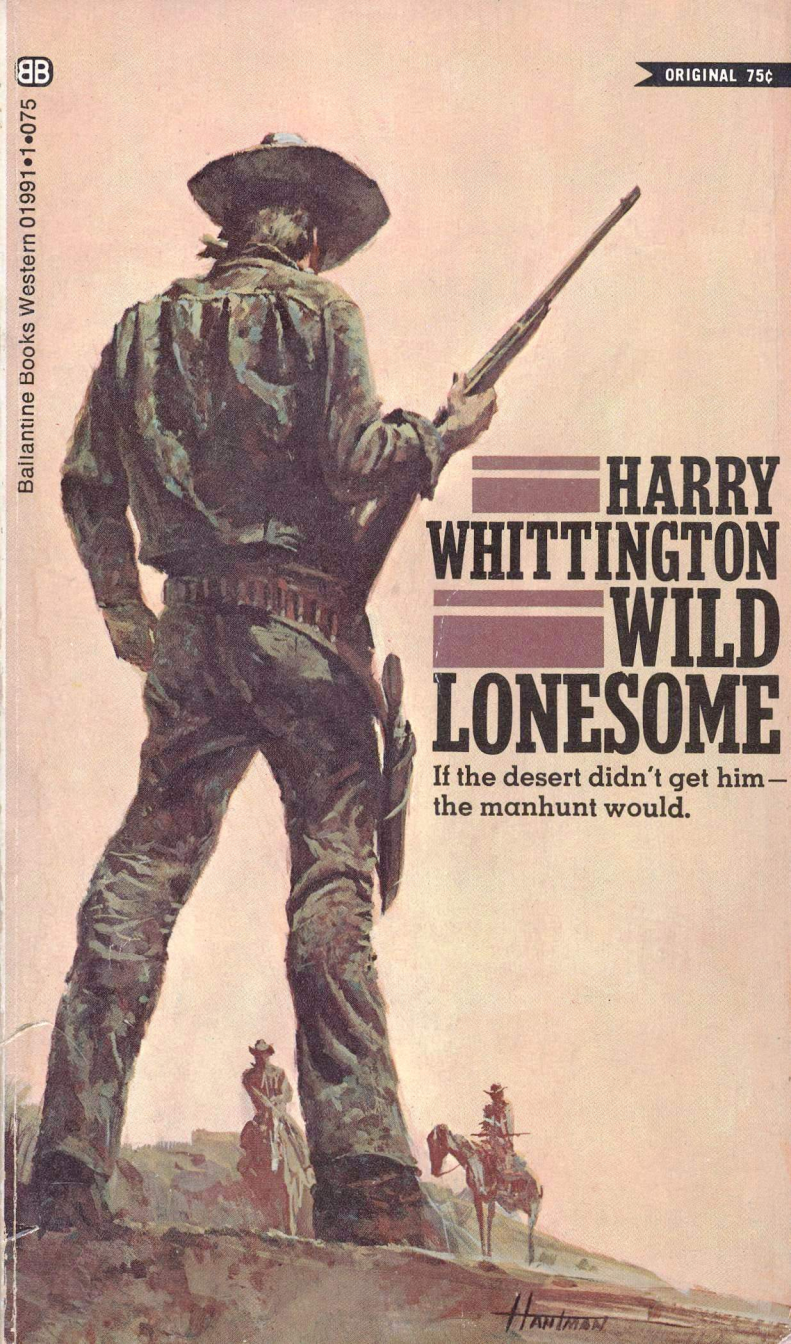




Ballantine Books Western 01991•1•075

ORIGINAL 75¢

A large, detailed illustration of a cowboy in a desert landscape. The cowboy is seen from behind, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, a long-sleeved shirt, and chaps. He is holding a long-barreled rifle in his right hand. In the background, two other figures are visible: one standing and one on horseback. The sky is a pale, hazy color.

HARRY WHITTINGTON WILD LONESOME

If the desert didn't get him —
the manhunt would.

HANIMAN

He wasn't guilty of murder but no one knew it except himself—and one other man.

Somehow, before they hanged him, he had to wring the truth from his enemy.

Somehow, he had to create a situation where the weaker man would fail.

He chose the desert as his arena—where he was hopelessly outclassed by the brazen heat, thirst, and lack of food. And where his enemy had everything he lacked—except courage.

AND DON'T MISS

these other Westerns by Harry Whittington

HANGROPE TOWN

HIGH FURY

This is an original publication—not a reprint.

WILD LONESOME

Harry Whittington

BALLANTINE BOOKS

NEW YORK

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I

Racing downslope, headed north, and losing sight of the Rio on the Old Trail through shroud-gray alkali plains south of Socorro, the black stagecoach rocked and swayed on its thoroughbraces. Driver and Shotgun braced themselves on the boot, unconsciously straining forward, tense with belly-burning apprehensions. In all that eternal yellow-gray wasteland nothing else moved.

"Go, there!" the driver shouted. He slapped leather-lines, never permitting his sweated, foam-muzzled team to break its headlong gallop. Through the funereal silence between far tomb-shaped ridges and surrounding beds of lava spikes like small headstones, the infrequent cry of the driver and the clatter of the hearse-black Concord were the only sounds.

"Must be hotter'n horsewater inside there with them flaps shut." Lean-shanked, in corduroy coat, levis, denim shirt and scuffed boots, his Texas hat secured under whiskered chin with leather thongs, the driver jerked his head toward the coach tonneau. The cab was padlocked and its iron-barred windows were blind with black canvas curtains drawn and snapped.

"Hotter where he's going." Pete Necomber muttered in a taut, unwilling answer as if he disliked discussing it. His heavy-jowled, wind-burned face betrayed his uneasiness and inner qualms. His hairy fists gripping the shotgun were white-knuckled.

"Yeah." Lucas Cross nodded. "Landrews will look back on this ride as the good ole days, all right."

"Reckon why they keep it closed thataway?"

"Thompson told me. They don't want Landrews seeing

where he is, or who's outside this coach. Thompson said we're crossing Landrews' home country and he ain't taking no chances."

"Jest don't see how they breathe in there. Like he's already dead."

"Yeah. Only he ain't yet, and that's the whole trouble."

"Reckon he'll make a break for it?"

Cross shook his head. "He'd be loco if he did, and loco if he didn't."

"Yeah."

After this flat exchange they fell silent, entering a region tufted with mesquite, cactus and yucca, torn with old gashes, and beyond, a dry lake as gray and arid as a skull. On both sides of the Old Spanish Trail, the broken expanses of the plateau stretched to remote ranges quivering in flame-blue heat waves.

Lucas Cross slapped the reins across the sweat-glistening, dust-gray rumps of his horses, but instead of yelling at his team, he shook his head, pale eyes puzzled. "He's taking it quiet." He inclined his head toward that sealed cab again.

Pete Necomber shifted the shotgun on his knees, nodding. He turned and spat red-brown cut-plug tobacco juice downwind. "He's one hell of a lot less jumpy than the rest of us."

"Landrews plain ain't spooked at all."

"Why in hell should he be?" Necomber said. "The rest of us are flurried up for him."

"I got this sick feeling in my belly. Had it ever since we left Garrity's stopover."

"Scared?"

"Yeah. Scared. I reckon. That, too. Only, there ain't nothing to be scared of, and it ain't that kind of sickness. I'm gut sick, sick to my stomach. Hell, I feel like I'm at a wake where there ain't nothing to drink."

"I don't worry about it."

"He's good people—you can look at him and see that. The way he holds hisself. Like they can hang him, but by

damn they can't make him beg. He stood in that court and took it like a man—"

"I just don't think about it. It ain't nothing to me."

"He was pretty good in there," the driver insisted.

Evan Landrews recoiled from the hip-galling budge of Ed Blackbury's holstered Colt every time the Concord bounced on the wrinkle backed road.

Landrews was a tall, spare-boned man in his middle twenties, seeming almost frail contrasted with the bulky deputy facing him. But there was about him a magnificent inner toughness that went deep and would endure, and the innate nobility and rugged heritage of stamina and ruthless strength evoked the same thrilled recognition one felt suddenly glimpsing a thoroughbred stallion.

He rode slumped in his seat, his gray eyes hooded but watchful and aware, fixed on something neither of the other two men could see. His dry brown hair grew ragged at his close-set ears and over his denim shirt collar. But the shirt was spotlessly clean, lovingly pressed and neatly patched as were his salt-gray levis and damaged boots.

It was hot. Sweat dripped along his face and discolored his shirt in streaks and rings. Dust powdered up through the floor, breathless, dry. He did not move.

Another hour passed in the stifling heat and dust. His mouth had a guarded, bitter set to it that did not relax and inner rages and pressures spread a gray pallor under the dark sheen of his hollowed, high-planed cheeks.

He slumped again, trying to relax and he laid his head back on the seat rest but couldn't escape the rub of Blackbury's gun, the unrelenting cut of the shackles on his wrists or the look of suppressed violence in Hal Thompson's flat brown eyes.

Landrews' gaze moved over Thompson on the seat across from him. During this eternal, hot ride from Las Cruces none of them had spoken except when necessary, but Thompson's itch to use the Winchester on his lap put its own kind of sweated tension into the breathless silence.

Thompson sat alert, booted legs apart. A thick-set,

barrel-chested man, he had gone to fat in his job as bailiff. His neck sagged over the limp collar of his tan shirt. He was bulky, but he could move fast. He was young and he was mustang mean. He was always looking for trouble. He anticipated it now, this was in his sweat-larded face.

On the seat beside Landrews the other deputy had fallen to sleep several times, but Thompson had not relaxed.

Landrews watched Thompson sweat and wait. Even the rifle across the stocky deputy's knees was hot, its weight and chafing pressure irritating through khaki uniform.

"Been thinking, eh, Landrews?" Thompson's voice was taunting. He was sweated, bored, and swallowing back the hot bitter-sweet taste of that sick desire he never put in words, even in his own mind: the need to kill. "Been thinking how you can make a break? Huh?"

Landrews didn't answer. A muscle worked in his jaw.

Thompson's voice rose. "Long ride. Last long ride. But you been figuring a break, huh?"

Blackbury sat up, yawning. A slender man in his twenties, he wore a thick amethyst ring and sported a clipped beard to make himself look older.

"Lay off, Hal. For God's sake, what's eating you?"

"Go to hell," Thompson told him. "You so mule-headed you don't see it?"

"See what, Hal?" Blackbury yawned again, stretched.

"Him!" Thompson's voice lashed out. "Him thinking about it. . . . Go ahead, hombre. Jump me. Go ahead."

"For God's sake, Hal." Blackbury stared at him, scowling.

Thompson lapsed into a sullen silence, remaining watchful. He closed a stubby finger experimentally on the rifle trigger. He drew a bandana from his hip pocket and without removing his finger from the trigger, mopped at the greasy sweat beading his jaws and seeping from under his hatband.

Thompson fixed Landrews with his narrowed eyes, his

voice breathless. "You know in your gut you're going to make a try, Landrews. Why not now? Why not now, Landrews, and get it over with?"

His hand tightened on the rifle-stock, waiting.

Blackbury swore. "You're gun-happy, Hal. Sweat, heat rash and a chance to use a gun. You act more roused than I ever seen dames in hook-joints get you."

Thompson stared at Blackbury, face gray. "You act like you got no woes. Sittin' there, dozin', that Colt holstered between you and the con."

"What the hell ails you, Hal? The guy's wrists are shackled."

Thompson jerked his head, peering at Landrews, sweat stinging his eyes in their fat sockets. "You tell him, Landrews. Tell the stupid son. You got to do it, don't you, Landrews? Shackled hands or not, you got to make your play because once we get you in the pen at Sante Fe, you're crapped out, and you know it."

"Drop it, Hal." Blackbury shuddered involuntarily. "You act like you're egging him."

"Sure!" Thompson laughed abruptly. "Make your move, Landrews, and I'll change your face with my gun-stock!"

Landrews met his gaze and held it while Thompson's hand whitened on the rifle. The coach lurched suddenly, going upslope and Thompson braced himself.

Nothing happened. The heat. The waiting. The thunder of the Concord. Suffocating dust up through the floor.

Landrews, a faint frown disturbing the bitter intentness of his slate-colored eyes, sat up as if listening for something.

Thompson bent forward. Blackbury straightened, said, "What's wrong, Landrews?"

"We're coming into San Antonio." Landrews' voice was harsh, clipped.

Thompson cursed him. "How the hell you know that, con? Sitting in here, closed up like in a coffin? Can you see through them flaps, mister?"

Landrews shrugged, did not answer. The coach slowed, lines and traces clattering. Cross struck the cab roof with

a whipstock, shouting from the boot. "San Antonio, Thompson. Changing horses here."

Thompson sat straighter, watching Landrews, dark eyes flat with an impersonal hatred tinged with a puzzled, grudging admiration.

Blackbury sat up and smoothed out his uniform, laughing and yawning. "That's a hell of a trick, Landrews. How in blazes you figure where we was without being able to see anything?"

Landrews slumped into the seat, sweated, uncomfortable, but at the same time satisfied, too. He had been right. On this trip he could make no mistakes. He had to be right, he could not miss by as much as a quarter of a mile.

He felt the gaze of the two bailiffs on him. He kept his eyes half closed.

The stagecoach rattled to a stop and from within the closed cubicle they could hear the vague, disembodied sounds of the town at mid-morning, carts and horses and people moving past them on both sides.

Hal Thompson unlocked the padlocked door, keeping his gaze on Landrews. He stepped out into the street, leaving Ed Blackbury to guard their prisoner.

He wiped at his sweated face. If it was up to him he wouldn't trust a prisoner with Blackbury—the guy was too easy, instead of killing first and wondering whether he was right over a beer sometime later, he would hesitate. One of these days, that Blackbury was going to lose a dangerous prisoner, or get himself killed because he delayed too long before he used his gun. Blackbury figured you could trust these guys as long as you treated them fairly, but as far as he could see they were mad dogs, and that's the way you had to treat them.

Thompson stared around him at the steaming little town. It was a parcel of adobes, frames and false fronts thrown down in a burned land. Downslope, the way they'd come, the parched earth was brown, Mexican red, dried yellow. Sagging shapes of scrawny cattle dotted the slopes where there wasn't even the touch of green, the

animals subsisting on nettles, briars and brush. The brutes got hard and tough and wild like that—they matched the country.

He stood just outside the coach, stretching and breathing deeply, gulping in the furnace-hot air that was as pleasant as a night-misted breeze after that closed coach.

He watched the townspeople converging in the blaze of sun, spilling out of shade, doorways, running around sides of the buildings toward the black, barred-windowed coach. They slowed when they got within twenty or thirty paces of the black maria and its armed guard, approaching warily, casting timid shadows on the hard-packed, rut-scarred street. There were children and old people among them and a few Indians and Mexicans, silent and curious.

"Hey, mister, who you got in there?" a boy called to Thompson. His eyes were saucer-round and he was as wary as a whisky jack.

"You got a prisoner for Sante Fe, mister?"

A middle-aged man in a dark suit and derby, a gold watch chain across his chest, came forward, glancing around Thompson toward the door of the coach, standing slightly ajar as Blackbury tried to let in a little fresh air before he locked up. The man inclined his head toward the coach. "Is that the Landrews fellow you got in there?"

"Ain't no sense you getting too close, mister," was all Thompson said.

The man flushed red to the sweat band of his derby. He stared at Thompson.

The townspeople inched closer. Thompson waited until Blackbury closed the door. The onlookers whispered, nudging each other, studying the black coach, the bailiff and his gleaming rifle.

"You people. Keep back," Thompson said, his voice hard and loud. "If there's any trouble, I want you to keep back out of the way."

He pushed through them, armed, studying them for any suspicious-appearing men, or anyone who might be carry-

ing concealed arms, or who might appear unduly nervous.

"Is that the killer Landrew?" a woman asked.

"How long you plan to stop here?" another asked, drawing her children closer, but not retreating from the semicircle in the blazing sun.

"Is it Landrews?" somebody called. Thompson didn't answer. He exhaled heavily, glancing at the single dust-furred cottonwood on the street and its meager dappling of shade.

Holding his shoulders erect, his body still stiff and cramped from the hours of tension in that sweatbox guarding Landrews, Thompson strode around the stage office, going between the adobe and the frame saloon toward the outhouse in the rear. He could hear the townspeople chattering, like buzzing hornets around the black coach, figuring it out for themselves, telling each other exactly what they wanted to hear about the prison wagon.

Thompson glanced over his shoulder. To hell with them. He had plenty to think about without worrying about hicks whose biggest excitement in a month was the passing through of the prison coach.

He gazed north a moment into the treeless country, more than faintly apprehensive. The line of buildings, saloon, hotel, livery stable and unpainted church ended abruptly. Beyond it was the wastes, flat, open, empty, and dangerous.

Worse than that, they were ten miles south of Socorro, the next stop, and this was Landrews' home bailiwick. If Landrews was going to try to get free, it had to break soon. If he hoped to beat the hangman's noose awaiting him at Santa Fe, he had to move, and fast. Thompson had studied Landrews' face. He had no doubt it was coming. His only hope was to stay on top of it, to see it coming. And for sure, it was just a matter of figuring when and how. . . .

Thompson emerged from the outhouse, glanced both ways, holding his gun across his chest, his hand on the trigger. He dragged his hands through a horse-trough, shook them dry and walked into the saloon from the back door.

Most of the customers were in the street around the stage. Three men played cards at a table near the window, their drinks in front of them. A whisky sot was slumped over the bar at the far end. The bartender was craning his neck, staring across the batwings toward the street. All of the men except the sot glanced up at Thompson when he came in.

"Give me a beer," Thompson said. "Don't know why. It cools me off for five minutes, and then I sweat it out soon as I get back in there."

The bartender shoved the beer toward him. "That the Landrews fellow you got in there?"

Thompson drank his beer, didn't reply. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Any strangers hanging around town in the last couple days?"

"Ain't noticed none" the bartender said. "Likely if anybody come in town, they'd come here. Only place to get a drink south of Socorro. That really Landrews out there?"

"Anybody figures to jump us better think again." Thompson finished his beer, set his mug down hard on the bar.

"I've knowed the Landrews boy a long time," the bartender said, wiping at a damp spot with his rag. "He stops in when he's through here. He used to, I mean. If you figure he's part of a gang or something, you're wrong. He's just a young guy trying to make it with a ranch. I figure he's got nobody to help him now—except his wife. She ain't going to try to jump you guys."

"You sound like you favor this guy Landrews," Thompson said.

"He's a good boy. I'm right sorry for him, if that's what you mean."

"You save your pity. These killers are like mad dogs. They get like mad dogs."

The fresh team had been backed into the traces, hitched, the lines straightened up across the whiffletree and shield, the water barrel was refilled, when Ed Blackbury returned from his break in the bar and outhouse.

"Quiet," Blackbury said. "Everything seems pretty quiet."

"Yeah."

Thompson watched Lucas Cross and Necomber climb stiffly up to the boot. He moved the people back who crowded forward, trying to sneak a look inside the black coach when Blackbury opened the door for him.

Blackbury said, "Wait a minute, Hal."

Thompson stiffened, jerking his head around. "What's the matter now?"

"No. Nothing wrong," Blackbury said. "It's about time to pull out. You reckon we best give Landrews a break here?"

"What you talking about?"

"You want we should both walk Landrews back to the outhouse, Hal?"

Thompson shook his head. He glanced at the staring crowd, at the men in the bar window. He moved his gaze across the upper windows at the hotel, the dusty curtains billowing out. He was taking no chances on a sniper up there in one of those rooms.

"We ought to give him his break," Blackbury said. "It's a long rough ride to Socorro."

"Hell with him. I ain't no damn wet nurse." He gazed at Landrews in the breathless, shadowed depth of the cab. "You'd like us to walk you back there and let some of your friends jump us, wouldn't you, Landrews?"

Landrews did not speak, but he did not need to. His unblinking gaze spat in the bailiff's eyes.

Thompson laughed at him, gripping the gun tighter in his sweating fist.

"I ain't making it easier for you, killer," Thompson said. "I got the word for you. You make a break, Landrews, it's going to be the hard way."

Landrews held his gaze a moment and then he laughed, a sharp bitter sound of contempt.

Thompson fell into his seat, shifting his shoulders and bringing the gun up, fixed on Landrews' solar plexus. Landrews' laughter pushed Thompson to the limit be-

cause a man looking for trouble and getting only contempt feels ready to erupt inside.

"Get in, let's go." Thompson spoke to Blackbury, not taking his gaze from Landrews. "Let the con suffer. If his kidneys are busting, it'll give him something to think about."

Landrews closed his eyes tightly as the black coach lurched forward. He had to shut Thompson out of his brain. Rage and hatred were suffocating him worse than the dust, and were clogging up his mind. He had to keep it clear. He had to think, had to figure where they were on the Old Trail.

He felt the coach tilt, going over the rise north of San Antonio. It gave him a grim pleasure to think both the deputies were so dull-headed they thought his knowing where they were on the Old Trail was a trick. He had traveled this road many times in the past eight years. He figured the speed of the horses, and placed in his mind sharp turns and steep declines, and rough lava patches that were unlike any other. It was a kind of seeing, all right.

Thompson was right about one thing. He had done a lot of thinking since they pulled out of Las Cruces. He had thought many things, all of them bitter, all of them full of hurt.

Lupe. . . .

It was worst of all when he thought about her. Lupe Marguerita Dolores Delgado Landrews. What a hellish lengthy moniker for such a little girl. But she could carry it, she toted it light and easy, the way she wore those Spanish combs, and mantillas, and the lace shawls that belonged to her grandmother Onate y Escalante.

He hadn't even seen her in a month, and needed to see her. He needed it in his guts and his loins and in his eyes. He needed to look on something that could eat through the bitterness that was like a poison. Oh, hell, Lupe, how I need you.

His mouth twisted. It was a hell of a thing. A man longed for his wife, but when he considered it, he thought

how badly he needed her, her arms and her mouth and her body. God, how must she need him? Alone up there, and friendless. She hadn't even come to his trial in Las Cruces because they had warned him a Mex wife wouldn't help him any with a gringo jury.

Landrews clenched his eyes shut tighter against the burning in them. God knew he had failed her, from the first. Falling in love with her. That had been a kind of failing her, and he had compounded that felony ever since.

First, there was the matter of wanting to take her east to Virginia to meet his parents. He wrote to them before he married Lupe, bursting with a kind of love he hadn't even known existed. Then came the letter from his parents. Maybe it would be best to postpone the trip—what they meant was, don't come at all. You live in a wild land out there, and you've married some girl quite at home in that place, but she would be unhappy here among your old friends. And that translated into, *his parents would be unhappy to have her in the house.*

It was a long time before he could credit it, hard to believe they'd even write such a letter. That was three years ago, and in three years, he unwillingly saw that they were thinking about Lupe in a way; they could tell from his letters how crazy in love he was; they didn't want her hurt. Sometimes they wrote, but he never answered their letters any more. No matter what else, they had hurt Lupe, without even meaning to. It was like a stone in his boot. He didn't hate the stone but he couldn't forget it, unless he threw it out, got rid of it. He was through with everything back home.

Then there was bringing Lupe to the adobe Texas-style house on his place in the foothills. They only had a few neighbors, none close—Charlie Tyler's big ranch was ten miles north on the Rio Salado—but nobody wanted a Mexican woman as a friend. Let them stay among their own kind, that's what the *good people* around Socorro said.

You love somebody enough, you can really hurt them.

There was just enough grass to keep a few hundred head of scrawny range cattle alive, but a drought took care of them.

They were dying off and the only chance to survive was to sell them off to somebody for feeders. That was when Charlie Tyler told him there was a Mexican ranch owner who would buy cattle in Las Cruces for a drive across the border. The Mexicans were having their woes with hoof-and-mouth disease. They needed meat for butchering. They needed it bad and fast.

He rounded up what cattle he had, and any strays he could scare out of the mesquite. Face it, a man got desperate when there was no water, no sign of water, and his wife was going hungry. He didn't ask the cattle any questions when he found them, and he made no effort to read anything on their hides they didn't call to his attention.

It was a long, hellish drive south. They lost a ruinous string of cattle, even though they hugged the Rio Grande, taking water anywhere they found it. His cattle were swallowed up in Charlie Tyler's big drive.

His first trouble with Tyler came in the cattle pens at Las Cruces. He had worked like a cowhand, with Tyler's men and the others, and he began to see that Tyler was going to treat him like one, though he had understood they were partners—on an unequal basis, sure, but sharing on the tally they made at the start of the drive.

Tyler stared at him as if he were crazy. He didn't remember any such tally; he was willing to count the beef bearing a Landrews brand and pay him for that, less expenses.

Looking back now, Landrews knew this was when he was first pushed past endurance. Tyler had insisted the Mexican grandee was in a rush for beef, there had been no time for branding—a tally and that was all. The tally was entered in Tyler's book, but according to Tyler most of the cattle lost along the trail had been Landrews stock, scrawny, already weakened by thirst, they had dropped along the way.

Only this wasn't true. It was partly true, but Tyler cattle had fallen, too. But now that they were in Las Cruces

anything not bearing a Landrews brand suddenly became Tyler cattle, and this didn't make even pretty fair sense. He couldn't justify his rounding them up, but Tyler had known about it and no matter what anybody said, it was common practice in that place and that time, with Tyler as much or more than his neighbors. Thirst and loss make desperate men, and it was a fight to stay alive.

Inwardly raging, Landrews had wanted to clear out of Las Cruces, start back home. But there was a hitch. The grandee paid with a draft on a Mexico City bank.

"There'll be a wait, Evan," Tyler said. "The draft has to clear the bank before they can pay us. I'm sending my boys on back north to Socorro. No sense both of us waiting down here. I know you're in a fever to get back to your little señorita, so why don't you let me pay you off when I get back to Socorro?"

Landrews shook his head. Tyler hadn't lied, he was troubled about Lupe, but they'd gotten an Indian woman in to stay with her. "I'll wait with you," he told Tyler.

The rancher shrugged. "Just that much more expense on you, hombre. That's all I'm thinking about."

"Maybe we can parley this thing while we're waiting," Landrews said. "I figure you owe me for about two hundred head more cattle than you got down—"

"No sense talking about that any more, Landrews. I been fair with you. You're getting all that's coming to you. That's all you're getting."

Landrews stirred inside the breathless coach now, remembering. Tyler was a thief, but he couldn't prove it, and there was nothing he could see to do about it.

He waited at the hotel in Las Cruces with Tyler until the bank paid the draft in gold. There wasn't much sense in it. Landrews stayed gut sick because he knew he was ruined. He had gone into this drive with Tyler and Tyler had cheated him so badly that he was lost. . . . He could buy a few head of cattle, but there was nothing left over for food, a new and deeper well, anything they needed, not even a pretty tortoise-shell comb as a take-home present for Lupe.

He and Tyler had some pretty loud verbal battles over

that tally. He had watched Tyler make an entry in his book, but there was no trace of it now. By the third day he had lost control of his temper and he called Tyler vile names, and people stared at them. When the bank paid, Tyler gave him an extra fifty dollars.

Landrews was taut with outrage, but he took the money.

"I know you're pretty riled at me, Evan, and you think I've hooked you," Tyler said, smiling. "But I'd appreciate it if you rode back north with me. Thanks to your calling me every kind of dirty name, everybody south of Rincon knows I'm toting a wad of gold—and it's a lonely ride north."

Evan agreed and they started on the silent ride home.

