox is wrong in this thing, and what I'm doing is really for his best interests—and the town's."

"You can count on us, Mr. Clayt."

"All right," Clayt said. "I'll tell you men what it is. It's a bad thing. We got a man, a murderer, walking loose in this town and Ox Slaughter refuses to lock him up. Now, I want him arrested—and that can be handled by citizens making the arrest. And that's what I want. I want that man behind bars, even if I have to put Ox Slaughter there along with him."

Somebody laughed. "That ought to be easy, Mr. Clayt."

Tom Hallison tossed off another drink, nodding. "Yeah. You tell us who you want arrested, Mr. Clayt. We'll take care of it. We want you to know we're with you. All the way."

At four o'clock that afternoon, Dr. Barfield entered the sheriff's office and closed the door behind him. It was as if he had shut off a strange, charged atmosphere of tension out there in the slanted sunlight. Ox looked up from his desk, didn't bother to smile. He seemed haggard, sleepless, but, more than that, he appeared to be a man without hope.

"You got yourself a man-sized hassle building up here, Ox," Doc said. "Reckon you know Ranchester's hired men have been riding in here all day from his ranges?"

"I know. Fast as he can, he sends out word to them to come in here."

"What do you figure he plans, Ox?"

Ox spread his hands. "I don't have to figure. I've heard, all day. I got a few friends left ain't scared to get word to me—yet. Old Clayt means to arrest Landers and put me out of here, at the same time."

"You better swear in some deputies, Ox."

Ox shook his head, his laugh bitter. "I ain't got that many friends, Doc."

"Must be some men you can swear in to uphold law and order."

"Would you oppose Clayt Ranchester, Doc, if your livelihood depended on him?"

Doc exhaled heavily. "You did, Ox."

Ox stood up. He walked to a window, stared through it, his eyes bleak. "But not intentionally, Doc. Don't pin no medals on me. I got pushed into it. I tried to do my sworn duty. Looks like I've gone too far."

"He's getting those men over at the saloon pretty fired up."
"Yes."

"If they try to take Landers, it might get out of hand. We don't want any lynching, Ox."

Ox laughed coldly. "We don't want any of this, Doc. Looks like it don't matter any more what we want."

Doc shook his head. "I can't understand it. A man—Brent Landers—comes in here trying to save a young girl's life, doing for her what everybody in this town ought to do. And how do they plan to repay him? They're going to take him in a mob—and, if he comes out of it alive——"

Doc stopped talking, crossed the room, stood watching the sun-streaked street. "How soon do you reckon they'll hit?"

"I don't know. Looks like Clayt has decided to get all his own men in here, men he can count on where he might not be able to trust the townsmen. . . . And, besides, I hear he's tried and convicted Brent Landers over there in that saloon—not only of that old murder up in Johnson City, but of the murder of the stagecoach guard and of the robbery. I don't know if we can stop them—once he has convinced them. He's a big man, Doc. A big man—with a big hate."

"And the hell of it is, he's convinced in his own mind that he's right," Doc said.

"I don't know," Ox said. "I figured that. At first. Now, I don't know. He means to clear his son of this mess, no matter who gets killed while he's doing it."

Doc nodded. "Maybe I could talk to him."

Ox shook his head. "The time for talk is past, Doc. He wouldn't listen to you this morning. He's more bullheaded than ever by now."

Doc swore, moved toward the street door. "By hell, I'm getting Landers away from here."

Ox's cold voice stopped him. "And what about that girl, Doc, if you do? What happens to her?"

Doc shook his head. "What happens to her if they lynch him? She's stood more than anybody's got any right to ask of her. She couldn't stand that. Her mind couldn't take it."

Ox nodded. "You begin to see now, Doc. You begin to see how it is."

Doc sank against the door, breathing through his mouth, as if he were too tired to take another step.

— 8 —

BRENT LANDERS PROWLED DOC BARFIELD'S OLD HOUSE IN THE hot, waning afternoon. He'd never before had quite the burning tension he now felt in his solar plexus, the tightness all through his body. It was as if Doc's old house had become a cage and the walls pressed in on him so it was hard to get a breath of air.

As the sun dipped, the shadows lengthened, and the hallway became a place of gray shadows. Brent paused for an uncounted time at Rosemary's door. Thank God, she was asleep. Thank God, she didn't know what was going on outside in that street. He heard the Indian woman moving about in the kitchen preparing an evening meal none of them would have any stomach for. She fixed it from old habit, and from habit they might sit at the table—if hell didn't break loose first.

Brent didn't fool himself. Hell was building up, boiling, ready to burst wide open in this town. How many times had he seen hell start to churn, and twist, and spread and get out of hand in other cattle towns so it took just a word or a movement to set it off? And, once it got started, it was something you couldn't stop.

He turned, walked back toward the front door with his hand resting on his gun in its holster. He heard the yelling in the street. It was like cowhands hoorawing a town, only there was tension in the shouting and there was no laughter.

He stood at the front door, watching the men hurrying in the street, along the walks. There were no children out there now, no women. The word had gone around, they were safely behind closed doors, where they watched too now, holding their breath, waiting, maybe not even knowing what they waited for.

Brent knew what was festering in this town. He felt the old sickness, the foreboding of doom that had been with him that long-ago afternoon when he tried to talk some sense into Stan Clevenger, and ended up by putting a bullet in him, and running. This was worse. It was bigger, and wilder, and when it burst loose, no bullet was going to stop it. Nobody could tell right now how it would end.

Brent heard the back door slam, and he spun around, fist closing, sweat, on his gun. He heard Alma speak, then Doc Barfield's voice answering her, and he tried to relax. It wasn't that easy. He was drawn too taut. Doc came out of the kitchen, paused, staring along the darkening hall at Landers.

"You all right, Brent?" Doc asked.

"Yes. Things are getting pretty noisy out there."

"Looks like a big night, all right," Doc answered with deceptive casualness. His voice hardened. "This town is in the hands of damned fools, Brent. I don't know where it's going to end."

Brent drew a deep breath. "Maybe I ought to get out of your house, Doc. It's me they want, ain't it? No sense dragging you in it."

"Now don't you go being a damned fool!" Doc's voice lashed out. "You stay right here. Long as you can. When there's a chance to break, a chance to do something, you'll take it. Don't you start worrying about me, my house. I'm in this because I want to be—because all my life I've been plumb opposed to people going insane. It's been my job to try to keep them from it. I wouldn't have it any other way. Besides, we need you here, as long as you can safely stay."

Brent's laugh was an empty sound. "You don't have to worry about me being safe, Doc. I can't remember very many times in the past three years when I ever really felt real snug and safe." He jerked his head toward the loud street. "This is just about a normal day for me."

Doc swore. "Well, it ain't any normal day for me. Out in that street, Brent, are men I've known for years. I happen to know that Clayt Ranchester's as decent as the next man at heart. Separately, most of them men are goodhearted human beings. Roused, they ain't human at all. They're listening now to hate, believing just what they are led to believe, building up to a wrong that could hound them—separately—in their own minds, as long as they live."

"There's one chance I could still stop it by giving myself up to Ox Slaughter. That's what Clayt Ranchester wants, ain't it?"

"You keep off them streets! This town has gone loco. Plumb loco. That's Ox Slaughter's word to you."

"Still, it's me they want."

"No. Not any more. Don't you go getting fouled up in your thinking. It's blood they want now. Ox thanked God you stayed in this house all day watching over little Rosemary. It's delayed the hell. It's, in a way, kept you safe this long—until we can come up with something else."

Brent winced, looking at the good doctor. For the first time in his life he knew what it was to have friends willing to put themselves, their careers, their lives in jeopardy for him. It was a good feeling and a bad feeling, a confusion of pleasure and hurt and gratitude.

"I got no right to ask you—and Ox—to put yourselves in hell for me," he said.

"You didn't ask us." Doc's voice was brusque. "Few days ago, Ox nor me never heard of you. All we know about you—all we really know—all we need to know—is what you've done for Rosemary, what you've been while you've been in this house, in this town. We don't know what we can do for you—maybe nothing—but whatever it is we can do, you're worth it, all right, you're well worth it."

Brent nodded, not speaking. He turned, glanced through the door toward the street. The hallway was fading into darkness, but Doc did not put fire to the night lamp he usually kept burning for emergency patients. Yells went up from down by the saloon. Horses whinnied in panic, the sound riding on the early night wind. Hoofbeats pounded, racing past Doc's house, and then, a few moments later, riding the other way.

Doc put a match to his pipe, drew deeply on it, watching the first flares of torches winking along the walk on the far side of the street. He said, "Sometimes a little bit of good comes out of a hell like this—people see what they bring on themselves in a thing like this. Sometimes they learn—those who live through it to learn anything."

Horses raced up close to the boardwalk out front. A half-dozen men, none with torches yet, paused out there, animals prancing, nervous from the tension in their riders.

Somebody yelled. "You got him in there, Doc? You got him in there for us?"

Laughter erupted. Suddenly a rock crashed through a porch window. Glass shattered. Doc cursed, but did not move. Brent took a step toward the front door, but Doc put his hand on his arm, gently.

There was a brief, sharp silence out front, the men waiting, and then they pulled their horses around, raced back to the saloon, hoorawing.

"They ain't built up yet," Doc said. "They ain't got the guts yet."

"I'm going out there," Brent said in a low voice. "If there's any chance to stop them, it's got to be now."

"Stay in here, boy. You go out there, them men may do something none of us can ever fix. . . . You let us handle this, Brent. You hear me?"