Looking back, it seemed strange that Tyler should be so nervous about road agents because they were jumped when they made night camp the first night out of Las Cruces. They were on the trail between Fort Selden and Rincon where the Rio winds through the Sierra Las Uvas.

The road agent was alone, and he must have been sneakier than any coyote. Landrews woke up with a pistol in his throat and Tyler sprawled out on his back, his gun gone.

Tyler was shaking all over. "Don't do nothing loco, Evan. For God's sake, the guy's wild, he'll kill us."

Landrews stared at Tyler's white face for a moment, but he was already coming upward toward the gun biting into his throat.

"He'll kill you! He'll kill us! He'll kill you!" Tyler kept yelling it, as yellow as he was crooked and that meant he was shaking all over. But all Landrews could think was that this man might as well kill him as take the little stake he'd gotten from Tyler.

He didn't make it far. The road agent brought the gun up, using it as a club, laying it across Landrews' temples as he moved into it.

Pain splashed through him, paralyzing him. The gunman hit him again, and he woke up with Tyler bathing his face with a wet bandana.

"Thank God," Tyler said. "I thought he'd killed you."

When Landrews' head was clear enough so he could think at all, he shoved upward, staring at Tyler, his face gray.

"What's the matter with you, Tyler? Why didn't you go after him?"

Tyler stayed haunched on his knees, his sun-leathered face taut. "I don't do fool things, boy. I ain't wild like you—"

"That's every cent we got. Our cattle. Everything—"

"We're alive, boy. We got that to be thankful for."

"You sit around being thankful for it. I ain't got a chance to stay alive without that money."

He jerked free of Tyler's hand on his arm, ran to where they'd picketed their mounts. He was tightening the cinches on his saddle when Tyler walked up behind him.

"What rash thing you plan to do now, boy? Nobody knows better than you how big and wild this country is. You got no chance to find him in this dark."

Landrews spun around, sweating. "You just going to let him ride away with everything we got?"

Tyler's voice was level. "I figure as long as I'm alive, boy, I can make more money."

They stared at each other a moment in the star-lit desert night. Then Landrews cursed, swung up in his saddle.

"Where you going?" Tyler said.

"What the hell is it to you? We ain't got no money to guard any more, so I can't see the sense in you and me riding any further together."

Lupe held him in her arms, and her warm gentle voice tried to console him, but he could not be consoled. There was a feeling of wrongness about the whole business that kept him sweated, fevered.

Finally when something had to be done to get them through the next few months alive, he hitched up the flat-bed wagon and Lupe drove it into Socorro. He rode be-

side her, trying to think what he would say to the bankers in there. Word had come out from Sheriff Barr Kingan that the bank had made a loan to Charlie Tyler. But Landrews knew this didn't mean they were going to lend him anything.

He never got to the bank.

It was as if riding into Socorro was plunging headlong into a nightmare, a waking terror that never ended from that moment.

Lupe pulled the wagon into the walk before the general store. Evan winked at her and said he'd meet her there with the money he was picking up from the bank. She threw him a kiss—and onlookers shook their heads, shocked at such behavior in public, the kind of thing a woman from the saloon might do—or a Mexican wife.

Landrews swung down from his horse and tied the reins over the leather-slicked hitch-rail. He stepped up on the walk just as a man came striding out of the saloon, laughing about something and talking over his shoulder.

Landrews stopped as if poled.

The man turned toward the street as the batwings swung together behind him. His gaze struck against Landrews, moved on, and then jerked back. His eyes widened, and his face showed gray under its deep burn.

He looked both ways along the quiet, sun-struck street. He took a quick glance toward the saloon, changed his mind.

"Wait a minute there," Landrews said.

The man was already moving. Landrews had learned how swiftly he could move the night he was robbed on the trail north of Las Cruces.

The man took long strides, going away from Landrews without seeming to be running.

"Hold it!" Landrews' voice bawled the words. The whole town was struck numb at his yell. Vaguely he was aware of Barr Kingan's coming out of the sheriff's office down the street. Lupe stood up in the wagon, her hand pressed to her throat, her gaze fixed on him.

The man made it all the way down the steps from the

saloon stoop to the boardwalk and almost across it. Evan went after him.

Evan dove as the road agent snagged looped reins of his horse at the railing. All around them people were running out into the street, yelling. The batwings fell wide and men spilled out.

Evan caught the thief hard and they sprawled into the street between the side-stepping horses.

The agent's spurs ripped at Evan's legs, but he didn't even feel it. The man was already getting to his feet, trying to run. His fist exploded in Landrews' face, but Evan didn't feel that, either.

He heard somebody yelling his name from the saloon stoop, but nothing stopped him. He saw the road agent only through an occluding haze of red rage, but he chopped at what he saw, beat at it, and felt it wavering and then sagging before him.

Four men caught him and held him, and it took all of them to do it. He saw the road agent scrambling away, getting to his feet, grabbing at his horse.

Yelling, Landrews fought free and leaped toward the thief. But the man lunged into his saddle and was moving on the street, going south out of town when the men bore Evan to the ground again. All through this he was aware of someone's shouting his name, and when the dust cleared he saw it was Charlie Tyler and that Tyler had come running from the saloon when the fight started.

"He's getting away!" Landrews raged. "Stop him!"

He heard Barr Kingan shout at the rider to stop, but the man on the horse didn't even slow down. Kingan fired one shot over his head, but this seemed only to spur the horse.

"Take it easy, Landrews!" Tyler said. "What in hell ails you?"

"You ought to know if anybody does!" Landrews said. "That's the gent that robbed us. You know it. You saw him just as good as I did."

Tyler's smile was puzzled, and his quiet voice seemed worried about Landrews' sanity. "Why you think my boys jumped you, Evan? At my orders? That poor

jasper you was trying to kill was Chip Harden—the poor son works for me, or did until you scared him half to death.”

Landrews stared at Tyler. “You’re lying,” he said. “That man jumped us at night—”

“At night, yes,” Tyler said in his quiet voice. “And I was scared, and you got slugged pretty fast. You seen poor ole Chip around somewhere, and you go wild. Wild. You plan to jump every man you see?”

Landrews held Tyler’s gaze a moment, and then he shrugged free of the restraining hands on him. “I ain’t got time to call you anything more than a thieving son-of-a-bitch right now, Tyler. But I’ll get back to you.”

Landrews shoved his way through the crowd. He heard Tyler’s voice behind him. “I know you’re bad upset, Evan, and you’re reckless and rash, so I’m overlooking your words this time.”

Landrews spun around. “Don’t overlook anything, Tyler! You want to settle it, you reach. Now. Only you make it fast. I mean to catch this man before he gets away. . . . All of a sudden I don’t doubt he works for you, but I’m still going to get him.”

At that moment, Barr Kingan put his thick-bodied frame between them. Of medium build, freckled, his lips sun-dried like raisins, the sheriff spoke in a level tone, but without any uncertainty in it. “You people break it up. Tyler, I figure you men were drinking in the saloon, and you ought to get back to it. Everybody in town knows what kind of feeling there is between you and Landrews since that cattle drive, and ain’t no sense you pushing it.”

“Me?” Tyler straightened. “Any bad feeling is all on the side of that reckless boy there. All I done was try to keep him from killing one of my cowhands.”

Barr nodded. “Fine. You done a fine job. Now get on back in the saloon, or wherever you plan to go, or I’ll lock you two up until you cool off.”

When Kingan turned, Evan was already at his horse. Evan swung into the saddle, stared at Lupe in the wagon a moment.

"Trust me, Lupe," he said, his face gray.

"*Si.*" She trusted him. It was in her face and eyes, she believed him. She knew that the man riding away in panic had stolen from Evan because she saw it was true in her husband's anguished gaze.

"I got to bring him back here," Evan said to her. He was aware of the faces of the people around them, the Tyler riders, the townsfolks, friends of his for a long time. It was not easy for them to trust him when a big rancher like Charlie Tyler called him liar. Evan drew a deep breath, his gaze on Lupe's troubled face. "If he didn't rob me, he'll come quiet."

"*Si.*"

He gazed on her face again and then pulled his mount around. There was no doubt in his mind, the look, the build, the face that had gazed into his that night on the trail. This was the man—it was in the guilty, frantic light of his eyes, the way he turned tail and ran.

Barr Kingan reached up a freckled hand and caught the horse's headstall, halting Landrews. The sheriff's face was grim, worried.

"Hold it, Evan."

"Let me go, Barr."

"You do some fool thing, Evan, ain't no way any of us can help you."

Evan heard the murmurs, the voices of the onlookers, seconding the sheriff's warning counsel. Evan shook his head. "I don't ask you to help, Barr. None of you. I just ask you to get out of my way—"

"I'm trying to help you!" Barr's voice cracked like a bullwhip in the sun-grayed street.

Evan nodded, his whole body taut, his thoughts straining ahead to that trail south out of town. He stared down at the sheriff, his cheeks gray. "You want to help me, Barr, you see that Lupe gets home all right. I'm going to bring that fellow back. He robbed us, and Tyler knows it. He's lying and I'm going to prove he's lying."

There was eternal barren land between Socorro and

Las Cruces. Evan picked up Chip Harden's trail outside of town, and he kept hot on it.

He didn't give Harden time to rest. As he rode, or ran along beside his horse to spell him, Evan thought hard, trying to see how Harden could be innocent, how he could be wrong. He knew better. Nothing else added up.

Harden was running now like a man sick with fear.

The first thing Evan learned was that Harden was new to the area. He didn't know the land as Evan did. Harden would get off the Old Spanish Trail, looking for food or water, or trying to find a slate slide where his fagged mount would leave no traces for Evan to find, but he kept returning to it.

One night Evan dismounted, ground tied his horse and stole forward to the brink of a small rise overlooking a wash less than a mile off the trail.

He sprawled flat on the ground, searching in the gray light of the stars. Harden was whipped. The running man hadn't stopped for anything except water. He bought food from the people he encountered, Indians in a hogan, a prospector, a supply wagon, but he gulped down the meals as he rode.

Harden had made a wide trail around the army outpost. Evan told himself this was further proof that Harden was a guilty man. He trusted nothing except flight to save him from Evan's outraged justice.

Evan caught his breath. Chip Harden was down there in that draw, sprawled out face down on his blanket.

Evan drew his gun from his holster, let himself over the side of the rock. A dislodged pebble flew from his boot, struck a rock. Evan landed like a cat on a ledge, but the small stone had wakened Harden. He saw the man lunge upward, grabbing his blanket.

Harden hurtled himself into the saddle. He had not even dared to remove the harness from his horse while he slept. He rode away, clinging to the neck of the animal, not even looking back, fleeing like a man running from his own nightmares.

Later that day, Evan saw that Harden's mount had come up lame.

His own horse was trembling with weariness, but Evan urged him faster. He rode over a knoll and looked ahead to Dona Ana, a settlement just north of Las Cruces. He could see the church, the livery stable, the few adobe huts.

Evan came downslope fast. Harden rode out of the livery stable on a fresh mount as Evan rode into the village limits. A dog barked, a rooster ran, fluttering and squawking from the road.

In the shadows of cottonwoods, from the opened doors of the hogans, dark faces watched intently and yet with complete detachment.

"Hold it, Harden," Evan said.

Harden hesitated, clinging to the reins, deciding whether to run or fight. He made up his mind, twisting in the saddle. He went for his gun.

"Don't do it!" Evan warned. "I don't want to kill you, Harden, I—"

Harden's gun came up. They were near enough that Evan could see the wildness in Harden's dust-masked face. The man was sleepless, wild with fear, driven. He was unable to think anything any more except that Landrews was tailing him and there was only one way left to stop him. Harden pressed the trigger, firing.

The village echoed with the sound of the gunfire and the quiet that followed was stunned silence. The dogs no longer barked. The people watching from the shade leaned forward, but they did not speak.

Harden's bullet was wild because Harden was fatigued, half-crazy with weariness and fear. He was trembling and he missed.

Evan drew, still yelling at Harden not to try it again. Evan sat in the saddle and held his Colt .45 with both hands to steady it. He wanted to hit Harden high, in the shoulder if he had to shoot him to stop him. All he could think was that he had to stop him.

Harden's frightened horse, unused to its rider, and

spooked by the gunfire, and crazed by Harden's frantic spurs, reared suddenly, squealing.

At that moment Evan pressed the trigger.

Evan went sick, seeing Harden blasted from his saddle, the horse braying and pitching.

Until this moment everything had moved with frightening speed, as if racing toward evil, the long days on the trail, the uneasy night, the running, the tracking, bringing them to this place. And suddenly, it was all slowed, everything happening with frozen slowness.

Harden toppled free from the saddle. One of his boots caught in his stirrup for a moment, then it was jerked free and he struck the ground on his face and shoulder, sprawling there. He didn't move. The horse bucked, pitched, screaming, kicking as it made a run back through the wide livery stable doors.

Evan didn't move. His gaze was riveted on the body of the man in the dusty street.

At last he lifted his head and stared north across the sun-bleached land. A little while ago he had been there, home. Somehow now he felt icily that it was too far, that he could not make it again.

It seemed to him that this chase had ended the only way it could. Everything in his life had piled rages in him until it had to end like this, everything he was, everything that had happened to him had brought him to this place, to this moment, to the violent slaying of a man he didn't even know well enough to hate.

Sitting there in his saddle, he shuddered. He had the fearful feeling that though Chip Harden was the road agent who had jumped him and Tyler on the trail that night, still Harden was the wrong man to have confronted and killed, and that the man responsible for all this walked free up there in the Socorro country, a respected rancher borrowing money from banks and living high on a forty mile spread on the Rio Salado. Tyler.

Evan swallowed back the bile that gushed up hot into his throat.

Three men moved warily forward, guns drawn. They

surrounded Evan's horse and one of them caught its halter.

A rail-thin man with a badge on his weathered vest stared up at Evan. He said, "I'm the marshal here. That man is dead. You're under arrest. I warn you to come easy. We'll have to take you into the jail at Las Cruces."

The trial date was set, and it seemed to Evan that events hurtled swiftly again, the way they always seemed to hurry toward tragedy.

He was brought between two armed bailiffs into the Dona Ana County courthouse at Las Cruces before Judge Robert John Stinson. A local lawyer had been appointed by the court to defend Evan, but there wasn't much to say. Ten witnesses stated that they had seen Landrews kill Chip Harden in the street at Dona Ana. Under cross-examination some agreed that Harden had drawn his gun first and fired first, but all insisted that Harden had come into town on a lame horse and that Landrews had followed, riding hard after him in the heat, his horse sweated. All agreed that Landrews' gun was in his hand when he called out to Harden, warning him to stop. This was true, and unshakable, they all swore.

Charlie Tyler appeared in Las Cruces on a subpoena.

He visited the hotel where he had stayed, waiting for the Mexican cattle-buyer. He talked loudly in the bar, repeating what he had said in the street at Socorro. He had tried to talk some sense into Landrews' head, but the young rancher was deranged with worry, reckless, and beyond listening to anybody.

Charlie came into the Las Cruces jail that first night he hit town.

"I want you to know I got no personal hatred for you," Tyler said, "no matter what you done to one of my men."

Evan stared at him, thinking Tyler was talking hypocritical lies for the benefit of the onlookers.

"I brought something for you, my boy," Tyler said. He

unwrapped fresh clothing, a bundle of lovingly packed shirts and socks, levis starched and ironed from Landrews' wife.

Evan tried to thank him, but the words just wouldn't come out.

Tyler testified at the trial. First, Chip Harden worked for him on his ranch at the Rio Salada. He had told Evan this in Socorro. The whole town of Las Cruces remembered the violent way Evan had fought with Tyler while they awaited the payment of the bank draft.

"I hate to say this, your honor," Tyler said to Judge Stinson. "But it looks to me that poor old Evan was driven out of his mind by his losses—first on the ranch he owns where drought almost wiped him out. Then on the trail when most of his herd, trying to keep up with my cattle in the drive, fell dead on the way. He accused me of stealing from him. Looks to me like the boy was out of his mind with worry, and somebody just had to pay for his losses. I just regret it had to be one of my boys. Chip was a good man, sober and hard-working."

Evan's lawyer asked Tyler why, in his opinion, Harden had run when Evan jumped him, and kept running when Evan followed him.

"I can only give you my opinion, sir," Tyler said. "I think poor Chip saw the insanity in Evan's face—a wildness brought there by his losses and his worry, and his feeling that people were shunning him because he married a Mexican girl—all them things added up so Evan wasn't a reasonable man, and I think Chip was scared, too scared to think—he just ran scared and kept running—to his death in Dona Ana. You asked me, and that's what I think."

It was what the jury thought, too.

And here he was now, in the hearse-black prison coach, racing toward a prison cell and a hang-rope at Santa Fe. There was no hope, no chance for a pardon. His doom had been sealed at Las Cruces.

He closed his eyes tightly, feeling the sweat burn them. When he opened his eyes, his gaze was fixed on the

shackles at his wrist. He was chained and his hands were useless.

He stirred, seeing the way Thompson went tense at every movement, the way Thompson's finger stayed crooked on the rifle trigger.

But he couldn't think about these shackles, or his chained hands, or Thompson's gun. He could only think about Lupe, alone on that ranch with the Indian woman in a hostile country. Bad enough she had been a Mexican married to a white man. Now she was the wife of a convicted killer. His land up there wasn't much, but it was more than some greedy men owned, and excuse enough for them to come in the night and run her out. God knew he had failed her before, but now he had gone away and left her in peril.

This coach was racing him through the country he had longed to call home. Out there were two people he wanted to find. He thought of Lupe with savage longing, and of Tyler with unbridled hatred.

It was clear to him now, and it had been clear before he came upon Chip Harden in the street at Dona Ana. Chip had been hired by Tyler to jump them on that trail. Tyler hadn't meant to let him get home with any money, not from the first. Why give anything to a man who is broke already, and besides is married to a Mexican woman?

Landrews felt something twist in his solar plexus at the thought of the way Tyler must be laughing. He had all the money from the sale of the cattle. A few dollars paid to Chip Harden, and that was all the expense. A loan at the Socorro Bank to make it look good, and he was fixed to ride out a drought, or anything else.

Landrews moaned aloud, involuntarily, twisting in the breathless cab.

Thompson's voice lashed at him. "Take it easy, mister. You want a bullet in your gut?"

Evan felt the coach tilt, starting a long climb to a plateau of lava. He held his breath, glancing at Blackbury, seeing him dozing.

The horses slowed, whether they wanted to or not. The hill was steep, the lava-scarred surface was pitted, pocked and spiked. The coach bounced and they could hear Ne-comber swearing and Cross yelling at his team.

Still, Landrews waited, sweat standing on his face, his eyes closed.

Suddenly the whole coach jolted, tilted, and almost went on its side.

As the coach leaned, Landrews came forward. Thompson was fighting for his balance, but saw him coming.

Thompson brought the gun forward. But he was under Evan's shackled hands, and Evans thrust them upward, slapping the metal into Thompson's jaw with all the strength in his arms.

Thompson sagged, releasing the gun. It fell between them, striking the floor.

Evan heard Blackbury cry out. Blackbury was falling into him, the coach still riding at a forty-degree angle on the lava slide, horses squealing, the men on the boot yelling, whip cracking.

Evan was on his feet, braced against the lower door as Blackbury came toward him, fighting for his gun. He didn't make it.

Blackbury toppled into Evan, and Evan brought the shackles down upon him. He drove Blackbury to the floor and the deputy sprawled there, inert. Feverish with haste because this whole thing had to be accomplished before the coach reached the summit of the plateau, Evan wasted a moment checking Blackbury. He was unconscious.

Evan took his gun, pushed it under his belt. From Thompson, he took the keys. He had watched Thompson carefully so he knew the key that fit the padlock on the door. He couldn't waste time hunting it.

He didn't bother looking for a key to his wrist shackles. They had told him in Las Cruces. The key that unlocked those handcuffs awaited him at the state prison in Santa Fe.

He held the keys with both hands, pushed one of them into the padlock, turned it, the lock falling open.

The coach slowed, climbing, still tilted precariously.

Evan took Thompson's rifle, carefully turned the handle so the door opened a few inches.

He waited another moment, then moved over Black-bury's immobile form to the doorway. He pushed himself into the opening, waited until the coach slowed, then he stepped out, running down hill, slamming the door behind him. The sound the door made was lost in the rumble and thunder of the bouncing, tilting coach.

Landrews crouched low, running, and he did not look back as the coach reached the crest and picked up speed again, going over it.

II

Sheriff Barr Kingan walked into the Oasis Saloon, finding the place crowded and loud though it was forenoon. The first name he heard, shouted so the speaker could make himself heard over the shouting, was Evan Landrews.

Kingan paused a few feet inside the batwings, listening. He sat alone at a stained table, watching the shouting men along the bar. For the present everything else the Oasis had to offer was forgotten in the talk about Landrews and his sensational escape from the escape-proof prison van on the Old Trail.

Barr glanced about. The Oasis was the hub of the town, and it had plenty of excitement to offer—for the cowhand coming in with his forty dollars at the end of a dry month, for a gent looking for a friendly game of poker. Narrow plank stairs at the rear led upward to the rooms where a man could have a bath or a woman, or both. Barr's mouth pulled into a wry grin, and he sighed. A home away from home.

He winced, thinking about Lottie's nagging voice accusing him of spending more time at the Oasis than he did in his office or his home. He sighed again, not bothering to deny it at the moment.

The voices of the shouting men battered at him:

"They say Landrews made his break with his wrists manacled!"

"He could do it!"

"He could do it if anybody could—"

"I always said, you could kill Evan Landrews, but it'd take you a week, working at it full-time—"

"Then he might not be dead, just too disgusted to get up."

"Took two armed guards, and him with his hands in cuffs!"

"Wham! He got one under his chin. You seen Hal Thompson's chin? It's swole up like a sow, and blue as an overage hooker!"

"It's what I been looking for Landrews to do, all along."

"I wondered how long he'd let 'em keep him in that jail."

"Would you let 'em keep *you* in jail if you had a little Mexican tamale like he's got, waiting in a warm bed?"

"No man!"

"No, sir, man!"

"I say amen to that. A thing like that can make a peaceable man kind of desperate."

"That was him, one desperate hombre!"

The crowd stopped laughing at itself, and at its dreams about what made Landrews break. A tall, lean wholesaler said, "I laid bets all along they'd never get him to Santa Fe—"

"They ain't got him there yet."

"And they won't. Not alive, they won't—"

"I'll take bets on that, and you name your own odds."

A rider from Tyler's Rio Salada ranch shook his head, staring at the others. "The hell, what ails you people? This Landrews, is he ten feet tall or something?"

"He's big enough—"

"Sure, all of a sudden he's a big man because he pulled a break. Sure, he pulled a sharp trick, and he jumped out and ran—into the desert on foot. What the devil is so smart about that?"

"He's free—"

"He took care of a couple tough bailiffs, and he's free—"

"He won't get far, wearing those irons," the Rio Salada man said.

"You don't know Landrews—"

"I know that desert. I know how helpless a man is that can't use his hands. You ever had your hands tied so you can't use 'em—?"

"My wife keeps my hands that way—"

"—without his hands a man is gone, helpless. Like a turtle on its back. I say Landrews won't last two days. They'll get him, and they'll put him in irons and they'll take him on to Santa Fe to that hang rope—"

"Not Landrews."

The men growled, some of the pleasure dampened by this realistic picture the Rio Salada man forced them to see.

Another man pushed forward. "Trouble with you is, mister, you don't know Evan Landrews. I grant an ordinary gent might get thirsty and fed up in that waste pretty quick—"

"But not Landrews. He broke free meaning to stay free."

The small man nodded. "Landrews is a young fellow that makes up his mind to something, he's like a bulldog. Just like a bulldog. You might shake him loose, but you're going to kill him to do it."

"I say amen to that. When he bought that land out there, not one of us would have give a dime for his chance to raise cattle. He raised himself some—and he stuck it out. Of course the drought hurt him, but it hurt us all. You can't blame him for what the drought done to him—"

"And drought and all, he was still trying to make a go of it when this trouble hit. No, sir, I just say you don't reckon on the kind of gent Evan Landrews is."

The rider shook his head, unsmiling, logic all with him. His voice was lower than the others because he didn't need sound to put fury into the truth he spoke. "I say he can't last out in that wild country with his hands manacled. How about that, Sheriff?"

The rider turned, leaning on his elbows upon the bar, gazing at Barr Kingan. Barr stirred himself, getting up from the chair. Some of these men were aware of his presence for the first time, and he saw they waited for the

weight of his views to deflate the logical cowhand from Tyler's place.

Barr walked forward to the bar in the waiting silence, seeing the faces of these voters, all of whom he knew and had known for a long time. He saw in their faces that they didn't want to believe that Landrews could be captured once he'd broken free against incredible odds.

"I don't know," was all that Barr said.

Someone laughed. "Old honest Barr Kingan. First politician I ever saw that was so honest he'd admit he didn't know the answer—to anything! I always figured politicians had the answers to everything, Barr!"

"Yeah. He's a card. Even more honest than he has to be."

Barr grinned. "What's that got to do with it? You people asked me if Evan Landrews would last out there in the Magdalenas and I said I didn't know—"

"You know the land—"

"You've chased down prisoners that got away out there—"

"Yeah," the Rio Salada man said, "and you know what a man's up against when he's running, his hands shackled in front of him—"

"That land's tough," Barr agreed. "Even for a man that can use both hands free."

"That's what I said." The rider laughed in triumph.

Another man said, "We're talking about Landrews—and what he can do, once he sets his mind to it."

"No different," the rider said. "Right, Sheriff?"

"Might take a little longer," Barr said. "But in the long run, I got to agree, not much difference."

"Oh, come on now, Barr. You know Evan better than that—"

"Seems to me you're his best friend—"

"We were friends," Barr admitted.

There was a brief silence and someone asked, "you're going after him, ain't you, Barr?"

Barr nodded. He moved his gaze across their faces, carefully keeping his own face expressionless. He nodded

at last. "That's right. I'm looking right now for men to swear in on my posse."

"He's armed, ain't he, Barr?"

Barr nodded again. "I heard so. According to the bailiffs that was transporting him, he got away with a Colt .45 and a Winchester."

A man laughed. "And that's the guy that won't last out there!"

Another snorted in derision. "Armed. Sure. And handcuffed wrists. What good's a gun to him? Count me in, Sheriff."

An older man said, "You just don't know Landrews, mister."

"I know guns, and how hard they are to use when you got two good hands. Right, Sheriff?"

Barr said, "I don't want you thinking this is some sort of picnic I'm inviting you on."

"I don't! But I've hunted strays out there. You can die of thirst. You can die of hunger."

"If there's any way to stay alive out there, Landrews will find it," somebody said, almost defiantly.

The rider scowled. "What kind of talk is that? What sort of galoot is this Landrews, Sheriff?"

"Just an hombre like you," Barr said. He shook his head. "Like any of us. Only he's in bad trouble. I reckon that's about the only difference."

The rider laughed again. "And he's cuffed?"

"Yes, he's cuffed," Barr said.

"Count me in."

Barr Kingan knocked on the door at Room 8 in the Socorro Hotel. The door was opened immediately and Charlie Tyler said, "Come on in, Sheriff."

"You sent word you wanted to talk to me?"

"That's right." Charlie Tyler nodded. He closed the door, locked it and Kingan waited, watching him.

Tyler stood a head taller than the sheriff, six-feet three and with the leanness of an animal that's always running. Like a predatory animal, the sheriff saw him, a coyote, a lynx, a timber wolf. Kingan knew Tyler lived well on the

Rio Salado, put away steaks for breakfast and barbecued sides of beef on week-day suppers, but he stayed lean, even though he carried that well-fed look about his sharp-featured face and taut mouth.

Looking at Tyler now as habit had taught Kingan to study every man, he saw the indented line between his black brows, the habitual squinting of blue eyes, the fuzz visible in his nostrils.

Tyler gave him one of his easy smiles. "I'd have come over to your office, Barr—"

"That's all right."

"No. I know you're busy. But I figured you and me ought to have a private little talk."

"All right."

"And well, I knew how your place is busy with men coming in to join your posse."

"Yes. We've had about ten men from your ranch."

"I sent them. I want you to know you can count on my co-operation, Sheriff. All down the line. That's one thing I wanted to talk to you about. You can count on me."

"Fine. I appreciate you pulling your men in and letting them ride with me. I won't keep them no longer than I have to."

"That's all right. We're in this thing until Landrews is run down. Me and my boys."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I'm riding with you, too. I mean to come over and get sworn in. I want it right and proper. I want to be sworn in."

"You must have a lot to do without riding on a posse."

Tyler caught his breath. "Are you saying you don't want me along, Barr?"

"No. I'm just wondering if you know what we're up against? Heat. Thirst. Dust. Desert. No way to say how long we'll be out there."

"We're up against a killer, that's the thing that sits hard in my mind, Sheriff. He gunned down one of my boys."

"That's true. But you're a busy man, and it's my job to

bring a fugitive in. If you want to be certain in your mind that I will, I can tell you, rest easy. We'll get him all right."

"Will you?"

Kingan walked to the window, stared into the street.

"How you mean that?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I don't mean to make hard words between us, Barr. I just know that you and Evan rode together around these parts before you were elected. You were pretty close."

"And you mean to go along to see I don't *accidentally* let Evan slip away?"

"No. No. Now don't go saying words neither one of us mean. I don't mean that."

"I can't figure no other meaning."

"Sure you can. I was just trying to say that Evan was your friend—"

"He was. But I'm a sheriff now, sworn to see justice done."

"All right. And I'm a ranch owner who had one of his boys killed by a man that hates me—"

"You think Evan broke free to get at you, Mr. Tyler?"

"Well, what the hell do you think?"

"I don't know. We won't know for sure until we run him down—"

"Well, for God's sake, what else would he want, but to try to get me? You know he blames me for all this."

"I know there is bad feeling between you. That's one reason I'd as soon you let me run this posse."

"I expect to let you run it. But I also mean to be along. We've got to get him, Sheriff, before he kills again."

"Maybe he ain't free to kill. Maybe he's trying to make it into Mexico—"

"Mexico? What ails you, Sheriff? If he was trying to get to Mexico, why would he wait until he gets way up here to make his break?"

"Well, that's pretty clear from talking to the driver of the coach, and the two guards. Landrews knows this part

of the country better than any other. Knows the road—"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"He waited until they were climbing a steep hill, on a lava patch that had that coach leaning on its side and bad shook up. One of the guards tells me Landrews knew the road, without even seeing it. Just like he figured which guard to jump first, and where it had to happen."

"You sound like you admire him."

"No. But he figured smart. And he'll figure smart trying to stay alive out on that desert. Way I look at it, it ain't going to make our job no easier to underestimate him. Let's start out admittin' we're up against a wily gent, and we'll be better off."

"I admit that. It's just I don't admire him, like you and the rest of this town does. I know he's a wild man, a hot-tempered killer. You push him, and he'll kill you. That's another thing I wanted to talk to you about. You mind saying just what you've done to keep Landrews from slipping away from you, even before you get on his trail?"

"He won't do that. He's afoot on the desert. Now, I don't have to tell you, there's almost twenty miles of dead, dry wasteland stretched out from where he made his break out to the Magdalena Mountains. That just starts the foothills of the Great Divide. Beyond the Magdalenas is a hundred miles of trackless, rugged mountains."

"What if he gets back to the trail, steals a horse or a wagon—"

"He won't do that. We been in touch with the territory rangers at Los Lunas and Belen. If he was smart enough to make that break with Thompson watching him, he's smart enough to stay away from the trail."

"Is that all you done so far?"

Barr managed to smile. "No. That ain't all. I been busy, Mr. Tyler. I been on the wire notifying the sheriff in Santa Fe, and at Albuquerque seventy-five miles away, and the sheriff at Las Cruces, and the border people at Ciudad Juárez."

Tyler winced at the razor-sharp quality of Barr Kingan's unflinching smile. "I don't say you ain't doing your duty, Sheriff. Right to the letter. But you got to understand me. I'm worried. I got a right to be troubled. He's loose. And he's after me."

Kingan gave Tyler a brief nod, walked past him to the door, unlocked it.

"Wait a minute, Kingan."

"What is it, Mr. Tyler?"

"I want you to give orders they're to shoot to kill. He's dangerous, and that's the way we got to treat him."

Kingan stood a moment staring at Tyler. After a moment he licked his tongue across his sun-dried lips. He said, "I can't make you no promises, Mr. Tyler. I'm afraid you're going to have to leave that to me."

When Barr Kingan walked into his office at an angle across the street from the hotel, his deputy looked up from his desk. Around the room were waiting posse men, among them the state guards Thompson and Blackburny. Thompson's jaw was cut and Blackburny's eye was swollen and discolored.

Deputy Clint Howard said, "She's in the back room there, Barr. She said she wanted to talk to you. I figured it was best she didn't wait out here where folks could see her. I asked her to wait back there."

Barr nodded. "You got the supplies in and packed on the wagon?"

The deputy nodded. Thompson said, voice hard, "How long you figure us to be out there trailing that son, Sheriff?"

"I don't know, Thompson," Barr said. "I've hunted a lot of people between here and the Magdalenas in the past four years. Fugitive. Lost. Even prospectors get lost out there."

"How long you figure?" Thompson insisted. "Reckon you know my job rides on this? I want to get that son, and head out for Santa Fe with him."

Barr nodded, looking at the bailiff. "I know just how you feel, Thompson. But we best not hurry anything. Not

on the desert. I mean, I've learned the biggest thing in tracking is to take it slow and easy, and don't hurry it. He's on foot, he ain't going nowhere. Not before we run him down."

"We going to have dogs?" Thompson said.

"They're on their way."

"I don't figure dogs will be worth much out on the wastes," Deputy Howard said. "Dry as it is. Dogs will never pick up the scent."

"Just the same," Barr said, "we ain't passing up any chances. We want all the odds on our side. Huh?"

Barr walked into the room behind his office, closed the door. Lupe Andrews turned from the bare window that overlooked a field and treeless plains beyond. Her agonized eyes were dry.

Barr paused inside his door. His office was bare, a pine desk, a brass spittoon, guns chained and locked in a home-made cabinet. It looked like what it was, the inner sanctum of a ninety-a-month law officer. He didn't knock it because sometimes he figured if he weren't a government paid official, he wouldn't know how to turn an honest dime. But a man saw a lot of human agony in a place like this, and sometimes it got to him.

It got to him now.

Lupe looked as if she had been crying for a long time, and not even she knew how long. Even when she learned that tears were no answer, she could not dam them up, keep them from spilling. And the loneliness—that was a lonely diggings where she lived. Without Evan with her out there, she hadn't much, less than nothing.

A woman in tears and loneliness, already wearing the black of mourning. It didn't make a man's job any easier. He found himself recalling when Evan had first brought her up here, even her eyes had laughter in them, and her voice was like violins that laughed. She had beauty that made a man's heart turn over. He remembered the townswomen saying a Spanish woman's beauty was quickly gone, that Evan Landrews would have only a few years, and then she'd go to fat. He had to laugh aloud at that.

That he should live even a few years in the warmth of such beauty!

There was no thought of laughter or beauty in this room now. It was charged with her agony and heartbreak. Everything looked as black to her as the dress she wore, the mantilla over her dark curls.

Barr scowled, faint lines showing between his sandy brows, and he felt his sun-faded hazel eyes wincing against her misery.

He removed his hat and ran his fingers through his sandy hair. His hair, growing deeply at the temples, was thinning and he was partially bald, the scalp showing white above his tanned forehead.

He pulled at his hooked nose, watching her. "What are you doing in here, Lupe?"

"I had to come see you, Barr." Her voice was full of Mexican music, even in her grief. Or perhaps the agony accented those cello strains. She was the loveliest little thing he had ever encountered. Under happier circumstances he had reflected that looking at her could make him reluctant to go home to his own wife, a fine woman, a good mother, an excellent cook, but homely. Sometimes a man couldn't totally control his most secret dreams.

"Why? I told you, these people are funny. Nice, decent, God-fearing folks. But when they're stirred up—like they are now, they do things they might otherwise regret. They never took kindly to you marrying Evan and living here, even when things were good."

Her black eyes brimmed with defiant tears and her small chin tilted slightly. She met his gaze levelly. "I don't care about them. Do you think I care about them?"

It was his gaze that fell away. He stirred uncomfortably. "No. I reckon you don't."

She took a step toward him, lifting her arm, extending her long-fingered hands. "I don't know what to do . . . I am so alone . . . I've got to have help, Barr."

"I'm sorry, Lupe."

"I know no one but you."

"You see what a hell of a spot this puts me in, don't you?"

"Who's to help, if the law won't help?"

"I'll do all I can, Lupe. But—Evan kind of put himself on the other side. You can see that, can't you? My hands are tied. What can I do?"

She stood straighter, her face gray, her eyes burning. "Where is justice? Where can people turn for help against people like this Tyler—"

"Evan killed a man, Lupe—"

"Because of Tyler. Don't forget that. Because of Tyler. You think I don't understand this man's greed. He'll give you fine-sounding reasons for everything he's done—but he's a liar. Only greed moves him. A long time ago he tried to buy Evan out—we've only a small place, but it's more than Señor Tyler wants anyone else to have between this town and his place on the Rio Salada. He talks like a friend, but all the time he is thinking how to take everything from you—"

"You might believe this, Lupe—"

"I know it! Our trouble comes because that man meant to have Evan's land, and Evan refused him. He thinks now to get it for nothing!"

"This is nothing you can prove, Lupe. Lord, don't you see how sorry I am? I mean, even if I knew you were right—and I ain't doubting you—it's no good unless you can prove it."

She turned to the window, stared through it. Children's voices carried through the thin walls to the sheriff. He saw Lupe's shoulders sag round. At last she spoke across her shoulder. "Then you will not help us?"

"There ain't anything I can do, Lupe."

She pressed her clenched fist against her lips, but when she turned from the window, she was coldly calm. She said, "I knew this—before I came."

"Then why did you come?"

"I must do everything—even when it looks hopeless to help him—surely even you can understand that."

"Hating me won't help none, Lupe."

"I don't hate you. I'm too filled with agony to feel hatred."

He stared at her, sweated. "You know I'd do what I could to help you—and Evan. There just ain't anything. I got to find him, that's my job . . . I'm busy trying to get it moving, Lupe. I got to take a posse out on the desert. It takes a lot of planning."

"Oh, I'm sorry to waste your time," she said in irony.

He shook his head. "Please don't hate me, Lupe. I got my job. I got to do it, whether you hate me or not. You got to see that."

"Then why can't you see I must do all I can to help Evan?"

"I see that. There just ain't any way I can help. That's why I don't know what good it does—talking to me."

She sighed. "I won't take much more of your time. I know you must be in a hurry to get out there—to kill him."

"No sense in this, Lupe. No sense at all."

"Do you forget the coffee you drank over his kitchen table? The laughs you had with him? The lies you told each other—each bigger than the last—to impress me? The years he was your friend?"

"I don't forget nothing, Lupe. But also, I don't forget my vow. I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. That's why I'm sorry you come in town here like this just now."

"I had to talk to you, Barr. Before you go out—hunting Evan."

Kingan sighed heavily, glanced toward the closed door to the outer office, the unshaded bare window, open on the empty lot and the street, the sun through it lighting the velvet blackness of her hair like a halo. "All right, Lupe," he said. "I'll listen."

Her eyes brimmed with tears. She was so full of agony that he saw that even the kindness he tried to put in his tone made her cry. It was suddenly as if she had not cried, even in her loneliness, as if inside she were bursting with her need to cry.

After a moment she cried out, pleading, "Help me! Help *him*, Barr—"

"You know better than that—"

"You represent law and order—"

"Yes—"

"Not injustice, lying, fraud—"

"I got my job—"

"You're his best friend, Barr. Please!"

He prowled the office, sweated, feeling the sweat on his face and along his ribs. He said, "I was his best friend, Lupe. And I reckon I feel like a brother toward him. But I took an oath of office. And that has to come first—like your vow when you married Evan took the place of all other vows. I got that oath, and Evan has done a wild thing—a wrong thing—he's killed a man, and he's run. That makes him like a mad dog in most folks' eyes, Lupe—and mad dogs don't have *muy amigos*. Huh?"

"But you—"

"I'm the sheriff, Lupe, with a job to do, no matter how much I might hate it. And it don't make it no easier, you coming here like this. I got to see justice done, that's my vow."

"Justice!" Lupe cursed suddenly and violently. The word was so alien to her lips and so abrupt and so filled with outrage that Barr straightened, flinching against it.

"That's it, Lupe."

"What kind of justice that does this to Evan?" she cried, staring at him, her eyes hot, unblinking.

It took Barr Kingan another moment to recover from the violence of the lovely young woman's curse. It was like blasphemy in church. It was hearing vileness from a beautiful mouth. But what it really was was her heart-break, torn out of her when she was frustrated, helpless against what she saw as the compounded wrongs begun and perpetrated against her and Evan by a powerful man who was beyond her reach.

Barr exhaled heavily. He said, his voice gentle, "Listen to me, Lupe. I don't try men, or sentence them, or execute them. I got my job and it states clear what I've got to do, and it's clear I've got to do it."

She gazed, unblinking, at him, her lovely dark eyes searching his face, and Barr winced because it was as if she were trying to find the remembered face of a friend in a man who was suddenly a stranger. She whispered it, her voice hopeless, "They'll kill him when they find him."

"No."

Her red mouth twisted and her black eyes blazed. "You! You are like the rest of them. You lie, too! How can you keep them from killing him?"

"I'm going to bring him back, Lupe. That's my job, and that's what I'm going to do."

She caught his arm, between tears and rage. "Don't kill him, Barr. Don't let them kill him."

He turned his eyes away, not wanting to see her lovely face go ugly, twisted with helpless tears.

"Please don't, Barr . . . Please. He's not guilty . . . Not of murder . . . He wanted to bring that man back. He told me . . . Tyler robbed him. He paid that man to rob them both—"

"We can't prove none of that, Lupe. None of it."

Her fingers dug into his arm. Her voice rose. "You can give Evan a chance. . . If you talked to him—you go alone—talk to him by yourself—"

He shook his head. "I don't reckon he'd let me get near him, Lupe, the way things are. He—understands my job."

"But he trusts you! He loves you! You are like to him a brother. He has told me this many times."

The sheriff exhaled heavily, spreading his hands in a helpless gesture. "I am sorry as deep hell for what I have to do, Lupe. You don't have to make me see it."

"I just want you to talk to him." She gazed at him intently, pleading. "Give him a chance—maybe he'll surrender to you."

Barr shook his head. "No. He didn't break free to surrender to me." Barr thought about Charlie Tyler trying to threaten him behind a lying smile, and now Landrews' heartbroken wife reminding him of an old, deep friendship. They all wanted you to perform at peak efficiency, but none of them wanted to make it easy for you. Each

one came to you because his case was unusual, different, worthy of your making allowances that you would not make for anyone else, that they wouldn't want you to make for anybody else. He winced, watching the girl, her own people, and now her husband lost to her. Well, he didn't run things, he just tried to do a job. He kept his voice sharp because he didn't want her to expect anything, yet he hoped she knew that he felt pity for her—and for his old friend, the man running out there alone in that desert with his hands in shackles. "I can't make you no promises, Lupe. He won't surrender—and if I give him any chances, he might kill somebody else."

Barr sat at the kitchen table while his wife cleared away the dishes. He had a scratch pad and a small stack of receipts before him. In an office as small as his, he had to do his own bookkeeping, and he sweated now, trying to keep his mind on his work.

He rechecked the list from the general store, the supplies for the chuckwagon. He frowned because it seemed to him that every time a tradesman sold anything to the government, the price suddenly went up. You'd think buying in quantity like that, the price would be lowered, but it never worked that way. They all seemed to think there was nothing immoral or illegal about gouging the law officials. He went over the prices again, ticking them off with the blunt point of his pencil. The total was added correctly. It was out of line only because it was padded. He entered the amount on his records and shoved the sheet aside, sweating impatiently.

His wife removed the last plates, standing with them at the edge of the table. She stared down at the work he was doing. He didn't have to glance up to see what she looked like, or even to know the expression on her face.

Barr sighed, thankful that he didn't have to look up. He went on checking the costs of this manhunt, those bills already handed him. It was going to cost plenty, all right.

"So you're going out and get yourself killed, eh?" his wife said.

"I hope not, Lottie." He frowned, seeing the way her mouth was pursed so it had wrinkles in it like a prune. He saw this without lifting his head, saw it in his memory. Her complexion was rough, sun-starched, freckled. Lottie had never been a pretty girl, and time had been less than kind to her. This was a rough country, he thought fairly, and it wasn't easy on male or female. Lottie worked hard. There wasn't a lot he could give her on his salary, paid once a month, and never quite enough to make ends meet. Cost of living got worse all the time. Lottie worked hard around the place, and he felt guilty when he found himself wishing she'd fix herself up a little, pour on a drop or two of that perfume he'd given her last Christmas. It didn't hurt a woman to smell good. The women at the saloon knew all the secrets about rousing a man until he was belly-sick. It wasn't that he wanted Lottie to be like the saloon women, but it would be nice if he came home sometime and found her soft-handed, and sweet-smelling, and wearing something frilly. He almost laughed aloud at this. It would never happen.

"You hope not!" Lottie mocked him. "Don't try to pretend with me, Mr. Big Law Man. I know you. Oh, I know you, all right. All you care about is being out with a gun on your shoulder, hunting cats or men, and when you're not out hunting, you're hanging around at the Oasis Saloon. It's enough to make a decent woman sick to her stomach. Looks like you'd rather do anything than come home where you belong like decent Christian men do."

"I got my job, Lottie."

"Yes. And getting yourself killed looking for a man that married a greaser woman—that's a fine job."

"Don't talk about Mrs. Landrews like that, Lottie. You don't know her—"

"I don't want to know that greaser trash—"

"She's a good woman, Lottie, from a good Spanish-grant family. Her people are fine people—"

"Oh, you don't have to tell me how you feel about her! I know how you feel about her, all right."

Barr gripped his pencil tightly. He could feel his face flushing faintly red under Lottie's probing gaze. How could she know that he thought Evan's Mexican wife was the loveliest thing he'd ever seen, like something on a calendar, or in a secret, longing dream—but nothing you ever expected to own, or to get near? It was strange about wives—they could always sniff out your most secret thoughts, like a ferret at a ground hog's nest.

"Don't talk foolish, Lottie," he said. He tried to concentrate on his figures. They blurred before him.

"What's she going to do?" Lottie persisted.

"Who, Lottie?"

"Oh, don't act muleheaded, Law Man. You know very well I'm talking about your little Mexican señora. Evan Landrews' woman. What's she going to do around here when you-all kill her husband?"

"How do you know we'll kill him?"

"The men looking for him certainly intend to kill him—"

"How do you know that?"

"I hear talk around town, Sheriff Kingan. Just the same as you do, and I don't have to hang around the barbershop to hear it. They mean to kill Evan Landrews—and even if they don't, you'll have to send him off to be hung at Santa Fe. What's she going to do then?"

"Who? Mrs. Landrews?"

"Yes. Mrs. Landrews, if that's what you call greaser trash. Nobody wanted her around here when she was Landrews' wife—and no decent woman will tolerate her flaunting herself around in front of their men when she's his widow!"

Barr laughed in exasperation, despite himself. He shook his head, sweated. He felt more tired than he had ever been. It had been a long day, and it had just started.

He gazed up at Lottie. "Why, I guess you decent women will just have to form a vigilante committee and run her out of the territory!"

Lottie nodded, her face gray and grim. "You say that to think you're funny. But you know that's in many a mind right now. It might be just the thing to do!"

Barr tossed aside his pencil, staring at Lottie coldly. "All right, Lottie. All I ask is that you good Christian ladies just wait until she is a widow. Way you talk, it shouldn't be too long."

Barr rode at the head of the fifteen-man posse along the trail south of Socorro to the lava plateau where Evan Landrews had overpowered his guards and escaped from the prison coach.

"This here is the incline," Lucas Cross called, uncomfortable in the saddle, bottom-sore already. "We was coming up the other way. Down there it must of been. In places the coach was far over so me and Necomber had all we could do to hang on, and the horses was slowed down to a walk. He picked himself a real neat place to break, all right."

Barr straightened in his saddle. "I want you men to remember this. He was smart. He picked his own time. His own place. And that's what he'll do to you if you get careless out there on the desert. Now he can hide hisself in a mesquite clump and jump you from the back. He does that, he's got himself a horse—and water . . . And does it happen, I'm holding that man responsible. Cause you got your warning now. You keep your eyes open, you stay behind him, and you keep on his trail. That's all I'm asking of any of you."

"What trail?" Hal Thompson had dismounted and was leading his horse down the incline where Landrews had leaped from the coach.

"We'll find his trail," Barr said. "If you people will stay behind me. Now I'm going to pick up his track, and we're all going to get a look at it. That's all we expect to do today."

"Are you crazy?" The words burst from Charlie Tyler. "You going to give Landrews another day and another night head start?"

Barr waited a long moment before he spoke. "Now when I show you the track our man lays down, I want each one of you to fix it well in his mind. You're going to lose it—there are plenty of places where he can lose you

for a spell. Draws are rocky, don't hold prints well, or at all, and sometimes you can pick you out somebody else's *old* print to track unless you got the marking you want set clear in your mind."

"Where you expect to pick up a track in this stuff?"

Barr glanced toward the Magdalena foothills in the hazy distance, and beyond where the sun westered yellowly. "Getting late. We got our work cut out to track him out of this lava, all right. But we got this much to go on. He'll make west to those hills to keep from being spotted. So we line up along the west side of this road and we move down it and out, keeping in a line, and moving slow. Anybody spots a track—of any kind, I want that man to freeze, and yell out."

One of the older men pushed through the horsemen. His name was Sam Butterworth, and he and three others had aided the sheriff in tracking lost pilgrims in the past four years.

"Barr!" Sam said. "'Fore me and my boys go along with you, there's a little matter you didn't mention when you swore us in back in town."

"All right, Sam, what's eating you?"

"We want to know. We collect usual pay for this here job?"

Barr considered. He said, "You set for gun-play, Sam?"

"You figure there might be any?"

"There might. I want you to know in advance. You set to use a gun?"

"No. I won't get mixed up in nothing like that. But I'll help you track."

"That's fine, Sam. Usual pay."

Sam nodded, dismounted and took his place in the long, staggered line the sheriff had ordered along the roadway.

The entire posse dismounted, and leading their mounts, spread out on the incline and moved slowly west by south off the trail.

The sun bore down, even in the waning hours of the afternoon. Barr felt the sweat form under his shirt and

irritate, like rash. It would *be* red rash after four or five days out here. He swore silently, and inwardly, looking forward to the way it would be, but not shirking, either.

He lifted his gaze from the hard-packed, lava-torn ground and gazed out across the wasteland. It spread vast and empty to the foothills in the distance, and the mountains themselves were a trap for the unwary, offering little shade and no sustenance.

He blinked sweat from his eyes and moved forward again, searching like an Indian for any tell-tale signs. A rock overturned, a twig broken, anything to move him ahead with any sureness.

They left the lava-crust hill and a few feet out into the gray sand Barr found what he was looking for. He stopped suddenly, feeling his horse's head at his back.

Holding the lines, Barr knelt. He winced slightly at what he saw, but after a moment of tracing the pattern of the steps, he called the posse in.

"This is it," Barr told them. "This here is what you men are going to be looking for, what you are going to be tracking." He knelt again, pointing with his field glasses at the footprint left in the sand. "Now he done us a favor. You can bet it wasn't intentional, but he's got a rip in his bootsole that makes a mark that we can hang on to."

"How you figure he done that?"

"His boots were pretty well ganged up and old," Ed Blackbury said, recalling.

"Yeah, I noted that, too," Lucas Cross said.

"I don't know how he ripped that sole. Maybe he tore it on the door gettin' out of the coach, or on the lava spikes when he jumped. But there it is. Mark it good. He's left it for you to follow."

Sam Butterworth walked a few feet into the mesquite. "You're right, Barr. He's laying it down—and heading west." Sam made a derisive sound. "Pilgrim, or outlaw on the run, or even a prospector when he gets lost—they always head toward the mountains. They figure it gives them something they can see, where they can hide or be safe, or maybe find food or water. God knows they ought

to know better. First, a mountain has a way of backing off from you on a desert like this—and even if it lets you catch up, it's just a joke on you. Them mountains is like a big killer, waiting for them. No food. No water. And they die up there."

"This one ain't going to die up there," Barr said. "Because we'll get him first."

"That's what I want to hear. So let's go," Charlie Tyler said. He swung up into his saddle.

His ten ranch hands, the majority of the posse, moved to follow their boss.

"Hold it," the sheriff said. "We ain't going off half-cocked doing nothing. I told you what we were going to do, and I ain't changed my mind. We make camp. Right here. We give the chuckwagon time to catch up with us. We have a nice supper and we get plenty of rest."

Tyler said, "And you give Landrews time to get to Mexico."

Barr's lips moved, and then he exhaled heavily, waited a moment before he spoke. His voice was deadly. "We make camp," he said.

He waited for opposition, but no one spoke. These men knew their sheriff. After a moment Charlie Tyler swung down from his saddle, staring at those footprints leading off into the mesquite wastes.

III

Barr Kingan awoke suddenly, shivering. It took a few moments to adjust to the fact that the knife wasn't real, and the man wasn't real, either, and that he had been dreaming. A real lulu this time, he thought. The kind of nightmare that almost makes a man afraid to go to sleep.

He lay there another moment, between sleep and waking, orienting himself, finding the reason why Lottie's bony bottom wasn't thrust against his in the feather bed at home, what he was doing out here on the desert.

He opened his eyes and stared for a moment at the crumbling embers of the night-fire. A wolf howled distantly in the deep night. It was a sound he was accustomed to hearing, but now hackles stood along his neck. He felt secure in the warm-lit circle of the dying fire. The darkness hung like a shroud beyond the flickering reaches of the purpling flames. Still, he was in here under a blanket, near a fire, with the other men of the posse around him. He'd have coffee in a few minutes, and hardtack with side meat and beans. He thought about Landrews, crouched somewhere in the darkness, his hands shackled, his body numb with the night chill.

Kingan drew the back of his hand hard across his mouth, cursing all friendships, especially old friendships. Well, he was a lawman and he had no friends, all he had was his vow.

The night wind had blown in a misting rain, and now the winds dried it on the mesquite, cactus and dry-wilted Indian paint-brush. The chill was in his bones and he knew it would be there for two hours after sun-up.

He checked his watch. It was still an hour before day-break. He sat up, gazing at the east horizon, finding no fissures, no sign the night or the chill would ever end.

He gazed far across the faintly lit camp where the horses were staked and where the last night-guard sat hunkered under his rain slicker, leaning on his gun.