Brent trembled, listening to the yelling in the street. The crowd out in front of the saloon down there was growing. Torches flared brighter now. At first, they'd been like fireflies, timid in the dark, but now they spread, illumining the fronts of buildings, reflected in dusty windows.

"I can't stand here waiting for it," Brent said at last. "Can't let them pull you into it."

He turned, moving toward the front door. Doc said, without any hope, "I'm asking you, boy. As a friend——"

"I'm sorry, Doc."

Brent was almost at the porch when Rosemary cried out from her bedroom doorway. "Brent!"

Brent paused, straightening, as if he'd been struck in the small of the back.

"You see?" Doc asked softly. "There's reason to stay, boy. Reason to wait it out."

Alma spoke from the faintly lighted kitchen doorway. "Doc. Folks. Supper's ready. Come in now and eat."

Brent laughed helplessly. *Come in now and eat.* Sit at a table as if nothing were wrong, as if hell weren't about to erupt in that street.

A shot rang out, far down the street.

Rosemary said, "Brent."

He nodded and moved toward her, along the darkened hall.

Doc sighed, and they heard his sighing. "That's right," the doctor said. "Come on in now, folks, and eat supper."

Rosemary came slowly out into the hallway, walking beside Brent. He could feel her body tremble, reacting to scream of horses, shouting of men, or distant gunfire outside.

They followed Doc into the kitchen. Alma had set the table richly, and the sight of hot food made Brent's stomach twist. There was a sharp, quick rap on the back door. All of them reacted, going tense.

From the darkness, they heard Ox Slaughter's whisper. "The lamp, Doc. Turn down that lamp."

Doc nodded without speaking, turned down the wick in the lamp, blew out the wickering flame, pitching the room into darkness that was accentuated by the glow of embers in the wood-burning stove.

Ox stepped inside the kitchen.

"Doc. Brent. Rosemary. Listen fast to me, Brent. We may not have time. If anybody saw me coming in here, it's all over. Mostly, they're down at the saloon. I don't think Clayt figured we'd dare pull anything like this. I got Horace Fellows' rig and his best horses outside, right at the stoop. I want you to take Rosemary, Landers, and get to hell out of this town, right now."

"This what you and Doc been figuring all day?" Brent asked.

"Not just Doc and me, Brent," Ox said. "There are good people in this town. Some of them have to go along with Clayt on the surface. But you got blankets in the wagon, a box of grub from Earl Greenley. You got a couple rifles, a shotgun and ammunition from somebody else. You got our prayers. Now take her out of here, Brent, fast. Try to get her to her people."

Rosemary moved close against Brent's side. He put his arm about her, feeling her tremble. He moved with her toward the rear door.

"You got only a poor chance of making it out of town without somebody spotting you," Ox said. "One thing we're counting on is that nobody's going to be figuring on you making a break in Banker Fellows' rig."

Brent paused at the door, voice hollow. "You're finished if I run, Ox——"

"Don't waste time, boy," Ox said. "I already fought all this out with myself—all day. I'm doing what I've got to do."

"That house your wife wants——"

"Get moving, Landers," Slaughter ordered coldly. "Don't try to talk me out of it. You might do it."

Doc and Ox Slaughter followed them out of the kitchen, walking softly. Alma held the door, let it whisper shut behind them. The night was loud outside, shouting raged from the street.

Brent said, "When this is over, Ox, I'll bring Rosemary back here."

"What in hell for?" Doc Barfield asked.

"Somebody's got to testify against those men," Brent said, "when Ox brings them in."

Ox's voice was dead. "We'll worry about that some other time, Landers. Gil Clawson's maybe a hundred miles from here by now. And Rosemary? She's too ill to testify against the son of Clayt Ranchester in a Sage Crossing courtroom—even if it ever came to that. You got one thing to think about right now, Landers: that's getting her out of here—fast and far."

They went down the steps. The pair of black horses shifted nervously and Ox Slaughter caught their bridles, steadying them in the darkness. Brent hesitated one last second. Through his mind raced the thought that he was running away, one more time, when he had learned the hard way you never settled anything by running.

And more, his gaze raked across the forms of Doc Barfield and the sheriff in the darkness. From beyond the house and the stores, he heard the raging in the street. He was running away, but Doc and Ox couldn't run, and he was leaving them to face an even wilder hell because he had run.

"Let me stay, Ox," he begged. "Let me fight it out with you and Doc."

"Get her out of here," Doc said savagely. "What did you save her life for? To see her lose it here? Stop and think, boy. Maybe it hasn't hit you yet. What's all that hell out there really building to? To what? To a fire, maybe, a stray bullet—and she's dead—and whatever she might know of the men that attacked her up there—it's dead with her. You got your last chance, Brent, while it's still quiet, dark, now get her out of here."

Tautly drawn, Brent caught Rosemary in his arms, swung her up into the banker's carriage. He was seeing more hell than he'd ever even imagined before. Until now, it had seemed those men would stop when they got him. Maybe

they would. But it was a gamble neither Doc nor Ox wanted to take. It was a hellish chance he wasn't going to risk, either, now he understood it. Avery Ranchester might be guilty. His father, raging, might do any violent thing to save him. It didn't make sense, it was so revolting you didn't even want to think about it. But no one was sane in town that night—Clayt Ranchester, least of all.

Brent sprang up into the carriage, jerked loose the slip-knot Ox had made of the reins. He felt the horses straining, ready to move.

"God bless you, Doc, and Sheriff Slaughter," Rosemary whispered.

Brent stared at the two men for the space of half a second, then he slapped the reins, pulled the horses toward the darkness away from the main street.

There were two dark capes draped across the back of the seat. Brent saw they'd been placed there to wear, not only against the cold, but to shield their identity in the race out of town.

Brent laid a cape across Rosemary's lap. "Put it on," he told her, watching the road. "Turn the collar up around your face."

He draped the other cape around his shoulders, pulled it up about his throat. Still he was afraid they didn't look much like Banker Fellows and his wife out for an evening ride.

Bricks struck the front of Doc's house, glass shattered, and from the street somebody yelled his name.

"Doc!"

"Doc Barfield! You got that killer in there?"

"You want to bring him out, Doc? Or you want us to smoke him out?"

"Want us to burn him out, Doc?"

"Bring him out, Doc! Or we put the torch to the house!"

Standing on the back porch beside Ox Slaughter, Doc Barfield hesitated a moment, listening to the yells, even recognizing some of the voices, as drunken as they were, slurring, hoarse.

He watched the swift-running buggy race along the narrow lane toward the dark grove of pines. Once they made it into the darkness of night, he figured they had a fair chance. One thing, if any man could get the Tillson girl to Greybull alive, he'd put his money on young Landers. All they needed

was a chance, a chance to make it out of the reach of this mob.

"We ain't waiting no more, Doc! You bring him out, or we burn him out!"

Doc exhaled heavily, glanced at Ox. "Sounds like we got some company, Sheriff."

Ox shrugged. "Reckon we have."

"Maybe we better go up front and talk to 'em."

"All right. You want to tell them fellows the bad news, or you want me to?"

"Way I feel about bad news is," Doc Barfield said, "you shouldn't ever *tell* nobody bad news. You ought to let them find it out for themselves."

"Sounds good to me," Ox said, glancing once more into the night where the carriage had disappeared in a boll of grey dust. Then he turned and followed Doc Barfield through the house.

When Ox and Doc Barfield stepped out on the Doc's front porch, they found the yard aswarm with men, animals and torches.

Astride a thick-chested mare, Clayt Ranchester was just in front of the mob, at the foot of the steps. Behind him, they saw lawyer Quayle, Tom Hallison, men from the Ranchester ranges, men from the saloon, and townsmen, their sweated faces illumined by torch flares.

"We come for the killer, Slaughter," Clayt said, his voice hard and loud. "We got an order here from Judge Seivers removing you from office. And we got a warrant for the arrest of Brent Landers. We want to do this thing quiet and orderly. If there's any trouble, you're going to be responsible."

Ox stepped forward to the edge of the porch, hand on his holstered gun.

Ox said, "Men, none of us want this kind of trouble——"

"Any trouble, Ox, you caused it!" somebody yelled.

Others grumbled, agreeing.

"You men break this up, go home, and we say no more about it——"

"You're not the law here any more, Slaughter," Clayt Ranchester said.

Ox held up his arms as the men yelled defiantly. "Men! As long as I stand here, I'm the law. Your law. Now, Clayt—and his lawyer—both know I can't be removed from my

office by any order they get from Judge Sievers, or any other judge. Only the governor has the power to remove me from office. Now listen to me. I'm your law. Break this up. Don't do this thing——"

"We heard enough of your talk, Slaughter." Ranchester's voice was the kind that lanced through blizzards on an open range and it battered Ox's voice down now. "We *are* the law! We accuse you and Barfield of harboring a fugitive killer."

The yell swept all the way to the tail of the mob and surged forward again.

Ox waited. Then he said, speaking directly toward Clayt Ranchester. "You're going to find yourself in a hell of remorse and self-hatred, Clayt, when this is over. You're full of rage now. Don't do this, Clayt. Don't push these men into something all of you will regret as long as you live."

Clayt's face showed nothing but his cold fury. He shrugged his jacket up on his sloping shoulders, stared through Ox as though he no longer existed. Then he threw up his arm. He called off half a dozen names, most of them riders from his own ranch.

"Go through this house," he ordered. "Get that killer. Find him. Drag him out here."

Ox spoke coldly, voice level. "Hold it!"

The six men had fanned out of the mob, part of them running up the steps, the others moving to go around the house. For a moment, under the ring of authority in Slaughter's voice, they paused, staring at him, then moving their gaze uncertainly toward Clayt Ranchester.

"Bring that killer out of there!" Clayt Ranchester bel-lowed.

Ox drew his gun. "I warn you men. The first one to come up these steps will get killed. I ain't fool enough to draw this gun in this crowd without meaning to use it."

The men on the steps hesitated again, even Ranchester shifted slightly in his saddle. Aroused as they were, inflamed with liquor, they knew Ox Slaughter, a big, slow-moving man who never bluffed.

Doc saw it coming, but was unable to speak, to move to prevent it. A man in the yard stepped forward, something flickered in his hand. Doc wanted to yell a warning at Ox, but there was not time.

There was no time to speak or move, and yet it did not happen swiftly. Instead, it seemed to be interminably slowly,

as if time stopped. Doc saw the brick in the man's fist, saw him hurl it, almost watched it in flight. But with breathless suddenness, before Slaughter could side-step, the brick caught him in the temple.

For an instant, the brick seemed to cling there, and then it fell past Ox, striking the floor. Blood spurted in a jagged tear along Ox's temple. Doc saw the big man's face lose its color, going gray, and he leaped to catch him. Slaughter's knees sagged, and he crumpled, sucking breath agonizingly through his parted mouth. Doc got his hands on Ox, but couldn't support him. The big man struck on his knees and then toppled forward as if in some kind of prayer.

Doc sank to the floor beside the sheriff. Ox did not move. Except for the men who strode past them under Clayt's orders, the mob was struck numb suddenly. They strained forward, staring at the hulk of man crumpled on the porch.

Clayt Ranchester's face was gray. He moved his mount a few paces forward, gaze fixed on Ox.

When Ox Slaughter did not move, the mob remained tensely silent.

Clayt spoke loudly, defiantly. "Slaughter brought it on himself! We tried to warn him to step down. He got what he asked for!"

Doc gazed up from his knees at the big man on the horse, torch light flickering in his dry eyes, his taut face pallid. Doc's voice raked at Clayt like savage spurs. "Yeah, Clayt, that figures. A good man trying to do right. Yeah. You're right, Clayt, Ox sure hell asked for it."

The door behind Doc was thrown open, and it slammed shut, banging in the deadly silence.

"They ain't here, Clayt!" Tom Hallison shouted, voice shaking. "We been all through the house. Landers and the Tillson girl. They're not here, Clayt! They're gone."

Brent Landers slapped the reins across the rumps of the sleek black carriage horses, keeping them trotting at an even pace. Maybe he'd set it a little high in his panic, but he didn't even know how many miles he had covered since leaving Sage Crossing before he was aware he was not breathing regularly but was dragging in deep breaths and holding them until his lungs ached.

It wasn't easy, getting across the rolling plains in the darkness, not easy for a man who knew the terrain. One

point in their favor: these blacks were a rich man's horses, sleek, well-fed, conditioned. They had quality to them, stamina, they could endure a long run like this before they'd have to rest.

Brent worked it out in his mind as he followed a long arc to the Greybull road north of Sage Crossing. The mob would figure they turned north as soon as somebody learned they'd run. His only hope was that Doc and Ox—God help them—could buy them some time. Once he hit the Greybull road, he would have to stay on it in the darkness and pray Banker Fellows' horses could outrun the mob.

The rig bumped and rattled, the guns and box of grub and supplies clattering in the rear of the buggy. Let one of those blacks hit a prairie-dog hole and they were through. His fists closed on the reins, needing to slow them, but he didn't head them after all. Somehow he couldn't. It was a gamble, either way—a broken leg, a snapped axle, or the mob overtaking them. There wasn't much choice.

They came up over a slight knoll, the buggy bumping; then he pulled hard right on the Greybull road, a gray lane narrowing into infinity across the plains to the north of them. He shuddered, not liking this open prairie. It was a long, hard run to the rim of the first lodgepole pine thicket. He laid on the reins, hurrying.

Rosemary had not spoken. He felt her pressed against him on the high leather carriage seat. One thing, they were traveling in style.

Rosemary turned, glancing back. Brent tried to laugh. "Remember Lot's wife."

The girl was silent a moment, then she said, "Looks like a fire back there, Brent."

He slowed the animals unwillingly, impatience churning inside him, glanced across his shoulder. His first thought was that the mob had put the torch to Doc's house.

He sighed. "The glow isn't big enough for a house fire," he said.

He turned back to driving. Rosemary swayed, twisted on the seat, clinging to his arm.

"No. It doesn't look so much like the glow of a fire now, Brent. It's like stars back on that ridge."

Feeling a sinking sensation in his solar plexus, Brent twisted, staring back. "It's torches," he said. "Men on horseback. Hold on, Rosemary. They're on our trail."

She clung to his arm, not speaking, but not looking back any more, trusting him.

Brent drew the buggy whip from its socket, laid it across the blacks, feeling exultant at the fluid way they responded, racing like one animal. But the blacks were lathered by the time they climbed the ridge and rode into a shadowed lane that cut across the pine forest.

From the crest of a knoll, holding the whip poised, clutching the reins in his left fist, Brent gandered back toward the torch lights one last time, figuring his chances. He pulled in on the reins, feeling the horses slackening off, slowing. Rosemary did not speak, but he felt the tension in her. They moved down the incline. Then Brent turned the horses right, moving them into a copse of dense pines. He pulled the carriage into the heart of the darkest shadows.

For what seemed a slow eternity, they sat there hearing the sound of the lathered horses snuffing, blowing, their trembling reaching the carriage through the whiffletree. At last, they heard the thunder of hard-driven horses, coming up the incline and into the shadows of the forest-rimmed lane.

"Their own mounts are going to be beat before long," Brent whispered. "Either they'll follow the road looking for us, or they'll search this hammock. But they know they got to turn back soon—or walk."

The torches cast long, weird shadows through the thin lodgepole pines almost to the thicket where they sat. Quietly, Brent swung down from the buggy, moved to the horses, held their reins, steadying them. He felt the chill in the night, the ragged breath of the tired horses, heard the sound of the mob moving past on the Greybull road.

The silence settled in on them. Neither of them spoke. The last glow of the torches faded in the distance, and with it all sound of the horsemen.

After a breathless period in the thick silence, Brent heard the riders returning on the same road. Some of the torches were gone, the horses were no longer trotting, some of them plodded, the sound like slow thunder over the earth.

As they came nearer, Brent slipped off the black cape, and drew it across the heads of the horses, holding it there as the grumbling men straggled past out on the road. Some of the men shouted, wanting to search the thickets. Someone

else cursed. How did they know the murderer had headed this way at all?

Brent held his breath. He saw Rosemary sitting rigidly on the seat, her hands clenched in her lap, a dark blur in the black cape. Far beyond her, winking through the pines, he saw a single, crystal-bright star. Still not breathing deeply, he stared at that star until the sounds of the riders died on the wind.

— 9 —

THE SUN CAME UP AND, WITH IT, MILD HEAT AND A FAINT breeze. Landers sagged on the seat of the carriage, letting the dust-caked, lathered black horses plod forward. Rosemary was asleep, her head in his lap, the capes spread over her. He yawned, feeling an agonizing weariness spread through his bones, his body aching.

He glanced across his shoulder, in a way that had become almost habit during the long night. He felt some satisfaction. He had put a lot of miles between the carriage and Sage Crossing. There was nothing on the road behind him. It seemed peaceful, empty, forgotten, trailing into bottom land and writhing upward through low hills. Far to the west, he saw the rise of incredible ranges, blue with snow, tipping through the clouds and smeared with distant sunlight.

It was fairly open for miles on both sides of the road and Brent figured, with the distance he had covered, he could let the horses rest. They looked beat. He doubted they'd ever been treated like this before. Sweated, manes matted with burrs, they looked like scrub animals and not a banker's proud pair.

Brent pulled off the road, climbing to a shaded knoll. Rosemary woke up, yawning. She sat up, looking around questioningly.

"They sent grub along," Brent said. "We might as well eat breakfast."

He unhitched the animals from the shafts, found feed had been thoughtfully included in the carriage, rationed it out to them.

When he built a small fire for coffee, Rosemary protested.

"We can't hide up here," Brent said. "A fire won't matter, and coffee will make everything seem a lot better."

Rosemary made the coffee, fried bacon and mixed biscuits in a skillet. Brent watched her, experiencing a sense of pride. She was coming back to life, rejoining the human race. She was going to be all right after all. Maybe someday what had happened to her would be like a nightmare, and no more real. He hoped this was true.

While she fixed breakfast, he checked through the supplies the good people of Sage Crossing had secretly brought to the sheriff and stored in the banker's carriage. He loaded the rifles and the shotgun, replaced them in the back of the carriage, aware Rosemary was watching him apprehensively, covertly.

"Maybe I can kill us an antelope or some pheasant," he said, knowing he didn't sound very convincing.

They moved north again for three hours; then they pulled off the road to let the horses drink in a shallow stream. Brent stood beside the wagon, hearing the snuffling way the horses drank, staring up at the hills rearing away from them now all along the trail. Trees, thick trunks and sun-spattered leaves, climbed upward through boulders.

Something snapped in the rocks above them.

Brent felt his whole body go tense, even when it didn't make sense in the silence. But, for an endless three years, he'd learned a man stayed alive by suspecting the worst from every sound—especially when it came from a place where there should be no noise.