Kingan pushed his feet into his boots, yelled the camp awake, talking them out of their blankets and onto their feet. He listened to their protesting and they grouped, muttering and half-asleep around the lowered tailgate of the chuckwagon, waiting for their breakfast.

He gave them barely time to eat, ordered them to saddle up.

"Seems one hell of a time of the morning to git in such a sudden all-fired hurry, Sheriff," somebody said.

Barr walked along the lines of men as they mounted. He gazed ahead toward the foothills, finding the trail to the upper ranges wide and easy of ascent, especially for men on horses. Above the long yellowed slopes the tips of dark pine trees showed with the first rays of the sun on them. Barr thought they would climb up there today, because this was where the fugitives always ran, toward the mountains. Landrews had never been on the run before. He wouldn't know that the mountains were his enemy, though they promised all manner of shelter and concealment.

He shrugged. Well, if fugitives didn't make mistakes, lawmen would soon have to find honest work.

His posse sat slumped in their saddles, awaiting his next order. Behind them the sun broke long, ragged tears across the churning sky, and the eastern horizon glowed faintly pink.

"Billy Welch!" Barr called, and the youngest member of the posse came riding toward him, sending small dust bolls up from his horse in his anxiety and sudden sense of importance. The sheriff grinned inwardly, watching him. "Billy, I've got a job for you."

"Yes, sir!"

Barr smiled faintly, thinking it was wonderful to be so young, so full of vinegar. The hellish part of aging was

the things that hurt you so you lost that zest for living, that belief in things. . . .

He said, "Whilst I was sitting up last night, I wrote out something. It's a description of Evan Landrews, as he looks to me, best I can put it down. What I want you to do is take this in to Socorro and have it put on the wires to all the sheriffs' offices—"

"Aw, Sheriff, don't send me back—"

"It's an important thing I'm asking you, Billy. The wireless operator has the list of officers who'll get this description, and I want you to make certain that full list is covered. If we happen to miss Landrews out here—if he is some way smart enough to double back past us, those lawmen will have to be able to identify him. Huh?"

"Sheriff, I want to go with you. I—"

"You can head back out here, Billy, after you do this job for me. You can pick up our trail here, and meet us at the chuckwagon by noon. It's a job that's got to be done, and I figure you're the one can move fast and get it done. Huh?"

Barr rode a few paces out before the line of waiting posse members. He held up his hand in the waning dark, the firelight from the breakfast fires touching at his face.

He took a deep breath. Inwardly, he was telling himself that being sheriff of the county was the top job he could ever hope to hold. There were bad aspects, but there was something prickly about any work a man did. He hated the idea of tracking Evan down like an animal, and he hated having to face crowds speechmaking, even a group of fifteen sleepy men gave him a kind of belly-gone sensation. But these were the things he learned to accept in order to have what good there was in holding office.

"Now, since we been out here, last night and late yesterday afternoon, I about figured the way it was after Evan Landrews jumped from the prison coach. I thought you fellows might like to hear how I figure. It looks like when Landrews jumped, he rolled quite a spell on them lava spikes, going downhill into that gulley there. I seen

sure signs that's what happened. He got up right about here, and he was shook up pretty bad, and clinging to them two guns he stole, and his hands being cuffed made him feel kind of helpless and raging so he wasn't thinking too clear yet. If he hadn't been a little hurt there was a lot of things he might of done that he didn't do. First, was that he come running off that road here into the mesquite, thinking of hiding in case the coach stopped. So he left us tracks that wasn't no ways hard to find. Huh?"

"Hell, we was almost to Socorro before we knowed he was gone," Cross said.

"So, he was kinda hurt or shook up a little, and so he ran scared, and he left us this cut sole mark, and we follow it." Barr cleared his throat. "That brings us up to right now." He counted off four of the Tyler-Rio-Salado riders, hoping he wasn't too obvious about cutting out Tyler's men from the posse. He figured for disciplinary reasons it was best that the rancher's men not outnumber the Socorro people so heavily. "Now. You four men. I want you staked out across the plains here, in sight of each other, and in sight of the trail."

"What's the idea of that?" Charlie Tyler wanted to know.

Kingan hid a wry smile. Tyler was cunning, too. He saw that his hope to run this show was being weakened every time one of his riders was cut out of the posse.

"The idea is, Mr. Tyler, that I got to figure best as I can how to catch this here escaped prisoner. And I reckon to have stake-outs along here in case Landrews gets foxy and tries to double back." He spoke quickly, chopping off any chance for Tyler to protest. He called out two more Tyler hands. "You two men will ride slow on the Old Trail, ten miles each way. Take a lot of rest, and take it easy on your horse. When the rangers get here from Los Lunas we'll spell you, and give you help. Your job is clear as it is vital. I want you men to watch for any man alone, walking, or hiding, along the trail. Evan could get desperate enough to decide to jump travelers,

hoping to take horses or money. Everybody clear now on their jobs. Huh?"

Dark forms like wraiths riding out of the sunrise came over the horizon just before dawn and every man in the posse heard Barr's sharp cursing.

He watched the arrival of the first bounty hunters.

"Here they come. Like buzzards to the smell of dead carrion." He swore again. A job like this was never easy, but the human vultures preying on fugitives for the reward money always made it tougher.

The bounty hunters rode in together. It was easy to see they had met the night before, or in the early morning along the trail, and they were not a unit. They were working on their own, lean men, hardened, and the soul gone out of them. They didn't care about the man they hunted as another human being. He was as good dead as alive to them: he was some figures printed on a wanted dodger.

One of the bounty men nodded in an exaggerated way to the sheriff. "Morning, Mistah Kingan. You about got things in hand for your hunt?"

Barr Kingan gave the bounty hunters a brief nod, unable to conceal the distaste that showed in his face. It was as if three vultures had flown down and alighted, grinning, on his shoulders.

There was the smell of death about the three of them, the stink of spilled beer, the sour odor of sweat and unwashed clothing.

They gazed at him, unblinking, and grinning relentlessly, like mindless apes. Blaisdell, jackal lean, and a look about him as if he walked with his tail tucked between his legs, trusting nobody, deadly and vicious.

Jake Yelloweye's mouth worked in a contorted way as he tried to repeat what Blaisdell had said—to Yelloweye a huge joke. The half-breed had a speech impediment that was so bad only his close friends, Blaisdell and de Brasa, could interpret what he said.

Juan de Brasa gave Barr a faint, mocking bow. He was bone thin, his dark flesh stretched parchment dry across

his skull and his frame, but there was the look about him of a man who'd once been a dandy. His battered clothing fit well, and had the look of quality. But if de Brasa or any of the other bounty hunters had ever been anything except what they were at that moment—buzzards picking at the garbage of existence—it had been a long time ago, a long time ago.

Kingan shrugged, answering Blaisdell.

"Morning, Blaisdell, what brings you out here?"

Blaisdell's mouth twisted into a smile, but his eyes remained flat and dead. "One thousand dollars, Sheriff."

The word burned along the line of posse members.

"That's right," Blaisdell said, slumping in the saddle. "Territory offered it. Last night. So I'd appreciate it, Sheriff, if you people didn't get in my way and maybe foul things up."

For a moment Barr Kingan didn't speak. He was angered because the territorial governor had promised by wire to refrain from offering a reward. Kingan and the concerned law officials had requested it in order to keep men like Blaisdell and the other bounty hunters out of it. No one had to draw Kingan pictures as to why the governor had changed his mind. Pressures. The voters pressured him, wanting to know what the territory was doing to bring in the mad-dog killer who had broken free, and the governor had removed that pressure the easiest way open to him, he had put a reward on the wires. And the buzzards came soaring in on the first updraft.

"All right, Blaisdell, we'll try to stay out of your way." Kingan's voice and tone matched the bounty hunter's. "But before there's any misunderstanding, I got the word for you, all you bounty men—as well as any in my posse. All you men. I don't want no heroes, and I won't stand for nobody—and that means you bounty people—I won't stand for nobody jeopardizing the lives of our men here, or fouling our chances of taking that man alive. You bounty hunters get eager, and you get too close to him, and somebody will get killed."

"I mean to go right in after him and get him," Blaisdell said, and the men with him nodded, muttering.

"Fine. I understand you. Now, understand me. You men push him. He kills anybody, I'm holding you for murder. You understand? You got my warning, and I was never more serious or honest with nobody."

"What kind of thing is this?" Blaisdell said.

"It's this kind of thing," Barr told him. "I want you men to stay behind these tracks so you don't spoil them for the rest of us. I don't want nobody getting eager and going ahead and spoiling any signs. We take it slow and steady, and we'll get him. Landrews knows this region, but so do we. He's got a start on us—"

"Amen," Tyler said, and Blaisdell glanced toward the rancher, grunting with suppressed laughter.

"He's got a start on us," Barr said, "but he's on foot, and shackled, and we got time on our side. And that's the main thing. Time. Longer he walks out there, the hungrier and thirstier he's bound to get. He'll slow down and we'll take him, and nobody gets hurt, and—" Kingan stared directly into the dust-smearred faces of the bounty hunters, "and nobody gets charged with murder. Huh?"

The bounty men dismounted, holding matches cupped in their palms over the track of Landrews' boot. They walked around in the mesquite. The posse was tensely silent, watching them.

Abruptly far down the line of horses a gun was fired. Animals squealed, lurching upward. Men shouted and rode toward the sound. The pistol-fire reverberated, rolled across the wastes, fading.

Sheriff Kingan was the last to reach the men knotted around a young townsman who still held a smoking pistol at his side, his face sheepish, but also gray.

"What in hell is eating at you, Wilcox?" Kingan said.

"I saw something, Sheriff. It was moving in them mesquite bushes."

"Rabbit." Somebody laughed.

"Or a shadow."

"I'm sorry as hell, Sheriff. I was jumpy, and it spooked

me. All I could think was, you warned us about Landrews jumping us for a horse and a canteen of water. I didn't want to be the one he got."

"All right," Kingan said. He called Sam Butterworth and posted the ex-army-scout at the tail of the line, moving Wilcox inside. "In a way, I'm glad this here thing happened now. It was bound to happen, and now we got it off our chest. Huh? It gives me a chance to warn you trigger happy hombres. You hear me close. Just because something moves in a greasewood thicket, or in mesquite, or sage clump, or you see a shadow shifting on rocks, or even if you spot somebody moving—and that somebody is so far away you can't recognize him, I warn you, don't shoot first and ask questions next. You make sure. Even spotting a man alone out in this God-forsaken waste don't mean it's got to be Landrews. Other men come out to these plains and to them mountains. Prospectors. Hunters. Cattlemen hunting strays. You men use your heads. You trackers just stay cold on Landrews' trail. You don't have to kill nobody. You just make sure of every move you make, and every shot you fire."

The men returned to their places, laughing and talking with a sense of relief. The tension was eased. It was as if Wilcox's bullet had killed it for the moment. They sat easy in their saddles watching Kingan for a signal. Behind them, the sun rose slowly, spreading a wan saffron glow across everything. The heat moved in ahead of the sun, dry, depleting, promising to become vicious with terrifying suddenness, once the sun rose above the horizon.

Sheriff Kingan glanced toward the rising sun, then called out, "Our base is this chuckwagon, men. It has supplies, food, medical kit and water-barrels—"

"Our home away from home," somebody said.

"—it will move slow, but steady behind us, and it will stop in time to prepare us a lunch at noon. Now this is an order. You posse men come in at noon to this here wagon. Ain't no exceptions. I want you men to get water and food—it's what will make you different and better than Landrews, it's what will make you last when he can't last." Kingan tilted his head. "I see you bounty men

come out here with canteens, and no food. That tells me plenty about you. But any you bounty men that want to come in at noon, or at supper, or to ride along with us in this here posse—subject to its rules, and sharing its food and water and supplies—is welcome to do it. On the other hand, the first of you men that goes ahead and spoils any tracking signs so neither me or Sam Butterworth can pick them up, is in bad trouble, I'll arrest the man does it, and if he resists arrest, I'll shoot him."

Blaisdell said, without smiling, "you is growed into one tough sheriff since I seen you last, Kingan."

"What kind of sheriff I am depends on how a man treats me, Blaisdell. I mean to see justice done. To you. To my men. But the ten dollar word in there is—I am the sheriff. Just don't forget that. Huh?"

In the desert the sun erupted suddenly, brazenly and brassily yellow, radiating a relentless heat and laying a glare across the flat, unbroken expanse of wasteland. At once, the blinding light made it almost impossible to detect movement in the distant heat waves. If you stared long enough there was nothing but movement, the sands shifted, the yucca danced, the ragged tips of the far ranges wavered, approaching and receding.

Barr Kingan raised his arm, calling aloud, "Let's ride out. You men, watch Landrews. He's smart as any Mescalero you ever heard about. He'll bury himself in the sand and the mesquite, and you'll ride right over him."

He waved his arm forward, moving out. He saw Blaisdell and the other bounty men take a sighting on the signs and then ride out, like bloodhounds, going fast ahead of the posse. When these men tried to pick up the pace, Kingan lifted his arm, warning them to hold it down. In a few minutes, the bounty men were lost in the wavering distance and glare.

Sam Butterworth called. "This here Landrews. He's in good condition. You can tell by the stride he takes."

"He's in a hurry," Wilcox said. "That man's going somewhere."

"He's been going somewhere for two days," Charlie

Tyler said. "We ain't going to overtake him moseying along like this."

"He ain't tiring any," Butterworth called, "and that's the truth."

"He will," Kingan said.

Somebody shouted to Kingan, and he halted his horse, turning in his saddle. From the highway, a rider came at top speed.

His horse was blowing and the man panting when he reached the place where Kingan waited.

"Carraway, Sheriff," the man said. "You know Elam Carraway and his wife, live in that adobe place on the Santa Rita cutoff?"

"Yeah?"

"They was robbed last night, Sheriff. Sent word into Socorro, looking for you."

"Get yourself some food and coffee at the chuckwagon. Rest your horse. Deputy Howard and me will ride over and talk to the folks at Carraway's."

"Count me in," Charlie Tyler said. "I'm going with you, Sheriff."

The sheriff frowned, blood seeping from his cheeks beneath the brown of the sun. He said, "I'd appreciate it if you stayed here, Tyler, and kept the men moving forward on these here tracks. Clint and me can handle this." He nodded toward Deputy Howard, silently ordering him to cut out of the search party.

But Tyler pulled his horse forward, alongside the sheriff's sweated mount. He glanced at the other men, as if conveying silently to them that he was not a man to be ordered about by any ninety-a-month lawman.

"I'm going," Tyler said. His mouth was set. His voice carried in the heat and the stillness. "I know the Carraway place. I know the Santa Rita cutoff. It could be Landrews. You know blamed well it could. Make up your mind to that, Kingan. I'm going."

The Carraway adobe hut sat in a gray, treeless expanse of the plains. From a distance it looked like a brown bar set down in the emptiness by mistake. The desert sprawled

out around it, making it thirst, constricting it. The earth was gray around the hut, tan in the distance and sloped into the foothills to the west.

Tyler tried to hurry them, but Kingan refused, keeping the horses to a plodding pace that rankled the rancher, angered him, had him sputtering inside like a lighted fuse. By the time the hut came in view in the blue distance, Tyler was ready to explode.

Kingan ignored him. His eyes squinted, he searched that waste, following the lines of the foothills. The only movement was the gray specks of Carraway's sheep, finding sustenance where there was none in the dry, hard crusted flats.

"This land—not good for much," Barr said, speaking to Clint Howard.

The deputy only shrugged, too hot to answer, but Tyler spoke, voice rasping. "No good for anything. They'll never find any use for this place."

"Luckily the land gets better above Socorro," Kingan said, voice casual.

"Yeah. Some better," Tyler agreed. "At least a man can feed cattle—in good years."

"Landrews' land," Barr said. "Pretty good, huh?"

"You'd need a lot of hay hauled in to really make it pay. But he's got water up there, and that makes the difference. If a man's got water—and winter shelter, he has to make-do for the rest."

"Hear you were interested in that land of Landrews?" Barr's voice was deceptively tired, tossing the words away.

"Who told you that?" Tyler's voice was hard, as if he didn't appreciate anyone's prying into his private affairs.

"Oh, his wife, I think. She said you made them some kind of offer awhile back—"

"I might have. I don't need the land. But him living there with that Mexican woman galls me. I was willing to buy him out to get shed of him."

"His wife thinks you want that land pretty bad."

"What does a greaser dame like her know? Them Mex-

icans would hang on to all the land around here if they could. I can tell you this, I got no use for them. No use for a man that marries one of them."

"So you were willing to buy his place, even though you don't need it?"

"Hell. I'm expanding. Always expanding. And like I say, he's got water there . . . It don't matter now, does it?"

"No. It don't matter now."

"Landrews is got no use for it, and that Mexican dame, what does she know about running a ranch?"

"Not much, I reckon."

"So. Maybe I'll buy it up, after all. And the funny part of it is, I'll get it a lot cheaper than the price I offered Landrews for it. And he turned me down."

"That's the way it goes." Kingan exhaled heavily, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

They rode the rest of the way to the Carraway hogan in silence. The broad faded sky was cloudless, seeming as dry as alkali dust. Far west, cones of hills were dipped in the desert's crimson and brown. Kingan could not help scanning the region beyond the hut. His gaze crawled across the west ridge above the desert line, fringed by stunted piñons. But there was no movement, no purple dust specks, no black object that might be a fugitive, running. In the whole fist of land there was only silence and stillness and the sun.

Carraway had rigged a pole fence around his house. Behind the hut was a lean-to barn, a pole corral, an out-house, the whole clearing bearded by mesquite patches, prickly pear and bayonet cactus.

Elam and Rhoda Carraway huddled together on the stoop awaiting them. To Kingan they looked like little people, dehydrated and shrunken by the desert sun and unappeased hungers, and made smaller by their fear.

They rode into the yard and dismounted, nodding to the elderly couple who were so unaccustomed to visitors that they were timid before the lawman in a time of emergency.

Elam, a man in his late fifties, shriveled and dried by

the sun, dehydrated and grayed by it, looked older and more petrified than the land itself, his sunken cheeks sparsely pricked with thin gray whiskers.

Elam's battered hat, with torn brim was pulled low over his washed-out blue eyes. His wife stood silently at the doorjamb, staring at the three men, and then casting down her eyes in an almost guilty way she was so shy, and she did not speak. She kept her arm crooked above her forehead, shading her eyes as if her limb were permanently set this way.

Barr saw another reason for her keeping her arm above her eyes was her awe at finding herself in the presence of Mr. Charlie Tyler. Both the people knew of him, but neither ever expected to find him on his fine horse in their front yard.

Carraway ducked his head at Tyler, greeting him without quite daring to look straight at him. He said, complaining, "Had a thieving visitor last night, Sheriff. He took my mule."

Barr held the reins of his horse, glancing around the barren, poverty-dry yard. "Anything else?" he inquired. "Food or anything like that?"

Carraway laughed, his voice fluting upward. "Food? Hardly. You can't get blood out'n a turnip, Sheriff. No, he didn't get no food. But he might as well of starved us when he taken my mule."

Barr wiped the sweat from his forehead, wondering if there were a cup of drinking water in Carraway's well. He'd heard of thirsty travelers being turned away out here simply because the well was dry. "We'll get him back for you, Elam—"

Carraway bobbed his head so his hat brim danced. "Lord knows I hope so. You take a man's mule from him out here and you've crippled him. Lord knows, in the long run, you've killed him."

Tyler spoke, his voice impatient. "Did you get a look at the thief, Carraway? Did you see what he looked like?"

Barr saw both Elam and Rhoda retreat under the crack

of Tyler's voice. He said, "Let me handle this, Mr. Tyler."

Tyler's gaze struck hard against his. "I want to know, Kingan. This means more to me than to you to find Landrews—"

"I'll handle it." Barr's soft voice had sudden steel in it. He dropped the reins. "Neither one of you hurt any?" He peered at Carraway and his wife. The old woman did not move or change her position. She kept her eyes cast down on the dust upon his boots.

Carraway began to relax, feeling the importance of his position. He had the sheriff out here, and the leading rancher of the territory along with him. He waved his arm, shaking his head. "No. Ain't either of us hurt none, but we're ruined by the loss of my mule. Whoever it was, he didn't come near the house—no nearer than the corral and the lean-to. We didn't get no look at him at all, Mister Tyler, sir. No, sir. He come in the dark, went the same way. Sometime during the night, Rhoda and me woke up hearing our hound barking . . . He put his tail twixt his legs and hid in the barn when he seen you folks coming . . . But he was barking like wild last night and we heard a noise. First I figured it to be a desert wolf, some animal prowling. I got my gun and went out there, but I was too late. I near fell dead from shock and loss when I seen my mule was taken. I seen tracks where the feller rode off—but nary sign of the man or my beast."

Barr said again, prodding his memory. "And he didn't take anything else?"

Carraway scowled. "Now that's funny, Sheriff. Soon as it were daylight, I went out and checked the barn to see what else was took. Ain't nothing missing that I could see, except a couple things—"

"Yes?" Tyler leaned forward, speaking impatiently.

Carraway glanced up at the rancher, bowing in a faintly subservient way. "Well, I checked everything out there—and all that was missing—and I know it don't make sense, but all that was gone was a sledge hammer of mine, and an old chisel."

"Landrews!" The word burst from Tyler's mouth like a curse. Carraway, troubled, stared up at him.

"Except my mule, Sheriff," Carraway repeated, "that were all—a chisel and a sledge hammer. Ain't that a hell of a note?"

"No," said the sheriff, "it figures."

IV

"Well, Sheriff, I warned you about sitting around on your tail, letting Landrews move where he wants." Charlie Tyler's voice was cutting.

Barr Kingan glanced at the rancher. "At least he ain't in Mexico," was all he said.

"Not yet."

Sweating, the sheriff turned his back on Tyler. "Clint, I want you to ride back and bring the whole posse across the flats to us here. . . . Maybe you'd like to ride back with my deputy, Mr. Tyler?"

"I'll stick here," Tyler said. "I ain't no celebrated tracker like you, Sheriff, but I think I can pick up mule tracks as good as the next man."

Kingan shrugged, gave the deputy orders on following the sign he would leave behind in case he came on the mule tracks and followed them out. For a moment he delayed, slumped in his saddle, watching his deputy ride away.

The signs were clear in the corral, the mild struggle between man and animal as Landrews slipped a bridle on the mule.

Leading his horse, Barr walked out of the corral and then entered the mesquite and sage thickets that rimmed the Carraway place.

The ground was hard-packed, with only a thin layer of sand salted across its tough crust by the night winds. It was a long, slow time, an hour crept past, the sun spinning upward, fever hot.

"They went across here," Barr said finally to Tyler

who was a few feet away, walking tall, his head lowered, gaze fixed on the sterile ground.

"You pick up a track?"

"Mule droppings," Barr said. "Ain't more than a few hours old."

They mounted and rode slowly in a northwesterly direction.

"We get out here where the sand will hold a print, we'll pick up that mule's shoe-signs," Barr said.

"Unless they didn't head this way at all," Tyler said.

"They headed this way."

Tyler's laugh was taunting. "You able to tell that by the turn of the droppings, Sheriff?"

There was a faint silence. Barr kept his gaze on the ground ahead, but a muscle twitched at the corner of his mouth.

At last, he said, "They went this way."

Charlie Tyler rode his mount forward, abreast of the sheriff. "I been doing a lot of thinking, Kingan. Yesterday. Last night. And now what we found this morning convinces me."

"Yeah, Mr. Tyler. What's that?"

"I don't believe that dirty son is trying to get to Mexico at all."

"Landrews? You don't? Why not?"

"It ought to be clear to you, Sheriff. No matter why he waited to get up to this country to make his break, I know now his real reason was he means to get at me—and kill me, if he can. He's gone crazy. He's like a wild dog."

"Why would he rather get at you than to get to Mexico where he'd have a chance of saving his neck? You forget they got a hang rope waiting for Landrews at Santa Fe."

"I don't forget it. By God, I don't. That's just it. He's got nothing to lose. We all know he blames me for what happened to him—me who was only trying to help him out, letting him in on that deal in the first place, giving him an extra fifty bucks, out of decency—"

"But I heard he figured according to the tally-sheet you owed him almost five hundred more."

Tyler's pale eyes blinked. "You listen to me, Sheriff! That man's an outlaw. You taking the word of an outlaw against mine?"

"I'm just repeating what Landrews said."

"Landrews said a lot of things. Lies! He's an outlaw. And he murdered one of my men. He's a killer!"

"Something about that troubles me, Tyler. Has troubled me all along. This Harden that Landrews killed—"

"A good, hard-working boy. Sober and industrious—"

"Yet, he was new around Socorro country. Least, I never saw him before—"

"Well. Hell. He come in from the north. Up from Utah country. Yeah. He was one of them Mormons, at least he worked for them. He was a good boy. He hung around the ranch—"

"But he didn't go on the drive with you?"

"No. He didn't. Look here! Are you putting me on trial, for hell's sake?"

"Not me, Mr. Tyler. I don't try men. I just arrest them, or try to. I just hunt them down when they escape. You started talking about it. I was just making conversation, as my good wife always says when she nags my ears off about something."

Tyler blinked. He tried to smile. "You must know, Sheriff, that when we was robbed—Landrews and me—he was loco. It had started during the drive, him losing what few cattle he had, them dropping off like flies. It got worse while we were waiting in Las Cruces, him losing his reason that way. And then when we was robbed, he was like devils had him. I tell you I breathed easier when he rode away and left me. He was loco. So loco that the first stranger he run into in Socorro—poor ole Chip Harden—why he sees in him the man that jumped us on the Old Trail, and tried to kill him. I stopped him, but he followed Chip all the way down to Dona Ana County, and gunned the boy down—"

"Another little matter troubles me, Mr. Tyler. Now,

like you say, I got to admit Landrews was off his feed, upset—”

“Loco. He was loco.”

“But when he jumped Harden in Socorro, seems you could have settled it all right there by making that Harden stop where he was. We could have parleyed that thing out—and you could have showed Landrews where he was wrong.”

“Now you listen to me! By God, you better hear me good. Sounds to me like all your sympathies are with this here killer you’re supposed to be bringing to justice—”

“That’s what I’m doing.”

“Chip was scared. Maybe you’d be scared if a crazy man jumped you—he ran.”

“I admit, I’d be a trifle jumpy if a locoed gent jumped me from a clear sky. But I swear, with my boss, the sheriff, and a street full of men from my ranch trying to help me, I would of waited around—not run off in the wastes all by myself.”

Tyler swore, his eyes blinking, his mouth taut. “That’s what you would have done, Sheriff. Maybe I’d of done different. But Chip was scared, and he run—”

“Yeah. He run. He was too scared to face Landrews long enough to find out why he jumped him, why he chased him. Harden kept running until his horse come up lame in Dona Ana, and Landrews overtook him—”

“Overtook him and killed him, Sheriff. Don’t forget that. Overtook that boy, that poor boy, and killed him in cold blood. He was convicted of murder in a court, don’t you forget that, Sheriff.”

“That’s true, he was. And we’re going to bring him in.” The sheriff rode a moment, studying the terrain ahead. “How far you figure it is from Socorro south to Dona Ana, Mr. Tyler?”

“What? How far? Why, I don’t know—”

“Must be around a hundred and fifty miles. Huh? Give or take a few, you reckon?”

“Yes. I reckon.”

“A long ways. Rough open country. Tough on a man

or a horse. Takes a long time by horseback—even when you're running. Huh?"