He scowled, scanning the confusion of trees and boulders. It troubled him because the sound wasn't anything that made sense or had any reason to it, not like an animal's hoof snapping a dry twig, or pushing through underbrush. The instant he realized what the sound was, he crouched forward against the side of the carriage between the buggy wheels.

He spoke softly but urgently. "Rosemary. Off that seat. Hit the floor. Hard. Fast."

She didn't even hesitate to question him. Her dress rustled and she sprawled forward across the boot of the carriage.

Head pressed hard against the board of the carriage, Brent reached over the rear, caught a rifle and dragged it to him. At that moment, a rifle cracked from the thick-rocked rise behind him. He sank lower, hearing the deadly whine of the bullet.

Like an echo, another rifle was fired from directly across

the creek. The bullet blasted into the clay a few feet from the wagon, pinning them down in cross fire.

Brent, still crouched, caught the reins, jerked up the heads of the horses, pulled them around. The tired blacks protested. The two rifles fired again, the bullets whining. Swearing, Brent pulled on the lines, forcing the horses from the creek in a painfully slow turn up the incline.

Brent heard the clatter of small stones at the bushwhacker on his right ran down the incline trying to get a better shot at the carriage. Running along beside the carriage, still crouched low, Brent slapped the reins, and the horses, stirred by the wasp-humming bullets, reared and ran up the incline.

He headed them north along the road, dropped the reins into Rosemary's hands.

"Give them their heads, hold tight rein. Make them walk, but keep them moving. And don't get up."

She might have protested. He didn't wait. As soon as they passed the first clump of underbrush, he sprang out of the carriage, leaping into it.

He could hear the two men running in the boulders now. For a moment, he stayed where he was, watching the carriage move at snail's pace down the road.

He clambered upward on the incline, hunting any sign of movement in the boulders above him. There were two men shooting at him, but they were on different hills, pretty widely separated by trees, stream, road and incline. He figured he had only one of them to worry about at a time. One man, and keeping that carriage in sight.

He lunged hard into a thicket at the foot of a thick pine. Panting, he stayed there, searching the boulders above him. He saw something move in the rock patch. He lifted the rifle, taking his time, pressed off a shot. The bullet splatted into the earth within inches of where he'd spotted movement.

The man showed himself for a moment, scrambling upward toward the protection of the larger rocks above. He was quickly gone, like a leaping animal, and Brent used the moment to sprint through the underbrush along the incline, keeping Rosemary and the carriage in sight.

Brent kept running, hunkered over, until he heard that click of rifle bolt again in the silence above him. The gun fired, and a bullet splatted into a tree, inches above his head.

Brent went sprawling forward, feeling the small limbs

clutching at his face and clothing. He rolled over, watching that place up there where the rifleman would show himself again.

He saw the sun glint on a rifle barrel. Holding his breath, Brent squeezed off a shot at the instant a head appeared beyond that rock. He saw the rock chips fly along the barrel of the dry-gulcher's rifle. The man yelled involuntarily because he'd come less than an inch from taking Brent's bullet between his eyes.

Brent heard the man scrambling upward again, and this time he was running, looking for safety, not another vantage point for attack. Staring upward, Brent placed another bullet into those rocks to speed the attacker. It worked. There was the hurtling sound of loosed rocks.

Getting up, Brent stared toward the road. The carriage was far ahead of him. At that moment, the rifleman from across the ravine fired. But he was not shooting at Brent. He was shooting either at Rosemary in the carriage or at the horses. Brent went crashing down the incline toward the mountain road, hoping to draw the man's fire from the carriage.

In panic, he saw it was not going to work. Whoever that other man was, he meant to kill the horses. Brent shuddered, thinking about it. Left afoot up here, they didn't have a chance to make it to Greybull. Then he thought wildly: suppose it's Gil out there, or Avery Ranchester, trying to kill Rosemary.

Running, he searched the outcroppings across the creek, waiting for the gunman to show himself again. But the man was racing through that rough country, having slow going in the rock slicks, trying to get closer to the moving carriage.

The rifle exploded among the rocks above the creek. Still running, Brent fired toward the place where the orange flare had erupted. For a breathless moment, that man was silenced. He was turning, seeing Brent probably for the first time. Above Brent and behind him, the other gunman was still seeking safety, out of action for the moment.

Racing toward the wagon, Brent fired again toward the man across the creek. Suddenly, he began to feel better. The man up there was on foot, and must be some distance from the place where he'd tethered his horse. Whoever those two men were, they must have come upon Brent while they rested their own animals at the creek.

Brent figured he and Rosemary had one pretty fair chance. They could outrun the men. He didn't stop to consider what it was going to do to the two blacks—it might mean their lives—but he had to ask it of them no matter what the damage.

Rosemary pulled up when she heard Brent calling her from the road as he ran behind the carriage.

Brent yelled, "Stay where you are!"

She sank again to the floor, but pulled on the reins, slowing the blacks. Brent tossed his rifle into the rear of the buggy and lunged forward, leaping into it. He heard the fire of the rifle behind him as he scrambled over the seat rest and clutched the reins.

He took up the whip, snapping it across the dust-caked rumps of his horses. The rifle fired again, but the sound was further away this time. The man didn't shoot again. Brent clung to the reins, the horses racing downslope. He listened now, holding his breath, wishing he could silence the pound of his heart so he might hear the sound of running horses behind him.

The blacks raced up an incline, and the wagon tilted dangerously on a down curve. Brent kept the animals running at top flight until he could feel them faltering. Every minute he forced them to race like this, he was endangering their chances for the long pull. He glanced back, feeling panic wash over him. Two men were back there—at least two—and if it were Avery Ranchester and Gil Clawson, they would stay on their trail until Rosemary was dead so that they could live in some kind of safety.

Finally, when Brent could hear no sound of pursuing horses, he gradually reined in, slowing the blacks to a steady walk. For a long time during the night, he'd felt hopeful that they were putting many miles between them and Clayt Ranchester's men at Sage Crossing. He no longer had that hope. Two men trailed them, and they'd move after them without rest, never letting them ease off or spare the blacks.

Where were the men who were chasing them right now? Where was the sound of their rifles, or the thunder of racing horses on the ground? He stared back across his shoulder again and did not feel reassured because he heard nothing. They were back there. Every moment from now on, they'd be there, picking the right time, the right place, or pushing them until their carriage horses fell. He had the awful feeling

that somehow this was the story of his life. They were always back there, somebody behind him, and he had never had a chance from the start.

Brent was suddenly exhausted, so tired the sun seemed to dance in the bleak, cloudless sky. The road wasn't a road at all, but a confusion of scribbled lines through a million rocks and trees, and none of those lines going anywhere.

He was too tired to run or fight any more. He wanted to halt the carriage right in the middle of the road, and sit there with rifles and shotguns around him until they came on him. Let them come. Let them fight it out until it was ended, somehow finished. He was too dead tired to run any more.

He forced himself to push all that from his mind. Rosemary pulled up on her knees, slid up on the seat beside him. He thrust the terror and tired numbness from his mind. Everybody got so tired sometimes they couldn't think straight, didn't they?

He gripped the lines in his fists. He had to think rationally, or they were whipped; this would be the finish. Those two men would outthink him, outmaneuver him, and when they did, they'd get Rosemary again, and there was nothing he could do.

He glanced back over his shoulder again, wondering where their pursuers were, when they would show themselves. How long could the horses keep moving before they would drop with fatigue? There were no answers, just as for the moment there was nothing but awesome mountain silence all around them, and the sun on the road ahead, and no sound behind them.

He did not know how many miles he let the horses plod before he saw they would fall in the shafts unless he let them rest. Panic kept flaring in his mind. If they stopped, they were trapped, finished. But they had to rest or kill the horses.

He stared at the surrounding country, and, once he began to think, looking for a way out, he breathed easier. What you did when you had to rest was you found a rock wall and you put your back to it. You rested with your eyes open, your rifle across your knees, but you rested, and no man came on you unawares.

The sun had moved well past high noon when he saw the

place he would stop. There was water, and rock patches and the sheer rise of a granite break to put their backs against.

"We'll stop here, Rosemary," he said, letting the weary horses pull off the road and pick their way through the outcroppings down to the water.

"Will they——?"

"Find us here? They'll find us anyway. It'll be better for us if they come on us here."

Rosemary did not ask any more questions. He pulled the carriage close against the granite wall, hobbled the horses near the water and slipped feed bags over their heads. He was not planning to make a sudden run for it because these horses were through running for a while.

Rosemary got food from the grub box, made sandwiches. Brent spread blankets for them, propped the shotgun and rifles against the rock near his shoulder.

"Do you think they will come?" Rosemary asked at last.

"I don't know. They're back there. They might."

"It's Avery—and that Clawson," she said in a dead tone. "Isn't it, Brent?"

"I don't know. Don't think about them. They're not going to get near you, not any more."

He saw the shiver go through her. "It doesn't matter what happens to me now," she said.

He swore, so tired that he was hoarse. "What kind of talk is that?"

She stared at him, almost coldly. "Do you think it matters?"

"I damn well *know* it matters. Doc said it—You had a bad accident. You're a—a beautiful young girl—you got your whole life ahead of you."

She drew her hand across a smooth cold boulder. "Have I? Do you think I have a life waiting for me where we're going?"

"Yes." His voice was rough. "I do. You'll get back with your people, Rosemary—you'll recover, the way you do from a sickness."

"Will I?"

"Rosemary, don't talk this way. You've had a bad time. I'm not fool enough to say you haven't. You've been through hell——"

"Yes——"

"But it was a hell you had nothing to do with. It was a bad time. You can put it out of your life."

Her voice was tinged with hopeless bitterness. "You make it sound so easy."

"No. It ain't easy. I saw what they did to you. I know the way you think people look at you——"

"The way I *know* they look at me!" she burst out.

"All right. For right now. Sure. Maybe they do. But they'll forget, Rosemary—and you will too."

"No. I won't ever forget. Nobody—will ever let me forget Do you think my father will ever let me forget?" She covered her face with her hands. "It'll be in that look of pity every time I see his face. It'll be in the tone of his voice. It'll be in the way—in the way he'll wish in his heart that—I'd never come back alive at all."

"Rosemary, don't say that!"

"Why?" Her head tilted, her eyes brimmed with tears. "You don't want to hear it?"

"No," Brent said, staring along the back trail, watching the shadows lengthen in the roadway. "Because you're wrong, that's why. No matter what fool ideas people have—even your father—they'll get over them."

"No. You don't really know much about people, Brent. Not *good* people. Not the church-going kind of *good* people I've lived among I've heard them talking, whispering about other girls . . . girls no more to blame than I am."

"Not everybody's like that."

Her mouth twisted. "No. Some of them will look at me and won't say anything Oh, Brent, it would be better if I—never went to Greybull . . . I can't do it. I just can't do it."

"You'll be all right, Rosemary. Hell, don't make me sound like a sermon, but not too long ago, you thought you couldn't live at all. You're alive. You'll be all right—if *you'll let yourself.*"

Her head tilted again. "Oh, I could be all right . . . except for people . . . the people I've known all my life—the people I'll have to live among—up there in Greybull."

He exhaled heavily, did not say anything.

After a moment Rosemary gestured with her arm. "Look out there, Brent. What a beautiful land, quiet and beautiful—such a nice world—except for people."

She laughed suddenly, a wild sound compounded of anger

and heartbreak. "You don't know anything about people at all. Do you know what those nasty-nice *good* people think? Do you? Even my own father? 'Why didn't you *die*, Rosemary? Why didn't you die rather than—let it happen?'"

She covered her face with her hands, sobbing. "I wish I could have died That's all I wanted up there I wanted to die But do you know why I couldn't die—it was too easy—I had to come back to this—so you could take me up to Greybull and leave me among all those *good* people who will look at me and say, inside their filthy minds, '*Why didn't you die, Rosemary?*'" She laughed suddenly, her body shaking. "I don't know why!"

Brent stood up, leaning against the granite wall, bracing himself on one boot. He stared across the silent, empty land.

"I'm not fool enough to tell you something terrible didn't happen to you, or that it won't be bad—from here on But I am fool enough to tell you there's some *reason* why you didn't die, Rosemary. You're a lovely girl, and you can have a good life—just give it a chance, Rosemary. You'll—find a man who will love you for what you are—no matter what bad hurt you have had."

"Will I? She stared up at him, her mouth contorted.

He winced, looking away, but nodded, kept his voice level. "I'm gambling on it, Rosemary."

"Are you? What do you care? You'll take me up there. You'll ride away—you'll have it easy. You'll forget all about me——" Her voice broke. "Some man will love me, eh? Will he, Brent? Will he? Could you—could *you* love me?"

He was silent, staring at the horses, the slanting sun on the stream. He was silent a moment too long and she cried out, raging.

"Oh, that's different, isn't it? *Some* man could love me. Some man neither one of us ever heard of—or no one else ever heard of, either . . . that man could love me, but *you* couldn't, could you, Brent? Knowing what you do about me. Knowing *all* about me. That's different, isn't it, Brent?"

"No."

She was silent as if stunned. She tilted her head, looking up at him. When she finally spoke, her voice was empty, forlorn, as if afraid to ask. "Could you love me, Brent? Could you?"

"I haven't the right to love anybody."

Her body shook. She twisted her hands. "Oh, what a

wonderful answer. *You* couldn't love me! But it hasn't anything to do with what those—men did to me! It's something else. You haven't the right! Oh, my God, what a hypocrite you are! You're as bad as all the rest of them."

"I told you that. Right at the first. I'm not much."

"Oh, stop it! No better man ever lived than you are—no better, no kinder, more gentle man. God knows, I never met anyone like you before, and I know I never will again. Only don't *lie* to me. Don't be nice to me! Don't be a hypocrite like the rest of them. Don't say you have *no right* to love me—tell the truth—I've been used—like an animal, and you know it, better than anybody else, and I'm not good enough for you—and that's the only reason. That's the truth."

He straightened, staring down at her, his face gray, eyes haunted.

His voice was rough. "It's time somebody told you some facts of life, too, Rosemary. Maybe that's it. Maybe we've been too easy on you. Too easy for your own good. We've let you feel sorry for yourself. All wrapped up in self-pity. All you can see is your own woe. . . . Well, wake up to something you ought to know if you know people so damned well—everybody's got something hurting inside them. Everybody! And I'm no different—only maybe worse than some. Three years ago, up in Johnson City, I killed a man. He drew his gun on me and I shot him down in the street, in front of his wife. . . . I was a young kid and I was scared and I ran away. . . . They been looking for me—for three years, for murder. The day I found you up in the high mesas, I was up there hoping I'd find a man who maybe I could force to go back to Johnson City—and give me a chance to beat a hangrope. Well, I haven't got that man. I won't get him now. But, once I deliver you to Greybull, I'm going back to Johnson City. There's nothing waiting for me there but a hangrope. But I'm sick running, and I'm going back. . . . But I got no right to ask any girl—even one that's been hurt like you were—to face that with me. None of that matters . . . that ain't important . . . what does matter is that you better start trusting people—you better start with me. When I tell you I got no right to love anybody—you believe that, and don't go twisting it to mean something you want it to mean."

Her head was bowed as if she were being struck. She shook her head, staring at her hands in her lap. It was a long

time before she tilted her chin, looked up, her eyes deep in tears.

"I'm sorry, Brent."

He shrugged. "Try to get some rest. It's a long ride ahead of us. Next time we start, we better keep moving."

She was silent so long that he decided she was not going to say anything. Finally, she said in a low whisper. "Are they—you think they're out there, Brent—are they watching us now?"

He sighed, staring into the gathering dusk. "I don't know. I reckon they are. When it's dark, we'll try to move out. Maybe we can get away from them."

Landers shook his head, straightening against the boulder, holding the rifle across his chest. He stared into the gloom of early night, thinking the shadows and his own fatigue-clotted brain were playing tricks on him.

"Ho, up there . . . I got my hands in the air . . . don't shoot me."

Feeling tension gathering in him, driving away the last wisps of weariness, Landers watched the man moving upward through the boulders toward him, both arms extended in comic exaggeration of surrender, above his head. He recognized the voice, the walk, the man.

It was Gil Clawson.

"You alone, Gil?" Brent called.

"What else, old son? I figure I don't want to face that rifle—so we can talk this out."

"Better keep your distance, Gil . . . I got nothing to say to you."

Gil's laugh rode upward to him. "How do you know until you know what I got to say to you?"

Rosemary whispered, panic making her voice shake. "Brent. Don't—let him near me, please don't let him come up here."

"Get in the carriage," Brent said under his breath. "And stay there. No matter what happens, stay there."

He listened to the faint rustling of her skirts as she pulled herself into the carriage. He swore because the horses were not even hitched to the rig. He'd wanted to spare them every moment he dared. He didn't trust Gil Clawson any more now—with those hands over his head—than he had when he'd bushwhacked them with a rifle earlier. Maybe he trusted him

even less. Avery Ranchester, or someone, was out in that occluding darkness, and the horses were loose. Rosemary couldn't make a run for it, no matter what happened.

When Gil was a hundred feet downslope from him, Brent said, "You better stay right there where you are, Gil."

"I only want to talk."

"Stay where you are. You tried to put a bullet in me today, and I'll put one in you now if you move."

Gil paused, his laugh fluting up, making something comic of his stopping downslope. "So you convinced me."

Brent moved to the carriage, sidling toward it. He picked up a rifle, cocked it and placed in Rosemary's hands. "You ever used one of these?"

"Yes."

"Keep it fixed on him. Keep your finger on the trigger. If he moves, press it."

"Yes."

Brent twisted his head. "You see this rifle, Gil? You make a move, one of us will get you."

Gil laughed again, taunting him. "Hell, man, I just came to talk."

Carrying his rifle in his left hand, Brent placed the bridle and lines on the blacks, backed them into their traces, secured them. It was awkward, slow work, using one hand, keeping Gil always in view.

When the blacks were hitched to the rig, Brent dropped the lines over the boot. "If you have to, Rosemary, get out of here. Head north and keep going."

"I won't go without you."

He cursed suddenly and sharply. "Don't give me any trouble, girl. You might have to go alone. You just be ready to move, and don't stop and don't look back."

She managed an empty laugh. "Remember Lot's wife."

Gil called, "I don't know what you're going to all this sweat for, old son. I just want to talk. . . . Can I come a little closer now?"

"I can hear you."

"It's getting dark. I want to see you."

"Drop your gun belt."

Gil laughed, the fluting sound strange and unreal in the deep silences. He loosened his belt, dropped gun and holster at his feet. "Why not? I just came to talk." He moved forward, strolling up the incline.

"Hold it!" Brent said.

"Hell, man, what you scared of? My gun's back there. I told you I came to talk—with money. A lot of money."

"Money from the Greybull stage?" Brent said.