Tyler's voice was savage. "What you leading up to, Sheriff?"

"Me? Oh, no. Nothing. The court has settled this matter. They got the truth from all the witnesses, and they reached a decision. I was just wondering why this Harden didn't slow down long enough to figure if maybe he could talk some sense to Landrews, instead of running that way. I mean, he knowed Landrews was a stranger to him, he knowed he hadn't done no wrong in this world to Landrews, didn't he?"

"The boy was scared, Sheriff!"

"A hundred and fifty miles of scared, Mr. Tyler? On horseback? That's carrying wild terror a long way, seems to me."

Tyler's mouth twisted. "Does it, Sheriff? Seems to me you're overlooking the fact that Landrews was pushing him, every step of that way. He wasn't getting less scared. He was getting more scared."

"Maybe. But it don't seem in my mind that it would work that way. A gent would get tired running, get tired being chased. I mean a young man—sober and industrious, and innocent of any wrong—he would get so tired and thirsty and full of rage at being unjustly chased by some stranger that he had done no wrong to that he would finally have just stopped cold, and demanded to see that stranger's hole cards. Don't it seem that way to you, at all?"

"No, Sheriff, it don't! No, damn it, it don't! And I better remind you, it didn't seem that way to the County Court at Dona Ana, either."

Barr nodded, exhaling. "You're right, of course. And they had all the facts—heard testimony from everybody concerned. I mean, even you went all that distance—"

"It was the least I could do."

"That's what I say. You had your duty, and you done it. And the court had a better look at the truth than I do, way up here. So I ain't questioning nobody—"

"Ain't you, Sheriff?" Tyler's voice was savage.

"Not me. It just seems to me that an innocent man could have come back and faced Landrews, and put his loco mind to rest—"

"Damn it! It's too hot to listen to your talk! Have you ever tried to talk to an unreasonable man, Sheriff? Have you?"

"Not recently, Mr. Tyler." Barr Kingan's mouth was pulled into a faint, wry smile.

"Well, that's what Landrews was. Loco. A gun in his hand, yelling at Harden to stop. Harden done what you or me or any man would have done. He drew his gun and tried to defend himself."

"Against what? That's what eats at me, still. Here's an innocent young boy that don't know Landrews from a salt slick. Runs from one town. Gets in another where there are people all around—that trial had plenty of witnesses—and still he tries to fight and run again, never bothering to wonder why this *stranger* wants to kill him."

Tyler straightened in his saddle. He glanced over his shoulder. His voice was hard, lashing. "I'll tell you this, Sheriff. I don't like the way you talk. I don't think the town leaders would like it. . . . And I'll tell you something else. I don't like the way you're pushing this man-hunt. Seems to me all your sympathies are misplaced. Let me warn you. I get the least evidence that you're hanging back on this manhunt, and I'll have you jerked off this job—and I'll get your badge. And don't think I ain't got the influence to do it."

Barr Kingan sighed. "I never suspected you didn't, Mr. Tyler. If I've talked too much, I'm sorry. Like I say, you brought it up, and these things troubled me. I wondered why it didn't trouble that judge and jury, but like you say, it didn't, and they sentenced Landrews to hang, and that ends it as far as I'm concerned. Huh?"

Barr was standing in a bald sand flat when the posse overtook him and Charlie Tyler. He told them all to dismount and when they made a sweated semicircle

around him, their shadows clipped in the climbing sun, he showed them the signs he had picked up.

"Landrews dismounted here," Kingan said. "He's walking across there, leading old Carraway's mule, and he gives us two nice tracks to follow. There's his boot with the torn sole, and the mule puts his left rear foot down in a ginger way, makes a different print than the others. You fellows all see that?"

He waited, but no one spoke.

"Don't appear he's tiring any, yet," Sam Butterworth said. "Still taking a long step, and putting down a full track."

"Yeah. He's still full of whatever it is that's pushing him," Kingan said. He glanced up, met Tyler's gaze. The rancher blinked rapidly, his face gray under the sweated heat. Kingan went on. "And he got water last night at Carraway's. That's helped him some. But under this here sun, it ain't going to last him. Now we'll rest here until the chuckwagon catches up. Then we'll have lunch, water our horses, fill our canteens and—"

"Rest here!" Tyler lunged forward, the other men reacting at his abrupt movement. "What's the matter with you, Kingan? Rest? Now, when we've just picked up his tracks?"

Barr kept his voice low. "Those are my orders, Mr. Tyler."

"I've warned you, Kingan. And I warn you now again, in front of these men. You let that prisoner get away—you let him do some more wrong—and I'll have your badge."

Barr said, "That's your privilege, Mr. Tyler. You do what you think is best. Because that's what I'm doing. And as long as I'm wearing this badge, we're following my orders."

"He ain't on foot no more, Kingan. Do I have to tell you that?"

"No, you don't, Mr. Tyler. But I'd like to ask you something. You ever rode far on a mule, bareback, or even with a blanket between your tail and that razorback spine?"

During the morning young Billy Welch had rejoined the posse. He sat, restlessly, in the small shade provided by his horse.

"Sheriff," he said, "just sitting here like this sure galls me. Couldn't I ride on out, follow this trail, and leave sign for the rest of you? I mean, young as I am, I don't need as much rest as you older fellows."

Barr managed to smile. "You're going to rest, Billy. There'll be plenty of chances in this heat for you to prove you're younger and better than the rest of us. But I need you too bad to let you do a fool thing like going without food and rest on this desert."

"A lot of us would rather be riding than sitting here waiting for that damned chuckwagon," one of the Rio Salado riders said.

Barr's voice sharpened. "You rest. When the wagon gets here, you eat. We got a long way to go. You want to wear out even before Landrews does? Then you just throw yourself away. Don't rest. Don't eat right. That ain't the way I'm running this show."

Tyler's voice was sarcastic. "Why don't you tell us just how you are running it, Sheriff? I might need witnesses when I prefer charges of dereliction of duty against you."

Barr didn't even glance toward Tyler, but he said, in a level tone, "I might as well tell you, we're out here to run a man down, and take him without nobody getting hurt, if that is possible—especially with them bounty hunters pushing him. I've learned, hunting men in this country, that a man follows what his brain tells him as long as he can, and then he starts thinking with his belly when he gets hungry and thirsty. Now, we're going to take it steady, and we'll harry Landrews, and track him, and keep him moving. We got dogs, and guns, and food and water. I figure when he sees what our plan is, to run him until he starves or dies of thirst, he'll run toward Mexico, hoping he can make it before we overtake him, or he goes wild with hunger. He'll try to make Mexico, but he won't make it because he'll get hungry first. Wild hungry. Like I pray God none of you ever have been, or ever will be. And thirsty for water till his tongue swells his mouth shut

so he can't hardly breathe. Now, like I said, he's full of cider now, walking long. He's got ideas. He's smart. He knows the country. Knew where to steal a mule—"

"And a hammer and a chisel," Tyler said, voice cutting.

"And a hammer and a chisel. But them's the devil's own tools he's stolen. A mule. And a hammer and chisel and nobody to help him, and both hands shackled. It's God's truth, he's already up hell creek with no paddle, even if he don't think so. So we stay behind him and we push him, and we wait."

"How long is that going to be for hell's sake?" Tyler said.

Kingan shrugged. "How long does it take a man to get hungry? A man thinks with his brain until his gut is empty, then he's like any other animal and thinks only with his belly—when he gets hungry enough, and out of his head with thirst, he'll turn back, he'll head for civilization, and we'll take him easy, and he'll be begging for a hang rope."

"You make it sound easy. Simple," Tyler said, wiping his hand across his mouth. "I hope to God for your sake, it's like you say, Sheriff."

About four that afternoon, one of the riders fired his gun straight into the air, and in answer to this signal, Kingan and his posse converged on an arroyo where an ancient stream had washed huge boulders and left them stranded in a sandy gash of land.

The rider was full of excitement. He was holding the Carraway mule by its bridle.

"Look what I found, Sheriff. Carraway's mule, and the old devil was munching short grass as contented as anything. He was eatin' thistles and grinning like a jackass when I found him. . . . And look here, what else." He walked to a boulder, held up the shackles and broken cuffs. The metal was streaked and covered with blood, and there were blood stains on the boulder. "Poor son of a bitch cut himself loose, but looks like he nearly bled to death doing it."

Kingan stared at the blood. "That won't make it no easier on him," he said. "But it might make it easier for us. . . ." He turned, calling. "Get back to the wagon and have them bloodhounds brought up here."

When one of the Rio Salado riders was gone, racing back toward the slow-moving wagon, Kingan handed young Billy Welch the hammer, chisel and bridle of the mule.

"You ain't sending me back with these things?" Billy wailed.

"You'll catch up, Billy. I got a lot of jobs and somebody's got to do them. Now, I want you to tell old Carraway that our man rode that razorback mule as long as he could take it, and then left him, like I figured him to do."

The dogs were brought up, given the scent and turned loose. Yelping, they streaked, to the north and west, angling across the flats, seen and then lost in the mesquite bushes.

Barr stared after the dogs, seeing the trail they took, and projecting it far beyond them in the distance.

Tyler put his thoughts into words. "You know where Landrews is headed now, don't you, Sheriff?" When Barr still did not speak, Tyler's tone hardened. "It's plain. Plain to me anyhow. He's on his way to that greaser wife of his—while we stand out here in the desert."

Kingan exhaled heavily, wiping his sweat-and-dust streaked face with the sleeve of his shirt. He said in a low tone, "Relax, Mr. Tyler. You're probably right. He is turning toward his own ranch, for some reason. Maybe because he's bleeding bad. Whatever's making him do it, he ought to know better. I got stakeouts on his place. If he gets that far, he'll have to walk in past 'em."

V

The sun hung stubborn and brassy hot. Evan staggered once cat-footing to the brink of a ledge overlooking the plains, the long grass-sparse slope dotted with the remnants of his cattle, and distantly his adobe, a Texas-style house, like a black rectangle against the burned earth.

He held his breath, staring at that house, and thinking about Lupe inside it down there. He tried to control the need in him, and urgency that pushed him toward her, eager and reckless. He could see the house where she was! Soon—unless they killed him—he would be with her. He glanced over his shoulder at the wild brown cliffs and the dry open sky, the desert, the rocky crags. He wasn't afraid of them any more, and he forgot to be tired.

He almost forgot the way he gently massaged at his wrists and hands. As he walked, he found himself pressing them. They looked bad, the fingers swollen and as red as new-made sausage; the backs were puffed, the skin taut and broken. Blood smeared his palms and arms, congealed and coagulated in long streaks over his flesh. At least the bleeding had stopped, and now that he was in sight of his own house, the pain no longer mattered.

He lowered himself to his knees and lay belly-sprawled on the ledge, watching the distant hut and outbuildings, searching for signs of life.

For a moment lying there, he panted, exhausted. His legs trembled because he had been moving at an unbroken, half-running gait since he crawled out of the small creek a few miles above his ranchhouse. His boots were wet and his clothing faintly damp even in the unre-

lenting sun, but none of that mattered any more. You had to believe you'd never see your home-place again to know what it did to your insides to be within sight of it.

He figured it was an hour to sundown, and though he was trembling with anxiety, he knew better than to make any move at all until at least nightfall.

The baying of hounds carried in the silence from the creek, a sound of yelping frustration and distress.

He lay listening a moment, taut. He didn't have the hounds to worry about, not at the moment. But this didn't do much to cheer him. Barr Kingan undoubtedly had figured hours ago where he was headed, and losing the hounds by taking to the creek wasn't going to buy him much.

He watched a soaring buzzard, circling on the updrafts. A fine haze of red dust clouded about the slow-moving cattle on the slopes. The time dragged. Every moment he remained up here put the mounted posse closer. Barr might reach that ranchhouse before he did, be down there waiting for him.

He clenched his fists, willing the darkness to spread faster. Barr's being down there wasn't going to stop him. Nothing was going to stop him. He was going in there to Lupe. If Barr outmaneuvered him, it was a chance he had to take. But now, as night fell, his only worry was the stakeouts Barr had surely placed on his land.

In the first darkness, he came up, sidling with the quick movement of a coyote in the shadows, going downslope, keeping to the concealment of mesquite, rocks. Lights glowed like faint stars in the windows and he crept closer through the stunted stand of pines, watching those dim lights in the house. They were like beacons calling him in, and at the same time like signals warning him away.

He came downslope stealthily, running from deep shadow to shadow, his swollen hand pressed against his mouth to muffle the sound of his panting.

Kneeling low in the sage, he came close to his outbarn. In the darkness he picked out the figures of the sentries. For a long time he crouched, watching the men on horseback, riding slowly in the patches of light from

the windows. They were armed and they were taut, their heads up, alert for any unusual sound. He heard his dog, troubled, baying back at the far crying hounds.

There was the scent of danger in the night wind. Evan sensed it, the sick-sweet smell of death, the feeling that he was walking into a trap, that they were waiting for him in the darkness, guns drawn.

One of the guards rode past the barn, leaving the reach of the lamp-light, patrolling beyond the corral. The few horses penned there stirred nervously, snuffling, putting their heads up, eyes wild at the nearness of the stranger.

Evan stayed where he was, concealed in the darkness, until he could figure the pattern of the stakeouts. And there was something else he had to know, too: that these men were not decoys, with armed men hidden in the house, or the barn. He couldn't know this for sure, but there were no covert movements, nobody forgot and lit a cigarette, or called to a buddy, or shifted his weight, or the weight of a gun.

He watched the riders, concentrating on them. It had been a long day and these men were tired. His heart pounded in a frenzy, watching them. He saw them grow careless, slump in their saddles, pause for a smoke as the night wore on and the darkness and the silence intensified. He saw they didn't believe he'd be fool enough to return to his own ranch. He had counted on their believing this, but after the bloodhounds put a pattern to his trail, he had known that Kingan would read his plans and head the posse toward his ranch.

He peered at the slow-plodding riders through the dark, wondering when the distant baying of the hounds was going to alert them to the fact that the posse was moving toward them. He exhaled in a sigh of thanksgiving. Fatigue had dulled them and they were lowering their guard. He watched it happen, but knew he couldn't delay much longer.

He crouched, waiting, tense. He awaited one thing now, and he clenched his eyes tightly shut, praying it

would happen soon. It had to happen soon, or he was lost.

It happened.

Lupe and the Indian woman doused the last lamp in that house, plunging the building and the yard into a void of darkness.

Inside her bedroom, Lupe lay tense, listening. Was it the sound the wind made, one of the guards patrolling the yard? It was like the skittering of a mouse in the dark. It was no sound at all.

The whisper of sound was repeated. A shadow flickered past the curtains at her window. The window opened, creaking in a faint protest. Lupe bit down on her lip, watching the slender form glide through, feet touching the flooring without noise, a shadow swallowed and lost in deeper shadow.

Holding her breath, Lupe sat up in bed.

She stared at the form in the darkness against the wall, but she did not speak.

She remained frozen, unmoving. Her heart beat wildly, and her eyes burned suddenly, hot with tears. She could not even say she was surprised that Evan had come through armed stakeouts to her here. She knew that she was loved, that she came first in all Evan's thoughts. Always before, seeing unhappy couples yoked together in stifling matrimony, the way Evan loved her had made her feel wealthier than the richest woman in the territory, but now it filled her with dread and foreboding.

She watched his shadow in the thick darkness with a heavy heart and a terrible fear. From the first she'd realized that even in the shadow of the gallows, Evan would worry about her, and come to her, and lose his life trying to make sure that she was all right.

She caught back a sob. She heard the Indian woman stirring in the next room, the plod of the sentry's horse in the yard.

Evan stepped quickly, silently from the window, reaching for her. The warmth of the feather bed enveloped her and she felt the chill of his body and she thrust herself

suddenly into his arms, whispering, biting back her tears. "Gracia a Dios! Thanks to God, you're alive—"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes. Your hands! What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm all right. I had to see you."

"You shouldn't have come!"

"I had to come. You knew that." He pressed his mouth against the heat of her throat, the good smell of her. He shivered all over.

"They could have killed you."

"I didn't want to die—I wanted to see you."

"Thank God our poor dog didn't bark at you."

He drew her closer, hungrily, and there was subdued laughter under his whisper, "My dogs don't bark at me."

She placed her fingers over his lips. "You must be quiet. You can't stay here. Eula is in the next room."

"I trust her."

"I don't." Lupe knew that Evan was remembering the troubles Eula had had, hiding her own husband from the law. Eula was an Indian, and cared nothing for the law. But Lupe was sick with fears. "Eula's a good woman, but I don't trust nobody. Not any more. Not after what they have done to you. I don't hardly trust God Himself no more." Lupe crossed herself at the blasphemy, but at the same instant, glanced upward, her black eyes defiant. Where was goodness in heaven or earth when they chased a man like Evan with dogs and guns?

Evan touched Lupe, pressing the flat of his palm against her cheek, quieting her. "Listen to me, Lupe. It's us now—and you can't stay here—not without me—"

"Evan, think only of yourself! Your own safety—"

"I came back here for you. I'm scared to leave you here. Our only chance is to run, get into Mexico—"

"Oh, Evan. We can't. You know we can't—"

"I'll steal horses, food. You'd be safer with me than—"

"—two hundred miles—through that desert country—with the posse after us." She shook her head, clinging to him, pressing her face against his shoulder.

He breathed out. His voice was empty, but determined.

"I don't want to put you through it, but I don't know anything else to do. I can't leave you here."

"I'll be all right."

"No. They hate me, and they'll hate you. If anything happens to me—you got nobody."

"Evan, please, you can't run, dragging me after you!"

"Get up. Get dressed. Come with me. Please!"

"Oh, Evan. You got to stop thinking about me. Stop worrying about me. You know that. In your heart you know it. I'm all right. . . . They can't hurt me—not any more. . . . But they will kill you, and if they do, I will die—I'll be dead inside though I lived to an old age. In God's name, Evan, get away. Get away free somewhere. . . . Don't think about me no more."

He was silent a moment, holding her, his hands moving on her back, his nose buried in the soft, cool fragrance of her rich, black hair. He sagged there a moment, overcome with fatigue, beaten, too tired to think any more. He felt the ache of loneliness burn across the bridge of his nose. He saw the cold, hungry darkness he'd existed through last night, saw it multiplied by all the days he would live without her. He saw the eternal stretch of empty desert country, the lonely days without her, and that corroding worry for her in his mind, eating away everything else.

He wanted to swing her up in his arms, carry her through that window into the darkness. There were horses, and he could steal them. They could run, and no matter how far they got, they would be together. But even as he thought it, he knew it was no good. Lupe had come from a gentle family, and nothing in her life before he brought her to this rough land had prepared her for the hardship, the agony of running without rest.

"Listen to me," he whispered at last. "Maybe alone, I can make it. Maybe. If I can get into Mexico, I will go to your people. I will send one of them up here with the word. I will tell them to bring you to me there. It will look to these people up here like a visit from one of your family, and he will speak only expressions of sorrow,

about me, about your loss, but when he comes, you will know I am there, and you will come to me."

She nodded. "Yes. Yes. Yes. Anywhere . . . I'll come to you—for whatever time we will have—"

"What are you talking about?"

"I want you alive! I want you to live. They are after you with guns."

"They haven't got me yet. Maybe they won't. I'll keep thinking about you, and I'll get into Mexico. We'll be together again."

"Oh, Evan. Even that—is a nightmare life—"

"What's the matter with you?"

"It is. It is. To know we can never again live free and open. We must run—trusting nobody. Afraid."

"We'll be together, Lupe—"

"No. Not the way we must be—"

"I don't care, as long as we're together—"

"Like animals—like frightened, hunted animals!"

He stared at her in the darkness, seeing her pale, rigid cheeks, her fevered eyes. "What else is there?"

She drew a deep breath. Clinging to her, he felt the trembling go through her body. She whispered it, her gaze fixed on him, pleading. "Give yourself up."

"Are you crazy?"

She put her head back, gasping, as if unable to breathe. Her dark hair bobbed against her shoulders. "They will kill you if you don't! Do you think I do not know this? Do you think I do not know about the guns, the dogs? Do you think I do not know that man Tyler will never stop until you are dead? Do you think I do not see it in the anguish of Barr Kingan's kind face? He loves you. You are like a brother and yet he knows he must kill you. This is in his face for all to see. Do you think I do not wait here—for what? For the moment when they come and they tell me that they have killed you."

They were silent a moment. She pressed herself close to him, thinking how strange it was that it was he who was racked with cold when he came into this room, and now it was she who chattered with chill, whose bones felt brittle with cold, the kind of cold that had nothing to do

with anything except the congealing of panic inside you, a chill that might never lift, the kind that not even the hottest sun could ever dispel.

His voice was low, whispered, but savage. "I won't give myself up. I won't let them hang me! I shot that man in self-defense. He wouldn't even talk to me—because he knew why I was after him, he knew he had robbed me, and he knew I recognized him! I won't let them hang me for killing him!"

She pressed her cheek against his. "If you gave yourself up, we have one chance, you and I. We will work for you—the sheriff and I—if nothing else, he has promised me he will try to get your sentence commuted to life—and then there is always a chance—"

"You know better. I've been sentenced to hang, and that's it."

Her fingers dug into him. "We'll work for you! At least you'll be alive! I'll wait for you!"

He held himself rigid against her, against the agony of fatigue that made him weak, made him look for some cheap, easy way out, when he knew there was none. "It won't work, Lupe. It won't ever work. We got just one chance to be together on this earth. Run—"

"No," she whispered, her voice dead, without hope. "That's no chance at all—"

Abruptly Lupe stopped speaking. She went tense, her voice cut off, her breathing silenced by the sudden wild yowling of her dogs in the ranchyard.

"Someone comes," she whispered in panic, clinging to him. "The dogs have become used to the staked-out men in the yard, they do not bark at them."

"Yes." Evan's tone was flat. "It's Barr. He came quicker than I figured he could." He glanced about in the darkness like a trapped animal. He turned back, looking at Lupe in the darkness. He kissed her mouth, sick with need. "Come to me, Lupe. I'll get to Mexico. I'll send for you."

She clutched at him, but he slid free of her grasp, as though he were already disembodied, a part of the night,

a memory of warmth and love and goodness. "It's not right," she whispered in agony. "It's not fair. . . ."

He whispered from the window. "Talk to him. Stall him. Give me a chance."

And then he was gone, shadow dissolved in deeper shadow, and she sat there, empty with the loss.

Evan let himself cautiously to the ground, searching the darkness. As he'd figured, the two stakeouts rode out front to meet the posse and the sheriff.

He heard Barr raging, yelling for some of them to get out back of the house and to stay there until he ordered different. "What's wrong with you people? Do you think it's all over because we ride in here? Do you think we would be here if we hadn't sure sign that Landrews is around here somewhere?"

Evan bent forward and sprinted across the yard, diving into the heavy shadows around the barn. He lay there, waiting, his eyes searching for every movement.

He watched two horsemen gallop around the sides of the house. He held his breath. One of them rode directly toward him. He knew he couldn't be seen, and yet it was a fearful sight, watching that rider come unswervingly toward him.

Evan pressed his back against the dark wall of the barn. The rough texture of the outbuilding chewed into his flesh. He stared at the rider, setting himself and now mentally urging him to ride closer, closer. He pushed the pistol into his belt and gripped the rifle by its barrel, like a club, waiting. . . .

The horse quivered, pranced nervously, scenting Evan in the shadows, but the rider was less acute, and still burned by the chewing out Kingan had given him before the rest of the posse. The deputy cursed, tugging brutally on the reins, jerking the horse's head around.

The horse side-stepped, protesting. The rider fought at him. Evan lunged forward, swinging the rifle. The gunstock whistled in the darkness. It caught the sentry behind the head, stunning him.

Leaping forward again, Evan snagged the drooping

reins, quieting the nervous horse. Close beside it, he clasped the sagging rider by the shirt, yanking him from the saddle.

Evan stepped aside and half-hurled the unconscious man beyond him into the darkness. Far across the yard, the dogs yowled, the other sentry, sitting straighter in his saddle, called out something, his voice troubled.

Evan pulled the horse after him deeper into the shadows. He swung up into the saddle and rode at the unhurried gait the sentry had held. He went south and west, past the corral and into the chaparral before he put his heels deep into the horse's flanks and raced forward, riding out into the darkness.

The pounding on the front door increased. The dogs were barking savagely, and Lupe could hear men talking all around the house.

"Light a lamp, Eula," Lupe called from her bedroom when she heard gunstocks being pounded against the front door. "They'll break the door in."

"*Si, Señora.*" She heard Eula moving about in the next room, bumping furniture in the darkness. The knock sounded again, more violently. Eula called out, "Patience. *Aquí. Aquí.* I come. I come."

And then the lantern glowed in there, the light streaking under the door, faintly illuminating Lupe's room. She got out of bed, her heart thudding sickly, listening for the gunshots that would mean Evan had been discovered and killed. She found a bathrobe, shrugged into it.

When she came out into the front room, her black hair in braids on each side of her head, she saw Barr Kingan and Charlie Tyler awaiting her. Kingan looked tired, his face gray, his clothes streaked with alkali dust. But Tyler was gazing around him, eyes burning.

Lupe stiffened, feeling the hatred gorging up through her. She had never been taught to hate, she had learned that up here—among people like him. She said, "You, *Señor* Tyler. May I ask what you dare to presume to do in my house?"

"Take it easy, woman," Tyler told her. "You sure took your time coming out here, didn't you?"

She gazed at him, her dark eyes unblinking. "I have nothing to say to you, Señor." She glanced at Barr Kingan. "And I discuss nothing with you, Sheriff, as long as this—this *man* remains uninvited inside my house."

Tyler cursed. "Why, you little—"

"Relax, Mr. Tyler," the sheriff said. "Maybe you best wait outside. This is the lady's house and—"

"And we're looking for a fugitive, Sheriff. A killer, and I won't listen to no greaser woman telling me—"

"We also are in her house, Mr. Tyler. And we got no warrant, and I figure it'll be a good idea if you wait out with the men."

Tyler stared a moment at Lupe. She was unintimidated by him. This outraged him. He considered Mexicans inferior to him, and he was accustomed to being treated with overt respect and awe. It was as if her set face were hewn from rich brass. She met his gaze unblinkingly.

Tyler jerked his head around, peering at Kingan in the yellowly lighted room. His voice vibrated in the silence. "I warn you, Kingan. If he's here, and you let him slip away with your stalling—you treating this woman like anything except greaser trash—"

"Outside, Mr. Tyler." Kingan said. His voice was level, but the rage and weariness were like prickles under it.

Gaze probing about the room, the half-opened doors, Tyler retreated.

He stopped as if frozen. Men yelled from the rear of the ranchhouse. A man shouted loudly in terror and rage. The dogs yowled insanely, and leather and metal clattered as the posse moved.

Tyler jerked his head around, staring at Lupe. Her face was colorless. She looked as if she might faint, except that she knew she wouldn't because this kind of escape was too easy.

"Landrews!" Tyler's voice blasted in the room. "This greaser woman stalled us—just like I knew—and he got out of here!"

He stared at them a moment, his face rigid, eyes wild,

then he heeled around and ran through the door, his gun drawn and spurs rattling.

Kingan hesitated a moment longer, gazing into Lupe's pallid face. He shook his head. He did not need to speak or to question her. He had all the answers he needed. He sighed out heavily, turned and strode out, leaving the door standing open.