Gil laughed. "Now, Brent, a man like you is plumb loco to go getting choosy. What do you care where the money came from if it's enough to buy you a trip to San Francisco—for two? Plenty of money to live high when you—and the little lady there—get out there."

"I don't want your money, Gil. If you want to go back to Johnson City with me—we can talk about that."

"Johnson City! Man, you are loco! You know what's waiting for you in Johnson City? Nothing but hangrope."

"Maybe not—not if I take you back with me."

"You ain't taking me back to Johnson City, Brent. . . . Let's don't even talk about that place."

"I got the gun fixed on you, Gil—"

"Still, you'd have to kill me to take me back where I got no wish to go—and where you wouldn't go if you had sense. Dead, I wouldn't do you any good. . . . Now, get smart, old son, and listen to me. Mr. Clayton Ranchester sent me out here to talk to you, and he sent a big wad of greenbacks to make sure you'd listen good."

"You never got any money from Ranchester. You're full of lies. Any money you got came from that stagecoach, and I want no part of it."

Gil laughed at him. "Man, you sure ain't very smart, are you? Looks like you'd have learned in three years of running from the law that nobody—nobody—fools with the law unless they got plenty *dinero*. Not even a man like Mr. Clayton Ranchester fools with the law when there's a better way around it—like money."

"If he sent you here, what does he want?"

Gil laughed, taking a wad of money from his Levi's, flicking the bills like cards in his hand.

"That's better. Now, I reckon you and the little lady know that young Avery was with me and Johnny Moffitt when we took the Greybull stage. . . . Even old Ranchester knows her word is going to cook young Avery. . . . Well, now, he don't want that. He figures what Avery done was just a boyish prank——"

"Well, I don't happen to feel that way about it."

Gil laughed. "But Old Ranchester sent twenty thousand

dollars that ought to make you—and the little lady—see it that way. Now young Avery is the old man's eyeball, and his whole life, and he don't mind paying twenty thousand—and even more—if you and this girl will take it and get out of this country—and leave him and his boy in peace.”

“You'd better go back and tell him you couldn't find us, Gil.”

“Now, wait a minute. You better ask the girl, hadn't you? We were kind of drunk—and mean—and we hurt her. Things got out of hand. We felt bad when it was over, sick and scared, and all of us gut-sorry for what we done. When we heard that she—was alive, we went kind of nuts. I admit we listened to Johnny. Never was but one way for Johnny to settle anything. With a gun. He told us we had to kill that girl before she put ropes around our necks. We made another mistake. We tried to—to get at her in the Doc's house. . . . But, when it didn't work, both Avery and me—we were glad.

“Johnny went back there alone. He had to get his kicks by proving he could get in there alone—and kill her. Johnny was bad in a lot of ways—I mean he talked all the time about the way he felt the first time he ever killed a man, the first time he ever come on a woman alone in a ranch house and took her, with her screaming and fighting him. He was always trying to get that feeling again . . . I mean, me and Avery, we done most of what we done, just because we listened to him. . . .

“Well, now Johnny's dead—and here's a chance for you and the girl to take this money and get away from here. Ask her! Wouldn't she like to go somewhere nobody knew her, nobody asked her questions, or stared at her? Ask her, Brent! Johnny's dead. Me and Avery—we're gut-sorry about what we done—but we don't want to face no hangrope because of her. We all got a chance to start over again, Brent—all of us . . . you, as much as the rest of us.”

Brent did not speak. He kept his gaze on Gil, aware that Rosemary was holding her breath in the carriage. He was swept with a chill sense of pity for her. She wanted never to face her family, or some courtroom where Avery and Gil Clawson went on trial. The nightmare would never end for her, or it could end forever here if she took Ranchester's money.

Brent's hand tightened on his rifle. Why hadn't Gil come

on them with Ranchester's money and offer back on that road when he'd been too tired to take another step, when all he wanted was to end it, get out of it? It would have been easy, then. What would it matter out in San Francisco that he was wanted for murder in Johnson City?

Brent shivered suddenly. It had mattered in Waco, Texas. It had mattered in Sonora, across the Rio. It had mattered with every step he took the past three years, just as it would hound him now if he compounded it all by taking Ranchester's money and Rosemary and running again.

He heard Rosemary's soft crying in the carriage.

"Ask her!" Gil's high tenor voice battered at him again.

Brent glanced toward Rosemary. He was afraid to ask her. She'd been in hell, but he'd never let her run from it, as he had. She didn't know what running could do to you, what it did to your insides.

"I don't need to ask her," Brent said. "I can tell you. You're going back to Johnson City with me and clear my name—and then you're going to stand trial in Sage Crossing, with Avery Ranchester."

He heard Gil's sharp intake of breath. Gil said, "Don't be a fool, Landers! You want to drag her through a trial? You know what Ranchester will do to her to clear Avery? You want that? Here's twenty thousand dollars. You'd better take it, and clear out of here."

"You're coming with me to Johnson City, Gil."

Gil laughed, a wavering sound of frustration. "What's wrong with you? You think you got any more chance in Johnson City than I'd have if I was fool enough to let you take me back to Sage Crossing?"

"I killed in self-defense——"

"Sure you did!" Gil laughed sharply. "Maybe you did, maybe to defend your life, prodded into it by a stubborn mule named Clevenger. Everybody knew what a mulehead he was. But that was three years ago—people won't remember that he was a man nobody could reason with. All they'll know is that you killed him—over cattle. Stolen cattle—hell, man, face it—cattle stolen from Clevenger."

Brent exhaled heavily. "You stole 'em, Gil. I didn't. I had a bill of sale. From you."

"Who is going to believe me?" Gil laughed at that idea. "Only one way you'd get me back there, Brent. Kill me. For what good? Forget it! You got no chance in Johnson City."

Take this money. You can live high out in San Francisco. Take it!"

Suddenly, he flung the tightly bundled bills toward Brent. The money struck his boot, fell to the ground.

Gil's voice rose. "Take that money, and clear out while you and that girl got a chance to stay alive. Take it!"

Gil spun suddenly, crouching in the darkness, and ran downslope.

Brent pressed the trigger. The sound of the rifle burst into the night. The bullet erupted in the outcroppings between Gil's legs. Gil yelled at the top of his lungs and lunged forward into the boulders, rolling and scrambling through them.

"Hold it, Gil!" Brent shouted. He moved away from the granite wall, running down the incline.

Rosemary called out to him, sobbing out his name. He hesitated, jerking his head around.

"Stay in that wagon!" he shouted. "Stay where you are!"

Turning, he saw Gil Clawson come up on his knees among the boulders. Gil had leaped forward until he had reached the place where he had dropped his gun belt and as he came up, he was working the big .45 from its holster.

"Don't do it, Gil," Brent warned.

"You ain't taking me back, Brent," Gil said. "I hate doing this, but you ain't got sense enough to listen."

The big gun slipped free of its holster and Gil threw the gun belt from him, falling forward onto his belly as he fired. His gun roared, the night glowed blindingly orange, spurting with flame.

Brent fired again, this time with the rifle fixed on Gil. He didn't miss, just as he knew he wouldn't—couldn't—miss. Even as he pressed the trigger the second time, he wished he would miss, but he knew better.

The rifle bullets struck Gil, rocking him first one way so that he struck a small boulder and then thrusting him away from it so he sprawled out on his back.

Slowly, Brent walked through the rocks to where Gil lay. He stared down at him, feeling sick and empty. Rosemary wailed out his name from the carriage, but for a long time he went on staring at Gil's body. Somehow, he felt that Gil was luckier than he was. It was all over for Gil, but Brent Landers was finished, too, because he had killed the only witness who could have proved him innocent of murder.

— 10 —

THE NIGHT WAS INTENSELY DARK SUDDENLY. BRENT LANDERS stood rigidly, legs apart, above the man he had killed. He was aware of the silence that was like a pressure slowing the heavy throb of his heart. He wished Gil Clawson were alive, wished he had missed, wished there was some way he would look down and see the shadowy figure move on the ground. But there was no movement. Gil Clawson was dead, and with him every chance for Brent to return to his home and square a murder charge was dead, too.

He had never really known this man, even in the old days when they rode together for Clevenger, and were casual friends. Gil laughed easily, too easily, so everybody laughed with him, but you never got to know him. He had gone hunting Gil, thinking somehow Gil would return with him to Johnson City, but all the time he had been fooling only himself because he had not known at all what Gil really was inside.

At last, Brent turned slowly and went back up the incline. He paused where Gil had tossed the thick stack of money. He bent down, picked it up. He stood hefting it in his hand. Something about it disturbed him, troubled him deeply. He tossed it into the rear of the carriage, hearing it strike the flooring.

"Are you all right?" Rosemary asked from the carriage boot.

"Sure." His voice was filled with self-hatred. "I'm fine. I killed him. He's dead."

"You had to kill him."

"Yes. I had to kill him."

He took a step toward the carriage as he spoke, holding his rifle low at his side. Suddenly, and without warning, a

rifle was fired twice from the darkness at an angle above them.

The two bullets smashed into the earth near the wagon—each lethal sound like a slap of death. He heard Rosemary gasp, and clap her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming. The horses stirred nervously, traces and metal creaking in the dark.

"Get down in that boot," Brent said, voice savage. "You stay there."

"Brent——"

But he did not pause to answer her. He hurled himself against the granite break, feeling the rough rock against his flesh. Sickness and despair turned to rage inside him, and he felt a terrible lust to kill. It had been too dark for anyone out there to see that Gil Clawson was dead. This attack was planned, part of a plan that included Gil's walking up with that money.