For that brief interval in time, Lupe did not move. She still waited for the triumphant growl from the posse. They'd found Evan. They'd killed him, the way a mindless beast kills, insensate with the smell of blood, the need to kill without mercy.

"Mother of God. *Mary, Madre de Dios.* Mother of God." Lupe whispered it, pressing her fist against her throat.

Lupe walked woodenly through the front door. She paused on the roof-covered stoop that ran the length of the long, narrow adobe house. She was aware that Eula followed her, carrying a lamp. Her dogs came whining, pressing against her in the light.

The yard was fiery yellow with lanterns.

Lupe walked into the breezeway, holding her breath. She sagged with relief. Across the yard near the barn she saw a group of men in lantern light. All were talking at the same time. They supported a man whose knees buckled when he tried to stand alone.

She did not breathe until she saw that the wounded man was not Evan.

It was not Evan. *Gracias, Madre de Dios.* It was not Evan.

She pressed her chilled fingers against her forehead. She heard Tyler's thunderous voice raging at Kingan. The other men fell silent, standing awkward and uncomfortable at the way Tyler spoke to the sheriff.

"Landrews walks in here and out, Kingan, at will. You could of ringed this place. That's what you ought to of done. I told you. These men heard me. Ring this place with men, I told you. No, you don't want nobody killed, you say. What do you want, Kingan? You want to tell us that? This man could be dead. Is that what you want?"

You want Landrews to get away? Is that what you're hoping? Is that what you want? You and that greaser woman of his? You could have stopped him. These men are my witnesses, you could have stopped him, and if he gets away, so help me, I'll get your badge!"

Barr Kingan met the rancher's gaze levelly. His voice shook with the weary rage in it. "If he gets away from me, Mr. Tyler, you can have my badge—you won't have to take it. But I told you before, and I tell you now—all of you—I am the sheriff, and as long as I am, I run this manhunt my way."

VI

By daybreak Evan had reached the foothills of the Magdalena Mountains.

Near the crest of a barren hill he paused, his horse lathered and trembling with weariness.

He gazed about, trying to think ahead, trying to overcome the fatigue that had struck him like physical blows all night. He had kept moving because he had not dared to stop. The horses and the bloodhounds had his scent, and there was no hope the dogs would lose his trail in the brushland until the sun rose high enough to dry out the very air itself.

Ahead of him rose the climbing hills, growing in ragged plateaus and sheer walls all the way to vast blue ranges, hundreds of miles of them, lost inside other trackless ranges. He didn't fool himself that this way offered any hope of security.

He licked at his dried lips. They tasted of alkali. He was thirsty, and there was no water in the mountains and even less in the arid wastes below.

Still his only hope lay south. Two hundred miles south over impossibly rugged, uninhabited land to the border. In Mexico there was a chance to stay alive, if he lived to reach it.

His mouth twisted. There was a hunger in him worse than the need for food, a thirst that made his desire for water of small importance. There was a hated name in his brain, and it clouded all his thinking processes, kept coming back like the burn of fever. He had to stay alive to face that man, even if he had one last bullet left in his

gun—somewhere this side of hell he meant to match them up, that last bullet and that hated name.

"Forget it!" He spoke aloud, and so savagely that the fatigued horse started, trembling. He smoothed his hand along its sweated mane.

He glanced back below him to the waste of sage and one thing to plan ahead to the moment when he would somehow find Charlie Tyler, but unless he escaped Barr Kingan's steady and relentless pursuit before hunger and thirst and need for sleep overcame him, nothing else had any importance.

Think, he commanded himself. You know this God-forsaken country. There's water somewhere, and you've got to find it.

He drew the back of his hand across his mouth. It was mesquite, wincing against the first wicked burst of sunlight. It blinded him and for a moment he remained still, eyes closed tightly. Fifteen miles from the Old Trail out here to the foothills—no longer an impossible distance with a horse under you.

He urged the horse forward, feeling its legs quiver. The animal had to rest soon, and God only knew when it had had water last. It may have been used most of the day on stake-out duty at his place before he stole it last night. Barr Kingan would rest his men and his animals, but there was no way to know how one of the posse might have cared for his mount.

He exhaled. The horse wasn't the only one who needed rest. This was his third day in this savage sun without food and with water drunk only on the run.

His eyes were heavy. He could not even count the number of times he had almost fallen from the saddle crossing those plains down there during the night. He had kept moving. Barr would spell his men, force them to rest, but this gave him his only hope of escape: keep moving, put miles between them and hope those dogs would lose his scent in the dry and breathless heat.

Thinking about the dogs and the men in the gray flats below him, he involuntarily booted his horse, hurrying it.

The horse faltered on the rocks, missing a step and staggering.

Determinedly, Landrews slowed his pace. He was running without thinking, and that was almost as bad as not running at all. He had to think. He had to clear his mind out, and he had to think.

They were pushing him, keeping him moving because that was Barr Kingan's way. He had hunted men with Barr in the forgotten time before this nightmare began. He knew how Barr figured, reasoned, planned.

Knowing this, he had to use it. It did no good to know how a man like Barr Kingan tracked if you didn't put that knowledge to some use. Bitterly he admitted he had not done this since he ran from his ranch last night. They pushed him, and he let them push him. They set the pace, and it ought to be the other way around. It had to be if he were going to stay alive.

He swung down from the saddle, angling upward, south by west into the Magdalenas, leading the horse, forcing himself to consider Barr Kingan and the spot he was in and to put everything else out of his mind.

Once he was thinking, he felt better, a little refreshed, as if a lost breeze reached down and touched him from those far mountains. But of course, nothing like that had happened. It was hot, and the sun rose, and the air burned his nostrils.

Still, forcing himself to plan, to remember and to look ahead, gave him a faint glimmer of hope. He was alive yet, and he could not even see a trace of his hunters in the glare below him. He had a chance. There was time to plan, and a time to make that plan work.

First, it was clear enough that he couldn't stop anywhere in these foothills. They were barren, little better than the desert, even closer to the sun than the flats and getting all the heat reflected off its gray surface. He needed water, and there was none. He had to put miles between him and the plodding pursuit of the sheriff. The sheriff. His best friend. His *ex-best* friend. That bought him nothing because his friend was going to track him in

that cold, deadly, unchanging pace, all the way to the gallows.

Evan's face pulled into a savage grin. "Go to hell, friend Barr. Go to hell. I'm the one you won't get. I'm the one you won't bring out of here."

He nailed it down, the certain way Barr would harry him, keep him away from food, help, water. The only way to defeat Barr was to get water, and keep moving.

Water. His mind strayed ahead of him, south and west, covering the barren wastes as he had covered it on man-hunts or seeking strays. Water. Cow Springs. Hell's own distance south, but on the rim of the wastes, a mudhole in the hills.

Evan's face twisted in that bitter smiling, and he walked faster, taking giant steps in the broken land. Cow Springs. He didn't try to figure the miles. He simply set the mud hole in his mind as the goal, and moved toward it.

He glanced across his shoulder, seeing the wasteland shimmering in heat waves. God knew Cow Springs was not a year around water hole. No one ever counted on it to be anything but a dry crust part of the year, but he had hit Cow Springs before. A man who wanted water could get it, by digging under that crust, enough for himself, and for his horse. As he recalled, the taste wasn't worth a damn, but he strode long now, thinking ahead to it.

Cow Springs. This was the answer, all right. It put him far south and west. It carried him toward the border. It kept him in the foothills, but out of those mountains. From long experience he knew Barr Kingan would dearly love to force him west into the mountains. It was harder for a posse to track in the hills, but it was worse on the fugitive; it was impossible for him to stay alive up there. The mountains took everything out of you that the desert had not already sapped.

Sorry, Barr. I'm going to get water and I'm going to stay out of the mountains.

Something touched at Evan's face like a chilled breeze, and he paused. He stood looking back to the north, his gaze fastened on something in the blue distance.

For some moments he did not move at all, looking off across the foothills and the gray flats, his mind filled with a terrible longing, and a sick memory that belonged to the lost past, another lifetime, when he had love and a home and all the security a man ever knew on this earth.

His slender form was shaken suddenly by a violent trembling. He shook himself, as if from a dream that refused to fade, and walked faster, dragging the horse in his wake.

He kept moving then, as the sun rose behind him, and then climbed his left shoulder, thrusting in blazing whiteness upward into the arc of a cloudless sky.

There were boulders and it was rough going, but he was putting miles behind him, and the thought of the water at Cow Springs gave him hope, made him forget the sun that blazed upon his shoulders and cooked the last moisture out of his body.

The ground tapered off, the mesquite thickened, and he walked out of the boulders seeing the scar on the face of the flatland, the broken yellow ground, and the crusted pool, no larger than a footstool in the sump of a gouged basin. He laughed suddenly, running downslope.

There was a sudden sharp call from the mesquite, a quick mutter of voices, a curse, and the click of a rifle-bolt thrust home, deadly and loud in that dreadful silence.

Evan stopped running and turned upward, west toward the hills, putting the body of the horse between him and the water hole in one movement.

Behind him, men yelled, horses lunged upward when they were released from the pressure that held them prone, hidden in the mesquite.

A rifle cracked below him, and the bullet ricocheted off stones near his feet. The horse squealed, leaping upward and Evan dragged hard on the reins, holding him down.

Keeping his head low, he ran alongside the horse, swung into the saddle. He placed his body prone along the mane of the animal, booting it, running into the hills at top speed. Thank God he had let the horse rest from

his weight. There was to be no water from Cow Springs for either one of them, but the horse had to carry them out of here, fast, high and far.

Behind him, the men leaped into saddles, firing at him, wildly, the sound of the rifles whistling in the silence and ringing in the hill breaks.

He climbed steadily, going into the rocks before he even looked back.

Clinging to his horse, racing uphill, Evan cursed with a sense of helplessness. Barr had read his mind, staked out the only waterhole within only God knew how many miles. He had gone running there, and Barr's men had been waiting. . . .

Tyler yelled aloud, exultant when he heard the distant rattle of gunfire.

"Cow Springs, Kingan! They jumped him at Cow Springs!" Tyler yelled.

Kingan was sitting rigidly in his saddle, listening, his face taut. He nodded, waving the posse to a gallop toward the mudhole. "Sounds like it, Tyler," was all he said.

They rode fast, covering the crusted ground rapidly. The gunfire ceased, and as they rode they were tense waiting for the next volley of sound.

The three posse men were on the incline of the hills above the waterhole when Kingan and his men rode in.

Tyler was in the lead. He rode forward, shouting, "Where is he? Where's his body? You men get him?"

The posse men were gray, troubled. They didn't answer Tyler, but one of them spoke to Kingan. "He come in as wary as any chicken-stealing coyote you ever saw, Sheriff. He took off like a scalded cat when Vincent clicked his rifle bolt. He was gone almost before we saw him for sure. But we saw him, all right."

Tyler swung down from his saddle, quivering, his face gray. "You stupid sons! What in hell you doing standing here? You saw him. Why in hell didn't you take out after him—"

"Take it easy, Mr. Tyler," Kingan said. "Ain't no sense chewing out the boys. They followed my orders—"

"Your orders!" Tyler's voice shook. "When you get a man in your gunsights, Sheriff, you don't let him ride out of it—not alive. Not a thieving murderer! You shoot to kill, you run him down—that is unless he's your friend and you're giving him every chance to make the border alive."

Kingan was silent a moment, then he spoke, his voice carefully controlled, lower than ever. "It's getting late and it's hotter than hell, Mr. Tyler. Let's don't none of us say things we'll regret. Like I told you, it's hell's own distance from here to Mexico. He's been three days out here now. There ain't no more mud holes like this that I know of—and I know this region as well as Landrews does, or better. . . . You men water your horses at the spring there, and take a rest. You fellows done fine. You done just what I told you. You kept him away from water, and none of you got hurt."

Tyler's voice was low, but it quavered, and his eyes blinked rapidly. "Keeping these men from getting hurt is commendable as all hell, Sheriff. But what about Landrews? For hell's sake, do we spend our lives up here? Or do we go after him?"

Barr said, "We *are* after him, Mr. Tyler. If you was with him, you'd know. We are after him like no devils ever chased a man. We don't have to get nobody killed to stop him now. We got everything on our side. Everything."

Tyler started to speak again, but Kingan walked away, leading his horse, putting the animal between them like a wall.

Tyler stood, impotent with rage, his whitened fists clutching the reins. He watched silently as Kingan walked his horse to the sump of the waterhole, let it drink of the sluggishly gurgling water there, then the tall rancher turned, speaking to himself, to nobody, to the men near him.

"Look at him. He's got no cares. He gets paid. He can stand this hellish heat. What does he care? It's nothing to

him. We take Landrews, we don't take him, he gets his pay just the same. It ain't like that with me. Kingan acts like it would suit him just fine if that murdering Landrews was to sneak in on us in night camp and slit my throat. And by hell, that's what the thieving son will do, Kingan goes on lettin' him run free. You saw what happened. Kingan had that ranch staked out, and yet Landrews walked in and out as it pleased him—in fact he rode out with one of our horses! Well, he can come in on us at night, just like that, while we move around like some Sunday School class on a picnic. Don't get hurt! Don't nobody get hurt! No, let the killer run loose—let him kill again—”

Tyler stopped speaking only because distant gunfire from above them punctuated his tirade, and left him standing taut-faced, listening. It was as if he had reached a place where he could no longer live with the pressure of his own inner thoughts, he had to let them pour out or he would burst as though his lungs were tied off.

Kingan left his horse ground-tied in the sump, came running up the incline.

His voice crackled with rage. “Them bastard bounty hunters! They're pushing him—and somebody's going to get killed, sure as hell!”

Tyler laughed angrily. “Yeah. And it might be Evan Landrews. That would be tough, wouldn't it, Kingan?”

Barr Kingan stood staring upward into the hills, listening. He did not answer the rancher, or even bother to glance over his shoulder toward him.

“Mount up, and move out!” Barr called over his shoulder. “Whatever it is up there, we better move in on it!”

Evan was still in the saddle, climbing upward, his horse faltering when there was the sharp rattle of gunfire from the east. Under him, his tired horse gave a frantic lunge and broke into a gallop.

The rifle cracked again. Evan looked around, seeing no protection except the boulders above him. He cursed because the boulders were not only a wall, they were a trap,

too. He could ride into a cul-de-sac and they'd carry him out like dead game.

Far below him he could see the faint dark forms of men near Cow Springs. South was open, hilly country, and that was barred to him because his tired horse could not hope to outrun watered, rested animals very long.

They'd cornered him, pushed him into a corner. This was nobody's plan—Barr had set his stakeouts to wait at Cow Springs, but the bounty men were tracking on their own, they had picked him up sometime during the day as he ran south, leading his horse, and when the posse turned him back uphill from the waterhole, they had chased him almost into the path of the bounty men.

Evan heard the crack of a rifle, heard the deadly whirr of a bullet past his head.

He ducked low. No sense thinking about how the trap was sprung, he was caught in it as surely as though three walls had sprung up, north, south and east of him.

He glanced upward, feeling that sense of helplessness. The mountains were their own kind of death trap, and yet he moved west, climbing, because this was the only way open to him. Already the bounty men were swearing because the boulders kept them from getting a clear bead on him.

Feeling the horse quiver, Evan slowed him, swung from the saddle. Pulling the horse by the bridle after him, Evan ran through the rocks, going upward.

The twisting goat-path between the rocks narrowed suddenly and alarmingly.

Evan stopped running, panting, the backs of his sweat-rashed knees trembling. Ahead of him rose a sheer wall and he saw no way out.

He moved slowly through the rocks. It was hot, breathless inside the narrow box. There was not much more room than inside a coffin.

He put his back against the wall, looking around, breathing through his mouth.

Suddenly he heard the voices of the men below him, carried clearly up to him on some odd updraft, sharp and loud in the rocky silences.

"I don't hear him moving no more. You think he's trapped in them rocks up there, Blaisdell?"

Blaisdell!

Bounty hunter Blaisdell.

Evan slumped against the rocks, an empty smile twisting his cracked lips. He had ridden with posses that followed Blaisdell on manhunts. He had heard that name talked in savage whispers over campfires and saloon bars. A pock-faced, soulless manhunter with eyes as flat and glassy as a dead bird's. Nobody escaped him, nobody got to him with a plea for mercy, because he had no mercy. Parents frightened their children with that dread name: move faster, or the hunter Blaisdell will get you! And now he was tracking him, and that meant the territory had put a substantial reward on his head. Blaisdell never went out for peanuts. The stakes were high, and there was nothing Blaisdell wouldn't do to collect bounty.

He heard Blaisdell call out. "He's in them rocks, all right. You fellows cover me, Brasa, and I'll smoke him out."

Brasa. That would be Juan de Brasa—the bird-dog, and that meant the other man was Jake Yelloweye, the half-breed Apache. No wonder they had been on his tail in these hills when Kingan's posse turned him back from Cow Springs. Those three men read sign as no Mescalero ever did, and they figured ahead from the sign they read, and that moved them faster, and they were seldom wrong.

"Hold it, Señor Blaisdell!" This was Juan de Brasa's voice from the rock croppings, viciously polite, but pregnant with mistrust, just the same.

"What's eatin' you?" Blaisdell wanted to know.

"Señor, if you please, I don't think Yelloweye and me care to sit down here and cover you—not while you creep up there and claim the bounty for yourself alone."

"That's right, Blaisdell." Yelloweye had a terrible speech impediment, but his protest was clear enough.

"What's the matter with you gents?" Blaisdell said. "We going to sit down here and carve him up between us while he gets away?"

"He ain't going nowhere, I don't think, Señor, if you please," Juan de Brasa said. "And it makes better if we decide how we share the bounty. Now. Eh, Yelloweye?"

"That's my thinking." This was what Yelloweye meant to say in his tormented voice.

Evan wasted no more time listening. Those men trusted each other not at all because they had hunted together before, knew each other well. Only a split settled ahead of time could be enforced later, by gun or knife, or threat.

Evan pulled the horse past him, close against the rock wall. He dropped the reins, ground-tying the animal.

He crouched low, crossed the cell into which he had been boxed. On his knees, he moved around the boulder, dragging his rifle beside him. Somewhere in this maze of rocks he had taken the wrong path. Somehow he had to find a trail upward, and he had to do it in the few seconds remaining while Blaisdell shouted down his partners in the outcroppings below him.

He moved along the hard-packed earth, the small volcanic spikes chewing at his knees. He hesitated, certain that a few feet to his right and below him, there was a path wide enough for a horse, perhaps the trail of an elk from Cow Springs below. Whatever it was, for the moment it looked like his only chance out of here.

He pushed beyond the protection of a boulder the size of a pony rump, trying to see that the trail didn't lead into another trap, another rock cell.

Simultaneously from below came Yelloweye's tortured but startled yell, the thrust of rifle bolt and the crack of gunfire.

Gasping, Evan reacted, hitting the ground hard, moving as that rifle bolt slammed into place.

The bullet was low, well aimed if quickly pressed off.

The pellet smashed into the boulder, rocking it slightly, skidding away spent.

Scowling, Evan lay face down, watching that boulder. Below him, Yelloweye was shouting, trying in his strained way to make the others understand that Landrews was trying to sneak out of the rocks while they parleyed.

"You get him, Yelloweye?" Blaisdell yelled.

The half-breed answered something, but it was unintelligible to Evan. Taking his time, he inched back, getting above the boulder, sighting downward around it.

Yelloweye fired again. For the second time the bullet slashed into the rock, and it quivered against Evan's hand.

Evan stared downward. Blaisdell, de Brasa and the half-breed were only partially concealed behind small slate outcroppings below. They felt pretty secure. He had to get into some kind of position to fire down on them, and in doing it he would expose himself to one of their rifles.

He brought his gaze slowly back upwards. Between where he crouched and the three bounty men there was at least fifty yards of small rocks, loose shale, boulders.

Steadying himself on his knees, Evan touched at the boulder which had quivered each time one of Yelloweye's bullets struck it.

Holding his breath, he peered around the boulder again, and this time the three men who had ceased arguing over the bounty for the moment fired at him simultaneously. They had him pinned down. Somehow, Yelloweye had made himself understood. They knew where he was.

The bullets struck the boulder, bounding away from it. Evan lay there, thinking hard about the gunfire on an angle from below him. Gun experts had always told him, and he believed that even rifle-fire was ineffectual at such an angle. He chewed at his dried lips. His chance to escape this trap alive depended on his testing that theory.

He glanced back at the boulders rimming the narrow path to the wall where his horse was. Once more he checked the position of the bounty hunters below him, drawing their gunfire.

He saw he had one chance and he had to take it. He set himself, putting his shoulder against the precariously tilted boulder. He felt it resist a moment, tilt, ease upward and then abruptly fall away from him, going downward through the rock outcroppings, tearing everything loose before it.

Evan heard Blaisdell yell a warning, but he was already moving, coming up to his feet and lunging against the next boulder. They didn't fire at his leaping figure.

His heart beat faster. This meant they were already busy, trying to dig in in an almost open place against the terrible rain of the rockslide.

He thrust upward with strength born out of desperation and a crazed will to get out of this trap. The boulder broke loose, larger than the first and following it, leaping, tearing, thundering through the rock bed—driving an avalanche of shale and stone ahead of it.

Evan didn't wait to see what was happening on that outcropping. He was putting his shoulder against the next boulder and when that broke free, plummeting outward, he ran to the next.

He saw his horse lunging about convulsively. He glanced downward once, seeing in the clouds of dust huge bounding rocks and a storm of stones, loosed and raging downward. Through the thunder of the stones and landslide he heard Yelloweye's wild screaming, the sound like an animal in distress, or a woman in hysteria.

Evan clutched at the reins, pulling the terrorized horse's head down. He turned and ran along the trail to the smaller path upward. For a moment he hesitated, gazing downtrail toward the foothills, and the plains below. He knew better. The posse at Cow Springs had heard the gunfire; there was no possible chance they hadn't. Kingan's men were in the foothills now, climbing. He had only one chance, move upward, find a break in the hill and circle it somehow south.

At the moment all that mattered was that he get out of this maze of rocks under cover of the rockslide.

He clambered upward on the elk path, running, dragging the horse after him. . . .

Barr Kingan pulled hard on the reins of his fagged mount, staring upward. The sounds of gunfire had been drowned in a thunder that rattled the earth under him.

Rockslide.

Barr lifted his arm, motioned the posse to a gallop

behind him and rode across the rocks, no longer looking for any sign, going toward the thunder of cascading rocks and earth.

The slide was ebbing when the posse came into sight of it. There were brief moments of silent lull in the thunder, and then loosened rocks rolled downward again, making their own smaller landslides, each of them lesser than the one before it.

Barr heard something that at first he mistook for the scream of a panther. He held up his arm in a signal to halt, and in the silence he heard it again. It was a man's tortured screams, someone begging for help.

Barr jerked his head, and the posse cut at an angle north and east into the sharply rising hillside.

The screaming had ceased by the time the posse reached the place where the three bounty hunters had holed in.

They saw Blaisdell first. He was pressed against a slate wall, covered to belly-button with rocks and shale. Near him, bleeding, his hat gone, Juan de Brasa was cursing, only half conscious. They did not see Jake Yelloweye at once.

"Get them men out of there," Barr ordered, swinging down from his saddle.

Tyler led five posse men unsteadily across the piles of loose rock to where Blaisdell was trapped. The five men began throwing rocks away from Blaisdell and de Brasa.

Tyler said, "Did you get Landrews?"

Blaisdell's flat eyes glittered and he stared at Tyler. "You son of a bitch," was all Blaisdell said.

Tyler hesitated one more moment, then shrugged and turned his back on the trapped men, walking away from them. "Jake Yelloweye is covered by rocks somewhere over there, Kingan," Blaisdell said. "He tried to get to us. He couldn't make it."

A faint moan led Barr and the posse men to the place where Jake Yelloweye had been knocked down and covered by rocks and shale.

"Let's dig him out," Barr ordered.

They fell to, throwing rocks aside. Jake's eyes were

opened, anguished when they found him. He tried to speak, but made no effort to move.

"He's badly crushed," Kingan said, kneeling beside him. "Ribs broken. He's in a bad way."

He stood up, and Jake's eyes followed him.

"Fix up some kind of blanket stretcher," Kingan ordered. "Two or three of you men are going to have to take Yelloweye back to Doc Curtis in Socorro."

Jake Yelloweye's lips moved, his obstructed voice rose.

Barr shook his head. "I don't savvy, Yelloweye. Save your strength."

Blaisdell, freed, limping, stared down at the crushed man. "He says he don't want to go back. He's got to get Landrews."

Barr straightened, meeting Blaisdell's gaze levelly.

"I already warned you bounty men about something like this. I told you, you get anxious and push him, you'd get a bullet in your tails. The three of you, bad hurt—lucky you ain't dead, and Yelloweye with just a chance to get back to Socorro. I warn you men back for the last time. You stay with my posse, or you get no help next time, you get nothing but a bullet from my men for obstructing justice. You got that clear, Blaisdell?"

"I hear you. I don't know what kind of law it is that says a man can't go after a outlaw—"

"It's the law I just give you. And out here, I'm the law, and you don't think so, you get in my way like this again, and see. We'll gun you down, just like we would anybody else that tried to stop us doing our sworn duty."

Blaisdell straightened, forgetting the agony in his body, forgetting everything except the threat and pressures in the sheriff's lashing voice. Their gaze struck and held and for that frozen instant in time, they were alone on that rock-covered hill, two strong men, unwilling and unable to compromise.

Blaisdell lowered his gaze first. The pain in his body throbbed upward, beating against the crown of his head.

He forced a flat laugh.

"Ain't no sense in this world you hating Jake, de Brasa or me, Sheriff. Sure, we know what you think of bounty

men. And hell, you might chase us off. What would that buy you? You think you wouldn't get some more to take our place? You think they ain't more bounty men riding out here right now, and more after them as fast as they get a smell of the money the territory is offering for Landrews? You just work along with us, Sheriff, and we'll take him for you—and none of your voters gets hurt. That makes some kind of sense, don't it?"

Kingan shook his head. "You make up your own mind. You got my warning." He turned his back on Blaisdell, supervising the removal of Jake Yelloweye's broken body on the stretcher. With it went two more of Charlie Tyler's Rio Salado riders.

Kingan took a long pull at his canteen. He felt good about this hunt. He had pulled tail feathers out of Blaisdell and de Brasa, he had fewer Rio Salado men to worry about, and Landrews was using up what strength he had left after three hellish days, climbing higher in these mountains.

He saw Tyler stride past him, going to where Blaisdell was bending over de Brasa.

Barr stood staring into the mountain above them, but he had his ear tuned in to what the Rio Salado rancher was saying to the bounty men.

"You fellows ain't pulling out?" Tyler said.

Blaisdell glanced up, flat eyes glittering with his contempt. "Hell no. Nobody ever said it would be easy taking Landrews, but I'll take him."

"We get him, Señor," de Brasa said, spitting blood. "He pulled one smart trick, but we get him."

"I'd like to see him dead," Tyler said.

"What the hell," Blaisdell said. "For what would I keep him alive? Dead, he's a lot easier for me to handle."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"So talk."

"Like I said, I want Landrews dead. You kill him, I'll add five hundred on top of the territory bounty."

Blaisdell laughed. "You really do want him dead."

"I really do," Charlie Tyler said.

VII

The afternoon sun held relentlessly and Evan could feel its stinging rays broiling the last juices from his body.

Stopping to rest was out of the question, there was no hope that he would be able to stop at all.

He kept climbing, cursing himself with every upward step he took. Running from the bounty hunters he had moved into a new, rugged world where every step pulled something out of him, and hills were lost inside huge rings of other hills.

Climbing, leading the horse, he stumbled, almost fell, and then leaped quickly to his feet again.

With a feverish sense of guilt, Evan jerked his head around and looked over his shoulder. It was as if he was afraid Barr Kingan had seen him falter, even if only for an instant, and was reckoning inside his brain how much longer he could hold out now.

Hell with you, Kingan.

He paused, standing straight and listening. There were nearby skittering sounds, a rattlesnake in underbrush, a small animal running into the rocks, but he ignored these, trying to pick up the noise of his pursuers.

Distantly, and far below, he heard the call of the hounds. They could track him easier up here where the mountain breezes put some faint moisture in the air and the stunted piñons held it longer than the sterile mesquite and petrified sage on the flats.

Now that he had eluded the bounty hunters for the present, he shoved his rifle into the saddle scabbard, wincing at the sound of the metal rattling the empty canteen hooked over the pommel. Water. Everything reminded

him, even if he could forget for a few minutes at a time. His mouth was dry and it hurt to swallow. You sure as hell couldn't swallow cotton hour after hour.

He moved forward again, going upward. He couldn't go on like this without rest. He would have to stop soon, or fall.

Suddenly, it seemed to Evan that he lost the sun. One moment it was blindingly bright, and the next it was gone.

He widened his eyes, staring around him, and as he stood there he heard distantly a rumble of small guns, except it could not be guns because the earth trembled under him.

As he stood there, peering around, the sun reappeared, brassy and glaring, brighter than ever, with a noon whiteness in the late mountain afternoon.

The guns crackled again, coming from above him. The swollen world of the mountain quavered.

He exhaled. A mountain storm was moving down upon him from some lost ranges above and west of him. It was the incredible kind of happening that bore down suddenly in the terrible vastness of these ranges where powerful storms could blow their fury, expend their rage, unheard or unsuspected by any human being.

Lightning crackled suddenly from the clearest sky, seeming to spit and erupt before his face.

Evan tightened his grip on the horse's reins when the fatigued animal reared, quivering.

"Hold on," Evan said. "There's one good thing about a rainstorm, horse. It's wet."

Lightning crackled again, followed by eruptions of thunder.

Evan turned, searching for a place to hole in during the storm. If it moved into the hills below him, it would slow the posse, or stop them for a while. He had this chance to rest.

There were no overhangs, no boulders to belly up against, and he ran, feeling the chill of the wind with the promise of rain in it, refreshing him.

The lightning snapped, white and ragged before him,

followed by immediate peals of deafening thunder. The storm moved down upon him quickly, as though it had burst through the jagged hog-backs of the upper ranges and now struck with renewed force.

First the rain came in long, swollen drops, driven on the wind, slapping against his hat, bursting in his face. The sun was gone as if it had never existed. The world of the mountain was dark, purpling in the clumps of pines, darkening around the boulders, going black in the distant passes.

Lightning spun in a white ball, exploding blindingly before his eyes. Thunder followed the static snap of the lightning. It was as if the thunder and lightning shook the rain out of the wind, and it suddenly pounded down with wicked force.

For a moment Evan stood with his face turned up, eyes closed, letting the rain batter him, splash on his lips, pour down his neck. This didn't make sense and he fell on his knees, lightning crackling around him, needing drinking water.

He dug frantically, scooping out a hole in the hardened earth, digging deeply, tearing away the clay crust, forming a basin.

He stayed for some time on his knees in a kind of exultance, watching the hole fill with water, seeing the gray rivulets of rain spilling into it.

He got the canteen from the saddle, filled it with water from the hole, then he allowed the horse to drink.

The animal quivered with the exquisite sensation of gulping water from the basin.

Evan remained on his knees, his head back, letting the rain drench him. He could feel the static charge lessen in the atmosphere as the lightning rolled past him, crackling now like distant rifles, reverberating in lost canyons to the east of him.

The rain struck the parched earth, bouncing in gray bolls. The horse, filled, lifted its head, quivering with satisfaction, for the moment sated.

Evan stood up slowly, his clothes flattened and adhering to him, rain spilling from the flat brim of his hat.

He could feel the easing off of the rain as it was driven past him, following in the wake of the lightning.

For the moment Evan felt refreshed, almost as if he had had food and a brief nap.

He glanced downhill, knowing this energy would not last. If he could use it to find a hiding place before dark, he might get a full night's sleep for the first time since he leaped from the prison coach on the Old Trail.

He moved forward in the diminishing rain, hardly knowing what he sought. The downpour lessened, becoming a drizzle, and then ebbing, spent. Almost at once the ground turned yellow again, looking parched as the water ran off, shed, or was sucked into the arid earth. The sun reappeared yellowly, showing faint winking drops of moisture on the pine needles. Except that his clothing was wet, Evan could almost forget that it had just rained up here. He hung his canteen on his saddle as if it contained valuables and strode upward, going always south as much as the mountainous country would permit.

He studied the hills ahead and above him. No sense figuring on it, he somehow had to work his way out of these hills and back to the plains. He didn't have the strength left to go on climbing, and soon he had to find food. His stomach growled, and no matter what he thought about he couldn't put hunger out of his mind because that emptiness spread in his belly. He was in bad trouble now and he didn't try to deceive himself about that.

Walking, Evan closed his eyes, leaning his weight against the horse. It grew harder all the time to hold his eyes open. The air up here was thin, even thinner than he was accustomed to, and his sogged clothing and wet boots were added poundage.

The horse plodded forward, almost as if it instinctively understood his need to keep moving, to find a pass, a way out of these man-killer mountains.

Clinging to the pommel, Evan walked along beside the horse. He passed large boulders and moved into a sand and pebbled path. He checked only to see that it led

generally west and south, and this was the way he wanted to go and he slogged along, only half awake.

He could never afterwards say how long he had been in this deepening gully. He walked past slate overhangs, places where chiseled boulders stood like perilous roofs above his head. It occurred to him that he was likely straggling into some sort of mountain canyon, but he was too tired to care. Then he felt the hairs stand along the nape of his neck, the hackles rising, and at the same instant, the horse's instincts warned it of danger, too, and it stiffened, its ears pricking up, listening.

Distantly, Evan heard it, and it was far above him, but in that moment he forgot his weariness, forgot everything except that somehow he had to get himself and the horse out of this arroyo, free of this dry creekbed.

Evan didn't bother swinging into the saddle. There wasn't time for such luxury. He caught the reins, running forward, the frightened animal at his heels. He searched ahead, looking for a break in the slate walls, an opening into which he could run and drag the horse after him.

Flashflood.

He heard the ominous rumble and thunder of water spilling by the ton and at incredible speed downward through the dried creekbed. The earth shook under him worse than it had when thunder and lightning battered at the mountain. He didn't bother trying to figure how he had become trapped in a creekbed after a rain—they were dangerous enough at any time because of the storms that could rage unseen in lost ranges above. He had not been thinking, he had been too tired to think, too tired to care. It didn't matter much now. All that mattered was finding a way to get out of here.

The rumbling water drowned all other sounds above him. Evan did not look back. He rounded a sharp break in the arroyo. To his left was a shelf and a six-foot drop to another ledge. He did not stop to think anything except that it should take him out of the path of the flashflood. He leaped out of the creekbed, pulling the horse after him. He ran across the shelf and jumped. He felt the

horse strain, trying to resist, but his weight carried them both over the brink.

Evan sprawled outward, landing on his hands and knees and rolling hard to his left to escape the plunging horse. The animal landed, its legs buckling, and lying on the rock ledge. Evan stared at the horse to see if it came up lame.

For some moments neither of them moved. The torrent of water bore down through the arroyo, growing louder, the mists sending a sheet of fog out over the shelf and down upon them on the ledge.

Evan caught the reins, holding the horse's head down as the flashflood thundered past.

Even when it was over and only the wet mists and the damp odors brought down by the flashflood remained, Evan stayed where he was on the rock ledge.

The ledge was twenty feet across, but the drop to the next lower rock shelf was almost straight down and more than fifteen feet.

Evan got slowly to his feet, the backs of his legs still trembling. He tested the animal, found it sound, if as shaken as he was. Then he prowled the ledge, finding only two ways off it. One was up the sheer brink over which they had jumped, and the other was not much better. It was no more than a goat path, rocky, narrow, twisting over sheer pits. It was dangerous enough for a man alone, worse with the horse, and worst of all, it led upward.

Evan stood for a long time at the foot of the goat path. There was nothing good about it. It was just that it was the only way open. He had no alternative, except to abandon the horse on the ledge, climb back up and over into the creekbed.

He gazed upward, seeing nothing that reassured him or gave him any hope. It looked as if it was all out of his hands now. He knew he had to go southwest, and down, out of these mountains, and yet everything forced him west, higher into the ranges.

He put the saddle blanket over the horse's head to blind him. He secured the blanket with rope. Holding the

horse by the bit-ring, he moved slowly upward, testing the trail at every step.

It was slow, winding tortuously upward. Evan, glancing down, caught his breath, feeling a sense of dizziness that was almost paralyzing. The only good thought he could find was that if they fell from here, it was all over. It would be a great try, and they wouldn't make it. But they wouldn't have to worry about food any more, or running, or trying to get back to the flats when everything drove them upward to the crags where mountain goats lived.

He stopped often to rest, leaning against the slate outcroppings on the sheer face of the cliff. But he could pause only for short periods because the horse became skittish, restless, pawing at loose rocks and growing hard to handle when the rocks bounced downward along the wall of the cliff.

He moved slowly, finding the path narrowing as he had known it would. He backed upward the last ten feet to a ledge, pulling the horse hard against the cliff, putting all his strength into his fist on the bit-ring.

The horse's back leg missed the edge and the animal jerked its head up, lunging forward in a convulsive start.

Evan ran backwards with it, coming off the goat path onto another ledge, stumbling.

For some moments, he stayed there clinging to the horse, saying a silent prayer. Lupe would be proud of him, he thought. Her church, and her God, and her beads, and her candles and her prayers meant so much to her—or they had until this evil time undermined even her faith. For the moment he wanted to have her old kind of faith, he wanted to thank somebody because he had come safely off the narrowing path, he had come this far, and both he and the horse were still alive.

He sighed. Maybe if he told Lupe about finding a faith, something to believe in up here, it might help to restore her to a religion that had made her happy once.

He laughed suddenly, a bitter tormented sound. If he told Lupe. How could he tell her anything? If he ever saw her again. Sure, he was alive up here in the hills with a

canteen of muddy water, no food. He hadn't fallen off that goat path because it would have been too easy.

He turned suddenly, leading the horse, striding upward because there was no other way to go. The ledge led on to a wide incline that opened to the darkening mountain night. Above him, between rock fields and piñon hammocks he saw patches of short grass, food for the horse at least.

He walked upward. If he staked out the horse up here overnight, it would be refreshed, rested, grass-fed by morning. Hunger was stabbing at him now, striking in his belly, but causing a nausea behind his eyes, a weakness all through him. But there was hope in allowing the horse to pasture while he rested. If he slept and the horse was refreshed, he had a chance of finding a trail downward in the morning, and he might outrun the posse or the bounty hunters in a race to the flatlands.

He breathed through his mouth, gasping for air. He was tired, his head light as if he were suffering from fever. It wasn't fever, not yet anyhow, it was overwhelming fatigue. He had run as far as he could go like this.

His knees sagged, and he laughed aloud, thinking if the posse came on his trail, Barr Kingan would read pregnant meaning in the way he had almost fallen here.

He walked out on the grass-patched mesa—a tabletop of land overlooking wide expanses of lower levels. He sagged on his knees for some moments, finally got up and tended to the horse. He could not think of anything more important than seeing that the horse was cared for, staked out for the night. His slim chance of living through tomorrow depended on this tired animal.

He removed saddle, blanket, headstall, tying the horse to a forty-foot lariat secured to the trunk of a stunted piñon.

Freed, the horse strode about the grass patch, walking the length of the rope, feeling the tug when the lariat tightened. At last the animal settled down to eating grass.

Shadows lengthened, cast by higher ranges that reared upward between the mesa and the sinking sun.

Carrying blanket, saddle and guns Evan walked away

from the horse to the brink of the tableland. He stood for a long time searching the darkening mountainside below him. Infrequently he told himself he could detect moving forms in the shadowy tunnels of dark beneath him, but then there was only silence, no movement. He looked about, feeling a kind of security. They couldn't come directly on him. They would have to climb upward and come in from the sides. This was good enough for the moment; better than he had hoped for. They had pushed him upward against his will, but at least he had a ledge that was hard to scale. He sagged to his knees, placing the rifle beside him. He had to sleep, he had to rest.

He laid his head on the saddle, hollowing out a small hole for his hip. He shivered once, and then he remembered kicking out the blanket and spreading it over him. The blanket smelled of horse. He was asleep almost at once.

He slept fitfully, the ground uncomfortable, his body and mind wound too taut to relax easily. In his sleep he was running, going backward in some kind of return to security that he was certain was lost to him, even as he dreamed it.

In his dreams he went across the gray flatlands to the ranch he had built, seeing all the familiar landmarks. There was the grassland where the cows were, and before it the road winding into Socorro, or the Old Trail, but all around were the dry wastes where strays fell, and death lurked. And in his dream, he strode across it, going to the yellow adobe ranchhouse where Lupe waited warm and sweet-smelling in the shade for him, and in the shade there was cold water and Eula came from the kitchen toward them with trays of food and he could hardly look at the food or smell it because he could not take his eyes or his arms from Lupe.

He reached for Lupe and she smiled, but he could not take her in his arms, and it troubled him, and he tried to tell himself it was because Eula was standing there with food, and he had to wait because he wanted Lupe too terribly to love her in front of Eula as he wanted to love her.

The road was wider outside his ranchyard than he remembered it, and smoother and broader even than when the wagons and coaches had opened the Old Trail in all the years since 1598. The road ran wide and flat and he walked alone along it and there were flowers and the smell of sweet bay and jasmine, the soft fragrances nobody ever met out this way. There was a tall white house and it had columns out front, and a veranda and he saw his father and mother standing on the veranda, and they were waiting for him, and he ran toward them.

It was not the same. The stables were gone, and the rows of houses beyond the stables were fallen down, some of them burned to the ground, and he shook his head, trying to figure out why it was the place he remembered, but not the same at all.

His parents awaited him, but suddenly he was afraid to go near them because there was a terrible kind of peril waiting for him there, and if he went near them, he would destroy them.

In his dream, he tried to tell them of his fears for them. He could see that his mother was crying and she would not listen because she was crying. But his father nodded, and he saw that his father understood how it was. And then before he could make his father see it all, his father was talking. His father was telling him about the long years after the War ended. His father was saying that it was not a war to liberate slaves, or to preserve a union, or for any of the other high-sounding phrases. Men with power enough to manipulate whole nations were embattled over fiscal matters, which group would control banking, tariffs, trade, commerce. Greed. Injustice. Incidentally, the union was preserved, but the beaten states were no longer equal, despised with a contempt that persisted for a hundred years. This place is dead, his father told him, it is finished here. Perhaps in a new place you will be able to build a good life in freedom from oppression, injustice and greed. The only answer to injustice is relentless resistance.

There was lightning and thunder, and in the lightning

the shambles of that old world were revealed in all their agony and ruin, and in the thunder the very supports of that old world trembled.

Evan came awake unwillingly, more tired than ever, filled with a strange sense of sadness and loss.

There was the sound of thunder again. Evan sat up. It was not thunder at all. The sound had been translated into thunder in his dream, but it was the sound of pounding hoofs, racing horses on the darkened incline below him.

Evan threw off the blanket. He closed his fist on the rifle, got to his knees. He sat listening. There seemed to be only two horses, but they were galloping on the incline.

Evan stood up and ran to the brink of the ledge. The mountain night was dark and still. The thunder of the horses' hoofs grew louder.

Evan glanced up. There was a misting of stars strung across the abysmal black emptiness. Below him there were not even shadows, only the sounds of the horses. He had no way of knowing what time it was, or how long he had slept. He figured the riders were bounty men. It didn't make sense that they had picked up a trail that sent them running up this mountain, but there was no doubting that they were moving fast and climbing.

He steadied himself behind a small boulder, placing the Winchester across it, ready if anything did reveal itself in the darkness below.

He exhaled heavily because it occurred to him that the riders might be Blaisdell and Juan de Brasa, and riding like this was a trick to force him to reveal his hiding place by firing at them.

Below him, he heard the horses slowed down, and then men calling to each other. He recognized the voices—Blaisdell and the Mexican, de Brasa.

He stayed where he was, holding the rifle. There was the terrible urge to fire in the direction of those voices—likely the very best target he would get in this darkness—but he resisted, waiting.

"He is up there, above us, in those rocks, Señor," Juan de Brasa called in the darkness.

"Are you telling me you can smell in the darkness when you can't see, de Brasa?"

"I can smell. I can smell the horse. I know the man is there. He's up there, all right. I cannot point out the exact spot. But I am willing to cover you, Señor, while you climb up there and smoke him out."

"You're too damned anxious to suit me, de Brasa."

"One of us must find him. It is one thing to trap him in the rocks till daylight—"

"A few more hours, de Brasa, he ain't going nowhere. I'm willing to wait him out, unless you want to climb up there and jump him in the dark with your knife. That's quite a trick with you, ain't it?"

"Quite a trick. Still, I don't like to walk alone in the dark. Perhaps if we both—"

"I tell you, de Brasa, I don't like none of your ideas—"

"Why not, Señor Blaisdell?"

"Because you're too free with them. Any time you get so generous you want to *give* me something, I feel suspicious. If you're sure he's up there, I'm willing to wait until daylight."

"Have you considered what will happen in the daylight?"

"Landrews will make a break for it? Let him. We can run him down now. We're in a lot better shape than he is, thanks to the sheriff's grub."

"Yes. But you are not thinking clear, Señor, when you think you ate the sheriff's food, but you forget that by daylight, the sheriff will follow Sam Butterworth up here—and where will our bounty be, then?"

Blaisdell laughed. "Nobody's going to take our money, or our bounty, de Brasa. Not that sheriff. Nobody. You heard Tyler. He wants Landrews dead. He's willing to pay five hundred extra for it. I mean to oblige him. I'll figure a way to move up there as soon as it's light."

"Very well, Señor. If that's agreed. Shall we bed down here and get a little rest?"

"That's my idea, de Brasa, as long as you're sure you smell horse up there with that bird-dog nose of yourn."

"I'm quite sure, Señor."

Troubled, Evan stayed where he was, pressed against the small boulder, alert and sleepless. He listened to the sounds below, the horses ground-tied, the saddles pulled off, the brief wrangling and then the settling of silence.

But in that silence, Evan's apprehension remained and he stayed taut, listening, even while he told himself that this was the way Blaisdell and de Brasa planned it: they wanted him awake and worried while they slept. It would make him easier to take when they did move in. Again, they were calling the tune. For the first time in his life Landrews realized that the fugitive never—or seldom—chose the pace, or the time to rest or eat. This was one of the things that defeated him. Those on the side of the law could make many mistakes, but the man running could not afford even one small error if he were to stay alive, and free.

His eyes burning, Evan stared downward in the darkness to the place where the two bounty hunters slept. Greed. Both those men had broken most laws and all commandments, and yet they piously said they were representing forces of order when they set out to bring in an outlaw, dead or alive. And dead was easier. Greed pushed them. Greed kept them together on the trail, each using the other's knowledge and talents, but never sharing anything, never trusting each other, united and divided at once by greed.

For a moment he thought he saw a shadow flickering in deeper shadow, but he stared, wide-eyed, and could detect no further movement. Perhaps it was an owl or some other night prowler. The silences deepened, and he could hear the hungry horse snuffing in the patches of grass on the mesa behind them.

There was a whisper of sound. There was silence, and then there was the faintest noise, real and yet without substance. A breeze touching at dry leaves, the wing-creaking of a bat, a loose stone, a man catching his

breath—a man who moved like a cat, and like a cat saw in the darkness.

Gasping, Evan turned, bringing the gun up, and falling on his back beside the boulder.

Only this movement saved his life. The Mexican, in Indian moccasins, had come up the incline and crept around behind his prey. De Brasa had gone to the saddle and blanket first, and turning suddenly, seen Landrews beside the boulder. He had caught his breath, turning too swiftly, and Evan heard him.

His knife upraised, de Brasa lunged outward upon Evan. Evan rolled hard to the left, going away from the boulder and carrying his rifle with him.

He felt the sharp slash of the knife, ripping his shirt and cutting cleanly across his shoulder. Blood spurted hot along his arm. De Brasa's knife was honed to a fine edge, sharpened to kill instantly and soundlessly. In that terrible instant, it was clear that de Brasa had allowed Blaisdell to fall asleep and meant to kill silently, and silently carry Landrews' body past his sleeping partner and to the posse for a full, unshared reward.

Evan slid his hands along the rifle, thrusting up, parrying the swift, savage blows from de Brasa's knife.

The Mexican gave a sharp laugh, feinting with his left arm and thrusting in a low, upward drive with the glittering knife.

Evan didn't even glance toward that left hand. His gaze was fixed on that knife, the blade picking up the only light in the pre-dawn darkness.

As de Brasa brought his knife upward, Evan swung the rifle. He heard the bones snap in de Brasa's right arm as the gunstock connected. The hand fell open and the knife struck the ground.

De Brasa made no outcry beyond a savage inhalation of agony. Silence was more urgent in his mind than agony.

The Mexican toppled forward, falling against Landrews and getting inside the arc of that rifle, his free left hand grappling on the ground for the knife.

Using both hands, Evan brought the gun upward,

catching de Brasa in the throat. The Mexican retched, but his hand closed on his knife and he brought it up, slashing wildly, frantically.

Evan felt the knife slash across his shirt, drawing a fine hot line upon his chest. He shoved with the gun, sending de Brasa outward on his back.

De Brasa struck the ground, his useless right arm hanging at his side. Before he settled, he was thrusting upward, swinging the knife before him.

Evan used the brief half-second of time to set himself, legs apart, gun caught like a staff in his hands, no time to turn it or thrust home the bolt, fearing noise anyhow.

The Mexican crouched before him, the knife held low, ready to lunge in and slash upward.

Evan swung the rifle, and de Brasa snarled with laughter, unable to suppress his exultation as the weapon missed and Evan was pulled in closer. De Brasa abandoned caution, leaping forward, driving upward with the knife.

Evan side-stepped him, and too late de Brasa realized he had fallen for a sucker's trick. Evan brought the gun back on a pendulum swing. It caught the Mexican at the back of the head, sending him sprawling on his face.

Evan leaped after him. De Brasa was still holding the knife. Evan caught his wrist under his boot heel, grinding it into the rocky ground. Slowly the hand opened into a spidery claw and the knife clattered on the rocks.

Evan grabbed it. In a wild, feverish fury, he ripped de Brasa's shirt, coat, trousers, the wiry man watching him in a paroxysm of terror, waiting for the moment when Landrews would plunge the knife into his heart. And Evan paused with the knife gripped in his fist, the blade biting into the rib cage, but his fury had ebbed. Instead, he struck de Brasa in each temple with his fist, and then when the man sagged, he measured him and clipped him beside the jaw with all his strength.

The bounty hunter sagged under him, unconscious.

For a moment longer, Evan stayed where he was, breathing through his mouth.

He pushed the knife under his belt. Laying the rifle

aside, he rolled de Brasa to the edge of the incline and then shoved him over the side of it.

The darkness was suddenly loud with rocks and debris spilling along under the bouncing, rolling body of the bounty hunter. Below, Blaisdell came suddenly and wildly awake, yelling for de Brasa in the night. The horses were squealing and then Blaisdell was cursing at them.

There was a brief, taut silence and then Blaisdell raged with laughter. Clearly he had walked to the place where de Brasa stopped rolling.

Blaisdell yelled at the Mexican. "Sneak out on me, huh? Going to make the kill all by yourself, huh? And he ripped you apart, didn't he, you stupid mule? With your own knife he marked you up, and rolled you over the hill! I ought to kill you, you hear me? I ought to kill you."

Evan turned around, running back and grabbing up his rifle.

He returned to the edge of the incline, willing Blaisdell to keep talking. There was only one way to quiet the wild raging anger inside him, that was with the Winchester.

But Blaisdell suddenly realized that his voice was almost as good for Landrews as a light to pin him down as a target.

There was sudden chilled silence, and then Landrews heard them scurrying around down there, getting out of the clearing, running for cover.

Evan sagged against the boulder, suddenly tired, the knife wounds burning, blood sticky along his arm and under his shirt. They were running for cover, and that was what he ought to do, only until daylight, there was nothing he could do, and by then with Blaisdell to keep him pinned down and the posse moving up, it would be too late.

VIII

It was almost daybreak on the mountainside when Sam Butterworth knelt beside Sheriff Barr Kingan and clutched his shoulder, shaking him awake.

Barr opened his eyes unwillingly, staring up at Sam.

"You're oversleeping, Barr."

Kingan sat up, huddled under his blanket. The first gold streaks had ripped long breaks in the darkness. It was cold just before daybreak. But Barr wasn't thinking about the chill when he shivered. He was going over in his mind the days he had been on Evan's trail, the meals he had eaten, the hours he had rested. Yet his socks were matted to his feet, and his body was covered with a stinging, irritating rash.

"Guess I'm getting old, Sam," he said.

"It's these manhunts that get old, Barr."

Kingan nodded, glancing around at the huddled forms of the posse, sleeping on the ground, the horses staked out, the chuckwagon a square shadow of black in the darkness.

"How you figure it's going, Sam?"

"We're pushing him, Barr. You know that. He fell two or three times yesterday. I reckon Blaisdell and de Brasa didn't let him rest too much last night."

"It can't be much longer," Barr said, pushing his feet into his boots, wriggling his toes inside his soggy socks.

Sam's voice was flat. "When hunger and thirst overtake a man and sap his strength, it's all over whether he admits it or not. In fact, sometimes he goes out of his head, and gets the wild idea he has got his second wind—

is stronger than ever, and that's when he wears himself out. He'll start staggering, and we can tell that in the way he walks, in the kind of tracks he lays down for us. And we'll see where he falls the first time—"

"And find him where he fell the tenth time." Barr said it without pleasure, shaking the blanket from his shoulders, and shivering again in the mountain chill.

"Still, we let him get much higher in these mountain ranges, we got trouble for ourselves," Sam said.

"He can't keep going. It's too hard on him up here, and the higher we push him, the harder it'll be."

Sam nodded, but said, warning the sheriff, "Gravel, rocks, boulders, hard ground, Barr. They don't hold prints like desert sand."

Barr agreed, shouting the camp awake, ordering the cook to start a greasewood fire for speed, and get coffee boiling.

"Hard ground, and thin air, and he moves slower, tires easier, Sam."

"If he's got sense enough left to think after five days of running," Sam said, "he can realize that he can hide more, rest more, up here."

"How you figure that?"

"He's got a horse to hide, but there's scrub brush in all these hundreds of passes and small canyons, and stunted trees, big rocks. Gives a man more of a chance to hide—and hiding is what he couldn't do down below there. And hiding he can rest."

"We'll track him, and keep pushing him."

"I told you. You don't pick up tracks as easy on this rocky ground—"

"So, we look for signs." Barr's voice hardened. He was fully awake now, getting the men stirring, and he knew inside that everything was in his favor. He just had to keep old Sam Butterworth tracking and moving ahead. "Signs, Sam. You know that. And you know that every man leaves signs behind him, he leaves 'em, and you can find 'em, if you're almost as smart as he is."