Moving warily, Brent Landers ran along the rock wall in the direction of the ambusher. His mind raced ahead and back, confused and, at the same time, coldly clear. You never trusted a man like Gil Clawson. You should have learned three years ago that he never dealt from the top of the deck. He gave you a bill of sale on stolen cattle, he gave you twenty thousand dollars that they meant to take back from you once you were off guard.

He ran among the boulders, staying hard against the shadow of the outcroppings. He reached the place where the break ended, and paused, holding his breath as he waited.

Dwarf willows and prickly pears made stark black forms in the starless night. The wind lowed faintly in the trees and around clumps of rocks.

In the darkness, Brent waited, knowing that the first man who made a wrong move was dead. He stayed where he was in the shadow, a part of the dark pattern of the rocks as his eyes searched for movement. For a long time, he saw nothing, but he did not move because he'd heard no moving above him. Sweat seeped down the shadowed planes of his face; it burned his eyes and he tried to blink it away.

Time ran out. From the darkness upwind he heard the sharp intake of breath, the way a frightened man makes up his mind, sets his body for movement.

Brent came up on the balls of his feet, set, tense and waiting. He had guessed right. From a stunted cedar clump,

there was the whispering clatter of small stones, disturbed rock, the scrape of boot leather, the sounds of a man running.

Brent waited another moment, listening to all the sounds that rode downwind to him like signaled messages. The man was going directly upward, crouched low, sprinting from tree trunk to underbrush to boulder.

Brent came quickly around the ground swell, leaping upward and crossing at an angle through the darkness along the incline. He moved upward through the boulders for what seemed a long time. No new sounds rode downward on the wind. The man up there had paused, hiding, listening.

Brent paused too, pressing the back of his hand across his mouth. There was only darkness, and the blacker dark of shadows formed by stunted pines and rocks, blotting out the blackness within them.

He angled toward the place where he had last heard the sound of movement. He reached the dark concealment of a boulder, slipped to his knees, holding his breath.

Holding gun ready, Brent inched around the boulder. When he heard the whisper of noise behind him, he held himself rigidly a moment, not believing it. The man had come down behind him.

He wheeled then, swinging the rifle in both hands up and out from him as the man lunged toward him. The knife winked, like a distant, indistinct star, like a comet shooting upward as it came in under the rifle stock.

Gasping, Brent brought the rifle down hard. The man knew how to parry and thrust and retreat with a knife. Many men liked knife fighting better than using guns. A knife laid a man open, and if one thrust upward with it right, there was no answer to a knife.

The man stepped out of the shadows, holding the knife upward in his fist, circling Brent. Brent held the rifle across his chest, not watching the man at all, only the glint of the knife blade.

It came upward in a lurch of movement. He put the rifle butt inside it and drove with a terrible rage. The gunstock struck the man in the throat. The knife clattered away against the rocks. The man gulped drily, trying to breathe. He sprang toward Brent, trying to get inside his gun. Brent laid the rifle hard against the side of his head, watched him crumple to his knees and then fold slowly, his face striking a boulder.

Brent stood there a moment, watching the inert form.

Then he knelt, turned the man over and stared into the thin young face. He felt no astonishment when he recognized Avery Ranchester. He felt nothing, only weariness and the memory of an agonizing rage.

He caught young Ranchester by the collar, dragging him downslope to the carriage.

Avery Ranchester lay very still for a long time after he opened his eyes. In the light of the small fire Landers had built near the rock wall, Avery saw Rosemary Tillson's face. She did not look at him, but he could feel her revulsion. He winced, sick to his stomach.

Avery tried to move, found his hands lashed between his shoulder blades, his legs secured at the ankles. He moved his head again, found Landers hunkering over him, waiting, face gray and eyes chilled.

At the look in Landers' face, Avery shivered involuntarily. Somewhere he'd heard once that, when you roused a good man to rage, God help you—because only God could help you. He'd never paid attention to that saying before, having met few good men.

Avery shifted slightly, indicating the ropes. "What do you think this is going to buy you, Landers?"

Brent stared down at him. "I hope you got sense enough to figure what it might buy you, boy."

Avery's mouth twisted. "This world ain't big enough to hold you if my old man comes after you."

"That may not do you any good."

Avery's eyes swirled with shadows. He drew a breath. "I don't bluff, Landers."

Landers nodded. "And I don't make bluffs, Avery. So we nail that one down." He jerked his head toward the body of Gil Clawson. "Look at your pal, Avery. He's dead. And Johnny Moffitt's dead. . . . You really think anything your father might do would keep me from killing you now?"

Avery swallowed. "What will it buy you to kill me?"

Landers drew the knife Avery had attacked him with from the ground beside the fire.

Avery watched him, face pallid.

"Recognize this knife, Avery? You jumped me—up there. You meant to kill me. You think I won't kill you now?"

"If you were going to kill me, you'd have done it before you dragged me down here."

"I hope you draw a lot of comfort from that thought," Brent said. He placed the steel point of the knife blade against Avery's throat, pressed, and blood spurted.

Avery cried out, terror boiling up from his belly.

"You see, boy, how it is," Brent said. "Now, Clawson and Moffitt are dead. You want to stay alive?"

"What you want from me?"

"Who robbed the Greybull stage? Who took Rosemary off that stage? Who—attacked her up on the mesa? Who tried to kill her at Doc's? You want to tell me that, slow and easy, while I write it out, and you sign it, you might live to get back to Sage Crossing. It's a gamble you're going to have to take. You think it over."

Avery licked his tongue across his mouth. "I was with them. We had been drinking. We took the stage, and the money. That was all I wanted. The money. My old man keeps a tight rope on me, keeps me broke. I wanted that money. I didn't want to kill Lon Parrish—and Gil didn't. That was Johnny. He didn't want money, he wanted to see a man die when he shot him. . . . He was always talking about that so it made you sick . . . the feeling of power he got the first time he killed a man . . . that's what he wanted, all the time.

"I didn't want to take Rosemary with us," Avery continued. "There wasn't anything I could do about it. I hated what happened up there. It made me sick. I—I had her—I had to. . . . But I'm not like them . . . I'm not. . . . It made me sick. Just the same, I was scared when we got down to Sage Crossing and heard she—was alive. I lost my head . . . I went with them again. . . . But I'm not as guilty as they were! I hated it . . . I hated it! All I wanted was the money. That's all I wanted."

When Landers had written it all out, he released Avery's hand, held the knife against his throat while the trembling boy scribbled his name across the bottom of the paper.

Coldly, Brent secured Avery's wrists behind his back again. He moved supplies, blankets and rifles to the boot of the carriage. Then he hefted Gil's body, pushed it up almost under the seat. He lifted Avery, dropped him beside Gil's body and the stack of money in the rear of the rig.

When this was done, Brent stood for a moment beside the small fire before he kicked dirt over it, burying it, putting them in darkness. He swung up into the carriage beside Rosemary. She was sitting tense, staring into the darkness.

First stars littered the sky across the tops of pines, the moon spread a patina of faded gray across the dark dome of the heavens.

Brent exhaled deeply. "We've got to turn back to Sage Crossing, Rosemary."

She did not speak. She looked at him, and he saw that she trusted him in anything he had to do. She nodded and he slapped the reins across the blacks, turning them south.

At daybreak, they reached the brink of the pine hammock above the prairies that rolled north of Sage Crossing. Brent sat straighter, watching the bolls of dust in the distance on the roadway. Sweat stood on his dust-caked face. It had been an eternal night and he had not slept. His whole body ached.

Brent rubbed his eyes, staring. He drew rein, halting the tired horses. He sat for a long time watching the posse drive hard toward him. He looped the lines around the whipstock, swung down from the carriage.

Avery was lying, cramped in the rear of the rig, eyes fixed on the distance, trussed up like a pig.

Brent said, "There's a posse coming this way. Maybe they're coming for us, maybe not. Maybe there's something more to this than I know, Avery."

Ranchester only stared at him, did not speak.

"No matter who they are, Ranchester," Brent said, "I mean to get into Sage Crossing alive—and I mean to take you there alive. But if these people are looking for me, I warn you, you make a sound back here, before they take me, I'll put a bullet in you."

Avery stared at him and believed him. Still, Brent saw there was a new sense of confidence about Avery, a cold set to his jaw.

Brent thrust a neckerchief into Avery's mouth, secured it with tightly knotted line. He then spread blankets and the two black capes over Avery and Gil's body.

Brent returned to the front of the carriage, watching the posse take form, moving swiftly toward him. He scowled, standing for a moment beside the buggy wheel, staring in the early light across the prairie. What kind of sense did it make that men would be seeking them on this road a full day after they had ridden north toward Greybull?

But it hadn't made sense, either, that Clayt Ranchester had somehow sent Gil and Avery after them with an offer of

money to leave the territory. The look of hope and cold satisfaction he'd seen in Avery's face when he heard about the posse—that didn't make sense, either.

Brent swung up into the carriage, held the tired pair down to a plodding walk downslope into the sunlight. They drove slowly without speaking. The sky grew lighter, the sun warmer against their shoulders.

Without interest, Landers counted the men in the posse. There were ten men on fresh horses. They rode intently, going somewhere, goal set. It didn't matter how many there were. They were armed, and Clayt Ranchester rode at the head of them.

So, it didn't make sense, but Landers knew . . . they had come armed, looking for him.

As the horsemen fanned out, surrounding them, Brent drew the horses to a halt. He recognized Ox Slaughter among the riders. There was nothing in Slaughter's face except a strange sadness, a look of defeat.

Brent sat very rigidly, clinging to the reins. He had not figured it out yet, but he saw that it was all over. It even ran through his mind that he might try to fight his way out of this. It was a fool's trick. It was hopeless. It was the story of his life. Still, he could take down some of them before they stopped him.

He glanced at Rosemary, and changed his mind. There could be no gunplay, no excuse for a stray bullet to strike her. They had come all the way back this far, they would play it out the rest of the way.

"Well, Sheriff, here they are." Clayt Ranchester's big voice had power in it, and Brent thought bitterly that Avery's heart would be lifting optimistically under that cape. "I told you we'd find them out here."

Ox Slaughter sat apart, looking from Clayt to Brent. He shifted in his saddle. "You didn't go to Greybull." He made an empty, flat statement of it.

"I told you they wouldn't!" Ranchester's voice struck at them.

Brent ignored the red-faced man for the moment, looking at the sheriff. It was vitally important that Ox believe him.

"Something happened, Ox," Brent said. "We turned back to Sage Crossing—last night."

"You lie!" Clayt's voice was like a fist in his face. "You never meant to go to Greybull. You ran out there to get the

money you stole from that stage, and then you meant to break for it—only we cut you off.”

Brent stiffened, sitting straighter, as if he'd been struck in the solar plexus. His tired body felt more tired than ever, he was conscious of being sweated, dirty. The money he took from the stage! The twenty thousand in the rear of the carriage! Clayt Ranchester *had* got in touch with Gil and Avery had sent him to frame Brent with the stolen money. Clayt must have known that his son was in on the robbery. In his heart, Ranchester knew it. He was not gambling. He was nailing it down once and for all. He had planned to get Landers to take the twenty thousand as bribe money—the money stolen from the stage when Lon Parrish was murdered and Rosemary kidnapped—and then find it on him.

“That's a pretty good story you fixed up, Ranchester,” Brent said levelly. “But it didn't work out.”

“I don't know what you're talking about, you thieving murderer, but it don't matter. . . . We'll find that money on you. And we're going to hang you.”

Brent straightened. “Take it easy, Ranchester.”

Clayt Ranchester spoke louder; this was always the way he rode over opposition. He talked it down. People heard Clayt Ranchester, and they believed him, they bowed to his superior will and loud voice.

“Here is the man, Sheriff,” Ranchester said, “the way I told you we'd find him. Yesterday morning, after this man took off in Horace's rig, Clawson told us, before witnesses, that this man had been with him and Moffitt when they robbed the stage.”

Rosemary tilted her head, looking up at the sound of his voice. Her cheeks were ashen, but her eyes were cold. “That's a lie. He wasn't there.”

Clayt Ranchester flinched, but spoke louder. “Stay out of this, young woman. We'll get to you—and why you left the stage with those men.”

Rosemary gasped, drawing in her breath. She stared at Ranchester, seeing that whatever concern or kindness he'd felt for her was gone, and that he was thinking of only one thing: he would save his son, no matter who was smashed.

She tilted her head, her eyes defiant. But Brent closed his hand on her arm, and she did not speak. She sat stiffly, face gray with shock, watching the old man on the horse.

“This man Landers is an old buddy of Clawson's. Clawson

told us that. They punched cattle together near Johnson City. Clawson pushed stolen cattle through a spread owned by Landers. They were pals, and they threw in with Johnny Moffitt for the robbery, but then Landers got greedy, took the girl and the money. Twenty thousand dollars. Now we got the teller from the bank that counted, stacked and packed that money. He swears he marked them bills. He'll know 'em. You going to search this rig, Sheriff? Or will I do it? That money is on Landers. He got just what he started out to get—the woman, and that money, and he was on his way out of here.”

“I was headed toward Sage Crossing,” Brent said in a level voice.

Clayt Ranchester laughed at him, his voice raking him like raw spurs. “Sure. You turned when you saw us. Didn’t you? Your tricks, your lying don’t matter because we’ll find that money.” He lifted his voice. “Sheriff!”

Brent said coldly. “Don’t touch this wagon.”

Clayt waited, looking from the sheriff to Brent Landers. He studied for a moment, then jerked his head, and the men backing him tilted rifles, moved their hands to the triggers, fixed them on the two people in the carriage who sat waiting, faces cold.

“Maybe you better throw down them guns, Landers,” Clayt said. “That way, you won’t be tempted. You won’t get yourself or your woman killed——”

Brent leaned forward. “You don’t want that, Ranchester. You’ve got to kill us. You’ve got to kill *her*! You’ve got to, and you know it. You’ve got to kill us, both of us, or your lies won’t stick.”

Clayt Ranchester’s face was stiff. He held Brent’s gaze a moment. He was conscious of the men silently ringing them. Brent had called his bluff. Even men like Tom Hallison were shifting, uncertainly. Landers *had* been returning to Sage Crossing. And not a man present would ever forget the way Rosemary had looked the day Landers brought her down from the high mesas.

Clayt sat stiffly in his saddle for one more moment. He had reached a place for the first time in his life where he had to make the next move, no matter how disastrous it might be. He had wanted to force Landers’ hand, but it hadn’t worked that way.

Suddenly, Clayt swung down from his saddle. His voice

had all the righteousness of an Old Testament prophet in it. He knew he had to sound right, and look right, because this was not working out as he planned it. For the first time, he knew that not only his honor, but his son's freedom, depended on pushing Landers into making a move that would get him killed.

"That money is here!" Ranchester bellowed. "And, by God, if the sheriff won't do his duty, I'll find it."

He jerked his gaze across them like the lash of a whip.

"I warn you, Ranchester," Brent said. "Keep away from this wagon."

Ranchester stared up at him. "You make a move, my men will put a bullet in you. That money is here. I'll find it——"

His fist caught the blankets and capes in one handful. He ripped them across the side of the rig, letting them fall across the wheel and into the dirt.

He stood as if struck by a catatonic trance, staring at the bed of the carriage. It was there. It was there for all of them to see, and though Clayt Ranchester went on standing there, he was like a paralyzed man.

Ranchester wanted to retch, gag with his sickness, but he was too stunned to move at all. He saw everything, all the evil he had been denying, all the answers he had refused to accept, all the ruin sharply etched, sprawled, in the bed of this rig. His gaze seemed permanently fixed on his son, trussed up, gagged, in there with the thick stack of money, and the body of Gil Clawson.

Finally, Ranchester shook his head, and turned, gazing up at Brent Landers, still trying to bluff it out, even when it was all over because there was only one thing Clayt Ranchester had never learned in his long, rough life and that was how to retreat. He never had known; he didn't know now.

Clayt's arm felt numb as if it were broken at the shoulder socket, but he moved as quickly as he could. He stabbed wildly at his gun, his raging gaze fixed on Landers. Even in this terribly slow moment, he thought somebody would fire at Landers if he went for his gun.

He fought his gun from its holster. But Landers only stood up in the carriage, watching him, unmoving. Then Clayt felt a gun thrust hard in his kidney.

Ox Slaughter spoke quietly at his back. "Drop it, Clayt. You've got enough shame and dirt on you now without killing an innocent man. It's all over, Clayt. It's all over."

The posse was gone. The men rode away slowly, as if the life and spirit were gone from their horses. Gil Clawson's body had been tied across the back of a horse.

Avery Ranchester rode behind Old Stew. His hands were bound, and he didn't know how many years of prison yawned ahead for him, but he breathed deeply, sucking in raw drafts of air, because after the long night it felt good to be alive.

Ox Slaughter had the returned money, the confession signed by Avery Ranchester.

"We'll ride back to town with you, Ox," Brent said. "We'll return the banker's rig, get one of our own."

Ox shook his head. "You don't have to return the rig, Brent. I speak for Horace Fellows. And the town. They meant for you to have it. It's yours. You are free to turn around and take Rosemary to Greybull."

Brent nodded, sighing deeply. "She's going with me, Ox. Only we're not going to Greybull . . . not yet anyhow. . . . Maybe sometime—sometime, when Rosemary wants to go there."

"What will you do?" Ox asked, troubled.

"I'm going back to Johnson City," Brent said.

"Johnson City! Gil Clawson's dead. You haven't got a chance."

"Maybe I have. He confessed—before he died. Rosemary was there. She heard it. Gil admitted stealing those cattle. Rosemary is going to tell them that, and when they see her, they'll believe her. . . . And maybe when they see—that a girl like Rosemary loves me—they'll believe me when I swear I fired only in self-defense."

Ox swallowed hard. "God help you, Brent." Then he straightened in the saddle, smiling. "But you know, I kind of think you two wi'l make it. I *know* you will."

Brent nodded. He lifted his arm, waving to the sheriff, and turned the rig on the lane. For a long time, Ox Slaughter sat there alone, watching them until he could no longer see them on the twisting, lonely road.

BRENT LANDERS rode into the town of Sage Crossing carrying a half-demented girl whose tortured body was evidence of what had happened to her at the hands of some man, or men, high in the badlands country where she had been left for dead.

The town was grateful to Landers for bringing in the Tillson girl. And they were curious too. Landers couldn't afford their curiosity—because he was an unconvicted murderer who had killed, not from choice, but because he'd had to. He had been on the run for three years—three years trying to bring in the outlaw who could clear him. But Landers had to face the desperate need of another human being, the young girl whose life and sanity depended on his staying in Sage Crossing to see her well.

And then Landers discovered that one of the men who had raped Rosemary Tillson was the outlaw he was after . . .

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