"We ought to be a lot smarter. We ain't hungry, or thirsty, or running. But the rain washed away a lot of

tracks, and there was a hellish mountain wind last night and that covers human sign when nothing else does."

Barr's voice hardened. "Then we look harder. Because he's leaving us signs, and he is too tired to think straight, or to destroy them in back of him because he's running, he's hurrying, and he'll make mistakes. He'll leave his signs. We don't have to be college-smart no more. We can do everything wrong—as long as we don't miss the mistakes he makes. We can make 'em. But he can't."

"Hope you're right, Barr."

"I'm right. You know I am. He's been pushed up here—and that was a bad mistake on his part, letting that happen to him. And even if he slips through us, what does that buy him? He hasn't gone far in five days—and if he's trying for Mexico, and that's the only place he has any hope of getting away from us—if he's trying for Mexico, he's still got a long way to go."

"You figure he's still trying for Mexico?"

"What else? What can he do? He climbs, but he tries to keep south and west. But even if he found food—which he won't—and even if he hangs on to what water he might of got in the rain—which he won't—he's got at least three or four more days to the border. . . . But hell, getting to the border won't do him no good. The land there is just more of this same wasteland, and he won't find food outside of Juárez."

"Wonder why a man keeps running, when his common sense must tell him all that?" Sam said.

"I don't know," Barr said. His voice was harder than ever. "I reckon a man fights what he thinks is wrong, he just can't stop. And I never yet met a man that was still breathing that didn't think he was going on living—given the least chance."

Tyler was silent, surly when they grouped around the chuckwagon tailgate for breakfast of eggs and flapjacks with coffee and syrup. When he spoke at all, it was to hurry the posse members who were tired, depleted by the relentless ride under the desert suns and who dallied over their food.

Tyler said, "We can't spend our lives out here in these mountains, Sheriff. Let's get this picnic rolling. We've given your *pal* another night to get ahead of us. Ain't that enough, even for you?"

Kingan was silent for some moments, feeling the eyes of the posse covertly studying him. Those who had served with him before knew he never tolerated such tone from any man. Still, Charlie Tyler was the big wheel in the Socorro country and meant to be one of the biggest in the territory. There was a lot involved when a man holding public office bucked a gent like Charlie Tyler. On the other hand, if he were to keep morale up on the hunt, and hold the posse under his control, he could not let Charlie Tyler horsewhip him with his tongue every time things didn't move to suit him.

He kept his voice level. "It's going to be a long day, Mr. Tyler. I think you'll get enough saddle-time before it's over."

"I'm interested in only one thing, Sheriff. Getting a convicted killer, and returning to my business. I don't like the way you're running this manhunt, and I want these men to know it."

Suddenly Barr laughed, a bitter sound yet filled with a frustrated kind of mirth. "I figure they each and every one has picked up that idea along the way, Mr. Tyler."

The other men laughed, too, forced to smile with the sheriff, even the Rio Salado riders, and Tyler fell silent again, his eyes murderous.

Sam Butterworth and one of his boys loped back into the encampment, dismounted and moved to the coffee pot.

Barr was watching Sam. The old ex-scout waited until his tin cup was brimmed and steaming with scalding black liquid, then he glanced toward the waiting sheriff and nodded.

"We picked up his tracks, Barr. He was walking that horse, and he was in bad trouble, and still moving up. I figure we can push him higher."

"All right, men, saddle up, and move out." Barr Kingan stood up, tossing out the remains of his coffee

and settling his gunbelt in a different, less chafing position on his rash-welted hip.

When the first sun-streaks touched at the rim of the mesa, Evan ran across the rough ground to the grass patch where he had staked out the horse. He saddled up, watching the brink of the incline, warily.

He had not heard from Blaisdell or de Brasa in the past couple of hours, but they were down there in the darkness, all right.

They might try an ambush, attempt to move up under cover of the darkness to be ready to cut down on him at daybreak.

He glanced about on the tableland, seeking a way out, but finding nothing except the waning wall of night.

When the horse was saddled, Evan ran his hand along its mane. The animal was refreshed and ready to run. The long night had helped him, restored him.

Leaving the horse ground-tied, Evan ran back to the edge of the incline, carrying his rifle.

A few feet from the brink he stopped, got down on his hands and knees, bellying the rest of the way, keeping the boulder in front of him.

It seemed to him his ears enlarged, straining for any sound from the incline, the hammock below, or the rock walls reared up on each side of the mesa.

The silence stretched with a singing kind of tension, the way barbed wire sang when it was too taut. They were out there, and lying flat on his belly, the rifle ready to fire, Evan tried to figure ahead what they would do.

He could not come up with any plan they might use. The Mexican had failed in his direct assault through silence and darkness last night. Their next play was going to come from the rocks out there, but he could not find any whisper or flicker of movement among them.

Below him, the bounty hunters' horses were silent. It was as if they had withdrawn, only Evan knew better. These men had hunted human game before; they knew all the tricks, tricks he couldn't figure in advance.

He retreated, crawling back from the incline. He got to

his feet and ran across the rocky soil to where the horse waited. Behind him, the distant sun filtered a saffron light across the mesa. It was all the light he needed to find a way off this tableland, a way down into the wastes.

Walking beside the horse, he found himself sweated, breathing through his mouth, even before the sun was fully up, even in the chill of the mesa morning. You've shot it, he told himself, it's all gone and you've shot it. Tell me about it, Landrews. Tell me about breaking out of that prison coach and getting into Mexico, getting Lupe to safety and coming back in the night to find Charlie Tyler. Tell me about it, Landrews. Only hurry, before you fall flat on your face.

He swore aloud, cursing the mountain, the sun, the posse, and himself. Mostly, he cursed himself.

There was one way out of here that he could take with some chance of staying alive until he found food, but that was down that incline there, and that trail was barred by two bounty hunters who wanted him dead because it added to their reward take.

He glanced across his shoulder, searching the rocky slopes that walled in the mesa. There was no sign that either Blaisdell or the Mexican had climbed into those rocks. If they had, his best chance lay in trying to run their crossfire.

His laughter was cold and savage and directed against himself. Of all the thoughts that had plagued him, this showed the least reason, the surest signs of fever and hunger and desperation instead of rational thought. You've shot it, Landrews. It's all gone and you've shot it.

To his left was another goat trail that climbed to a ledge, a pass beyond it, and a winding trail into new hills, gleaming brown and gray in the early sunlight. Oh, no. He had to work his way downward, even another run through a dry creek would be better than that, any passage that returned him to the flats, or even to the foothills. He moved faster, finding nothing.

He was trembling, frustrated, breathless and already weakening in the legs, ready to drop. It was the sense of

being trapped up here as much as lack of food plaguing him now.

Then he saw the break in the mesa, the deep gash that crossed it, and then plunged in a long steep run through a dry creekbed.

His face pulled into savage ruts of pleasure, and he drew the back of his hand across his whiskered mouth.

"Come on, horse," Evan said aloud. "Let's get out of here."

He took one last gander across his shoulder. He didn't see Blaisdell or de Brasa back there, but more urgently he wanted to be certain they didn't see him make his run into the creekbed. Let them search up here in the rocks for him. If they gave him just an hour before the posse caught up with them, it would be enough with the freshened horse under him.

Even though he felt a new surge of hope, his hands were quivering and he couldn't control their shaking. He was in a bad way. No sense fooling himself about that. He had to get out of here. He wanted food and he had to find it. If he made it to the flats, he'd make for the nearest human habitation and get food, even if he had to take it at gunpoint. He'd kill now, if he had to, to stay alive.

He ran into the opening that went at a long drop through the hillside. He did not even bother to remember the flashflood or the danger of a new one. He was moving again, going downward, and this was the only thought his mind could contain.

He didn't know how far he had run, still saving his horse for a race across foothills or flatter land, when some instinct warned him of terrible wrong.

The creek bed flattened out on a mountain meadow and he paused at a ring of rocks, staring across the grassy land.

At first he could not believe what he saw. Mounted men in a wide sweeping formation, moving slowly, but steadily, and in the lead, Sam Butterworth. Kingan's posse!

Across the meadow, a man yelled abruptly, a rifle

cracked. Then all the men were shouting, spurring their mounts forward at a run. Rifles cracked again.

Evan spun around, swinging up into the saddle. He thrust his heels into the horse's flanks, going up the steep incline at a gallop.

He kept his head down and didn't look back. They were on his trail. They were nearer than they had been in five days, but they would have to come up the dry bed in twos or single file. Unless his horse fell on the water-slicked pebbles, he had a chance to make it back to the mesa. He did not look any further ahead than that.

The horse slipped as if the pebbles were glass and the incline was too much for him. Sobbing for breath, Evan jumped from the saddle, hearing the pound of horses in the long twisting defile behind him. The yells of the posse came upward on wind-drafts to him.

Catching the reins, Evan scrambled upward, feeling the horse paw at the rocks, getting a foothold and losing it.

He ran out of the break in the mesa wall, and less than ten feet into the open tableland, stopped, staring stunned at the bounty hunters poised near the far rim of the incline. Whatever their caution before, they had abandoned it when they heard the report of rifle fire from the meadow. They had brought their horses up the incline and were ready to ride across the open plateau, separated by its width in order to offer single targets and crossfire cover for each other.

Evan stayed for what seemed an eternity, staring at the bounty men who had cut off his escape down the incline. Behind him, he heard the shouting, racing posse men in the creekbed.

He jerked his head up, finding the goat path, an impossible distance across the grass patches.

Blaisdell fired at him, the bullet spitting past him.

The Mexican fired from the other side of the mesa. They were trying to drive him back into the rocks.

Evan put the horse between him and the bounty hunters. He swung into the saddle, pointing the terrified animal toward the rocks at the far side of the tableland.

He jerked up his rifle, firing once toward Blaisdell, twisting and firing on the run at where de Brasa was leaping from his saddle and taking to cover in the rocks.

When he glanced back, racing the horse, Blaisdell was crouched in the rocks, rifle fixed on him.

He heard the crack of gunfire coming at him from two directions. He booted the horse, but it was as if the animal struck an invisible wall, or tripped on unseen wires.

The thought raged through Evan's mind. The bounty men had shot the horse. The impact of their bullets had stopped him in his tracks and he toppled forward in a last driving momentum.

The grass and the dawn sky changed places. Evan could think only he had to cling to his rifle as he was thrown forward over the dead horse's head.

He struck in the grass patches, rolling, clinging to the rifle. For a moment there was complete darkness and he was unaware of anything. Prisms and flashes of light in every color and shade erupted behind his eyes.

He moved in the grass, opened his eyes. His fist was closed on the rifle. His whole body was burning with fire, or numbed with agony. Head down, he glanced for the last time at the dead horse.

When he moved, one of the bounty men fired. The bullet kissed the hard ground inches from Evan's face, spitting up sand.

The bounty men didn't know whether he was dead, but they were not taking any chances.

He heard the first horsemen struggling up the pebbled incline at the mouth of the arroyo wall. He tilted his head just enough to see how far he was from the rocks and the goat trail upward.

Blaisdell and de Brasa were shouting at each other. The rock slide that had sent Jake Yelloweye crushed back to Socorro, and the knife fight last night had put faint respect for Landrews in the bounty men. Still they could hear the posse racing up the dry creek and they wanted a body to claim before the sheriff came out on the mesa and took over.

Evan drew a deep breath, held it. He brought one leg up slowly, bent his knees, clutched the rifle.

He came up, staying as low to the ground as he could and sprinted toward the rocks.

At first he thought he'd made it. But the crack of a bounty man's rifle and the impact of fire in his side were instantaneous.

The force of the bullet drove him hard on his face into the first bed of small boulders. He felt the fire spreading from the bullet wound but he did not stop.

A faint fiery film occluded his vision, but driven by a savage instinct of fury and agony, he scrambled upward on the rocky trail, protected by the boulders.

He did not stop crawling until he was twenty or thirty feet above the mesa on a ledge walled with rocks.

He paused then, lying on his back and staring up at the fading sky.

He released the rifle, letting it sink to the rough ground beside him. He moved his trembling fingers into the bloody tear in his side.

He winced, probing, and the sky spun. He almost passed out. The bullet had gone through him, all right, making a wide tear in his flesh. The bleeding was bad, very bad, the chance of poisoning was worse.

Breathing through parted lips, he lay there a few moments trying to think what to do. Vaguely he heard the hunters shouting at each other on the mesa below.

He pulled himself around, protected by rocks and overhang. The posse was out there on the mesa, near the dead horse. Blaisdell and de Brasa had ridden out to join them. Blaisdell was gesturing upward, and Evan could see he was boasting he had put a bullet in the fugitive.

His mouth twisting, Evan pulled the rifle up, and aiming downward, put three fast bullets into the grass at their feet, just to give them something to think about.

The men broke up, yanking horses around and moving off the mesa to the safety of rocks across it.

Evan did not waste his time watching to see what they would do. He knew what they must do, they would hole

in and wait him out now. They knew he was hit, and it was a matter of time.

Evan tore the shirt away from the bullet hole in his side, mopped at the blood, trying to inspect it. The tear was ragged and deep enough to cause trouble.

Holding his breath, Evan drew the pistol from his belt. He loosened his belt, opening the place around the bullet gash.

With the razor-sharp knife he had taken from de Brasa last night, he sliced at the flesh around the tear as long as he could stand it without fainting. Then he placed the pistol close to his side, firing it, feeling the blaze of powder searing the flesh.

He sagged back against the rock. At the sound of his pistol fire, the posse members had holed in again down there.

He stayed for some moments, his cheeks gray, pallid, his eyes tortured. Then he pulled his head around, searching the mesa.

A man moved tentatively out of the rocks over there. It took all his strength but Evan lifted his rifle, fired at the moving target. His bullet splatted on a rock, a few inches from the hunter.

The man lunged face down behind the rocks. He did not come up again.

Evan's whiskered face pulled in a savage grin. They had him holed up, he was wounded and hungry and bleeding, but he had them pinned down below there, and they could not take him, not as long as his ammunition held out.

He did not glance toward the rifle magazine, or check the bullets in the pistol. He didn't want to know how little time was left. Let them figure that out. Let them come and get him.

IX

It grew hot on the mesa. Barr Kingan, rigid and uncomfortable behind a boulder, searched the rocks on the ridge across the narrow tableland.

"We going to grow old, pinned down here like this by a killer alone with a rifle, Sheriff?"

Swearing inwardly, Kingan removed the field glasses and rubbed at his eyes with his fingertips. They were strained, dry and sun-weary, but mostly he wanted to keep Charlie Tyler from seeing what he felt must have flashed into them at the sound of the rancher's voice.

Barr said, "He'll get old a lot quicker than we will, Mr. Tyler."

"I come over here to talk to you, Sheriff, because I got an idea for getting that killer out of there, and not spend forever doing it. I'm sure it'll work. I talked it over with Thompson and some of the others."

Barr nodded, squinting against the pitiless white glare of the sun. His whole body was an itching mass of rash. When this was over, he was going to stand for hours under a spill of cold water. He even looked ahead to his wife scratching his back, all the irritating places he could not reach. He even thought about lying in bed with her again, in a cool bed, where even when they heated it up, the warmth was pleasant, nothing like this.

"All right, Mr. Tyler, what's your plan?"

"It's right simple, Sheriff." Tyler's voice hardened. "In fact, we waited to see if you would put it in action before I came over to talk with you."

"What's the trick?"

"No trick. You see the rise of that hill. Now where

Landrews is holed in up there, he's got us pretty well pinned down. But under some fire cover, a few men—and some of them have said they are willing to risk it, could climb up on each side and they could run him out—or kill him up there.”

Barr jerked his head around. “You really want his blood, don't you, Tyler? He's hungry, out of water, and we know he's been hit, but you can't sit here until he gives up without a fight—”

“No, sir, by God, I can't. And several other men feel about it the way I do. He's up there, let's flush him out.”

Barr Kingan held his breath a moment, and then he asked in a soft tone, “Do you figure the men you send could cross that open ground and get into the rocks without drawing Landrews' fire?”

“Of course not!” Tyler's face was rigid. “There's risk. Sure there is. But we could keep him down by firing at him while they made the run. Once they were in those rocks—”

“You mean the ones that made it—”

“Damn it! I mean we can't sit here like this and wait for a man to give up that don't mean to quit. He's got out of traps before, and unless we close in on him, and kill him, he'll run again.”

“You think it's better to kill off a couple of men—”

“I didn't say that!”

“It might cost a couple lives, maybe more, just to cross that mesa. You think he doesn't know he's got to keep men from creeping up through the rocks and coming down on him? You think he won't do anything he can to stop them? Somebody is going to get killed.”

“It's a risk, yes. I'll give you that. But it's a risk we've got to take—”

“Not me, Mr. Tyler. I won't go in on anything like that. Frankly, I couldn't pick out the men I wanted to see killed.”

“For hell's sake, Kingan! For a sheriff, for a lawman, you really turn it to clabber. A risk. That's all. We don't *know* anybody will be killed trying to take Landrews, but

it's a risk we got to take. I can tell you this, a man don't take a risk once in a while, he don't get anywhere!"

"We're taking all the risks I'm interested in, Tyler. There's plenty of risk, all around us. Now I've run these manhunts before, and I'll admit that once—a long time ago, when I didn't know any more about them than you do now, Mr. Tyler, I took risks, and I saw some good men die. Only I learned better. I found out you got everything on your side and you can get what you want without killing, and that's the way it's going to be with me."

"A risk. I'm not suggesting you will get anybody killed—"

"But you know we will. And I know these men, and their families, and I mean to take them back the way I brought them out, as long as they play it safe and follow my orders."

"Play it safe, and follow your orders. I can sure hell tell you this, Kingan. The reason you are a ninety-dollar-a-month sheriff, and never could be anything better is because you don't take risks. You play it safe. What the hell is it to you, you get your ninety a month whether Landrews escapes to Mexico, manages to kill me, or what."

Kingan massaged the field glasses along the fabric of his trouser leg, hearing the faint whistling sound.

His voice was cold. He was aware of silence near them, knowing other posse members, under cover of the rocks, were drinking this all in. He was sorry Tyler wanted it like this, in front of the men who were already tired and hot and ready to give up. He said, "One little thing interests me, Mr. Tyler. I'm all you say, a ninety-buck-a-month sheriff in a grubby part of a hot desert. I play it safe, and I don't risk any more lives than I have to. But it seems to me you're pretty heated up about this thing—"

"Why shouldn't I be? That man means to kill me!"

"And to be sure he's killed, up there in those rocks, you are willing to risk the lives of other men. Maybe four—five deaths, including Landrews up there—"

"To hell with Landrews, and to hell with your pity for him!"

"It's not pity for Landrews. Let's nail that down before you push me past the place I want to be about it. Landrews was my friend. But I am the sheriff, and I vowed to do my duty, and I'll do it. But that don't mean bloodshed, and with you, you don't give a damn how much blood is shed, just so that man is killed up there. It seems a hell of a lot more than you being afraid of him coming down and getting at you, more than a citizen wanting a prisoner returned to jail. It eats at me, Tyler, the way you want him killed no matter what it costs."

Tyler's head tilted. He gazed across the sun-struck tableland to the rocky incline. His eyes blinked rapidly, and his small mouth pulled into a taut line.

"I got a dream for this here land out here, Kingan. Just like my folks had back east, and the way my father did in Texas. The Tyler name means something. In Washington. In Texas, and someday here in the New Mexico territory. Now I've come out here, and staked land and raised cattle and done all I can to make this country safe for white people—in spite of savage Indians and greasy Mexicans. I admit I hate Landrews. You've pushed me, and you want the truth, and I'll give it to you. I've hated him for a long time—"

"Long before your drive to Las Cruces with him, eh?"

Tyler's eyes blinked, but his voice remained savage. "Yes. By God, yes. I've hated that man ever since he disgraced the rest of us white people here in New Mexico territory by marrying a greaser woman and bringing her to live as big as you please among us white people. Landrews betrayed the rest of us! Now, I'm a big man around here, and I aim to be a lot bigger, but I want this state for white people, not for Mexicans, and half-breeds, and them land-grant Mexicans that go to court over grants that God knows don't hold up in a white man's court. If this is going to be a white man's land, we've got to show the Mexicans that we mean to own it, and boss it, and run it. That's what I mean to do. Maybe because I come from Texas where I seen what the Mexicans tried

to do to white people. I came with a built-in hatred for 'em, but I got nothing but vile contempt for Americans that marry them, and bring them up here to live and own land. That's what Landrews done, and as far as I'm concerned, as far as any God-fearing white man in this territory is concerned, that's reason enough for hating him, and reason enough for doing all you can to run him and his greaser wife out of the territory."

Kingan met Tyler's eyes squarely. "Anything, huh? Even to lying in court, Tyler?"

Tyler cursed him. "I didn't lie in court. But I'll tell you this, I would of felt free to lie if I needed to. I feel no responsibility to treat Landrews like a white man when he don't act like one no more."

Kingan said, "I've sure enjoyed this here little talk with you, Mr. Tyler. I understand a lot better why you are anxious to have an end to this matter of Landrews—"

"Yes. Well, I thought you would. Any white man would—"

"But we're still going to do it my way." Kingan's voice lashed at the other man.

"Just a minute, Sheriff. Before you get too high and mighty with me. I've talked to Hal Thompson, to all my boys in this posse, and some of the others, and they say they'll pull out and leave you, unless you do as I say about jumping Landrews here and now."

"I don't think you mean that, Mr. Tyler, and I know you got a lot of pressures on you, and it's hot as hell and you're upset. So I'm going to do you a favor and forget you said it. Them men know that to walk off this posse will make them liable to arrest. I swore them in. I swore you all in. You took an oath, and by God, you'll live up to it, or I'll put the last one of you in jail when we get back to Socorro."

Tyler blinked rapidly, his thin mouth twitching. "The men will stick. But they want action. And I don't like your tone, Kingan. Not with me. I'm no stablehand. Don't be too sure you'll have a job long after we get back to Socorro."

Kingan let his voice carry. "Maybe you best talk to

these men, Tyler, and let them know you didn't really mean it about walking out, and that you expect them to stick, and stay out of trouble. Huh?"

"I tell you, they want something done!"

Kingan sighed. "Then I'll make a compromise. You keep these men down behind these rocks, and I'll go up there and try to talk to Landrews."

"You? Talk to him?"

"Yes. Maybe I can take him without bloodshed. He must be pretty sick. At least he'll talk to me. . . . Anyhow, I'm willing to try it."

Tyler gave him an odd smile. "Sure. Go ahead. Maybe you can talk to him."

Barr nodded. He stood up, cupping his hands around his mouth. He yelled. "Landrews! This here is Barr Kingan! Can you hear me?"

His voice rose on the wind, banged in the gullies and crannies of the mountain, coming back in faint echoes.

"I hear you."

"I want to talk to you."

"Got nothing to say, Barr."

"Let me come over there and talk to you. I might have a deal you like."

There was a long silence. At last, Landrews called, "I'll let you part the way up the path. But I warn you. You come unarmed. You stop and let me see you're unarmed, and you can come part of the way."

"That's fair enough. . . . Hold your fire."

Tyler stood up, caught Kingan's arm. "Listen to me, Kingan. You got something going for us now. By God, I never thought you'd do it. You're going to get close to him. Now, you turn around, shove a gun under your shirt, and when you get close—"

"No."

"Listen to me! I told Blaisdell, five hundred over the reward money if Landrews is killed. It's the same for you, Kingan. Five hundred bucks—"

"No." Kingan's voice lost all its control. "You can buy Blaisdell, and bounty hunters. Not me, *Mister* Tyler. And while I'm mad enough, Tyler, there's something I want to

tell you about that five hundred bucks you're offering so free—"

Tyler's voice shook. "What about it?"

"You tell me, Tyler. It's the amount that sticks in my craw. Five hundred. Just about what Landrews claimed you owed him from the cattle drive. It makes me sick to think, Tyler, that you might be offering Landrews' own money for his life."

"Damn your soul! You're finally accusing me out loud, ain't you, Kingan? You're accusing me of cheating Landrews and then rigging that robbery among my own men. I can tell you now, it's going to be me or you in Socorro when this is over. I won't have an outlaw-coddling lawman accusing me of crime."

"I'm not accusing you of anything, Tyler. I'm only telling you I don't like any of it. I ain't accusing you of cheating Landrews or rigging a robbery, but if I ever get proof that any of it is true, so help me God, I'll see justice done." He loosened his gunbelt and tossed it to Sam Butterworth. "Now, you stay put, and you keep these men down."

"Damn it. You're going over there unarmed. You're throwing away the chance to gun him, to take him."

"Shut up, Tyler. I gave him my word."

"Your word. A killer. A fugitive. Outlaw. *Your word!*"

"That's right." Kingan's voice shook. His face was sweated. He drew his sleeve across it. "My word means something, Tyler. To the people that know me. And to me. And I don't need a gun. I can see justice done without betraying my word to Landrews or to anybody."

There was a taut silence on the mesa as Kingan walked across it toward the rocks. Sweat leaked from under his hat band, discolored his shirt. He kept his arms wide at his sides.

"Hold it!"

Evan Landrews' voice lashed from the ledge up the goat path.

Barr paused at the end of the incline, squinting against the sun.

"I'm unarmed, Evan."

"That's fine. Only I'll tell you. Just turn around, Barr. All the way around. Slow." And when he had done this, Evan called down, "Now, pull out your shirt tails. Out. All the way around."

Barr obeyed, pulling his shirt out from his pants, letting it hang free. A breeze riffled in, soothing his rashed flesh. He smiled wryly, thinking that if he had gone along with Tyler's scheme to trick Evan, he'd have a bullet in his belly by now. He wondered if this little scene was making any impression on Tyler, Blaisdell, or the bailiff Thompson back there. He doubted it.

"Can I come up now?" he said, squinting.

Evan didn't answer and Barr moved forward warily, going up the narrow path between the rocks. The trail of blood was clear. He winced, seeing it strung brown and thick across the rocks and outcroppings. Blaisdell had not lied. They had put a bullet in him.

"That's far enough," Evan said.

"I can't see you, Evan."

"I can see you, old partner, and that's good enough. I ain't changed that much since the last time."

"I come to make you an offer, Evan."

He heard the man on the ledge stifle a cough. "All right. Make it fast. I want to get it turned down."

"Wait until you hear it. We got food in the chuck-wagon, Evan—"

"The condemned man could eat hearty, huh?"

"It ain't the worst thing that could happen to you, Evan."

"No. It ain't as bad as a case of measles at that."

"We got food. We got water. I'll send Billy Welch riding fast to bring Doc Carlyle Curtis out to meet you—"

"Why would I want to see the doc?"

"There's blood all over the ground here, Evan. No sense lying about that."

"I scratched myself."

"Looks nice and deep, and deadly—if you let it go long enough—"

"Your concern touches me, old partner. It gets to me. Especially since I can see you tending every one of my needs—all the way to the gallows."

"That's part of my offer, Evan—"

"You can't change a hangrope, so don't start lying, old honest friend."

"I ain't lying, Evan. I never have lied to you, and I ain't starting now. I ain't making you no promises I can't keep. I'll get a stay of execution . . . and I'll check all I can, trying to clear you."

"Is that all you got to say, old friend?"

Barr exhaled heavily. "Just about, Evan. Except we been friends a long time. I—hate to see you end up—out here like this."

"If that's all you got to say, you can get back down that hill. You ain't said nothing to change my mind." He paused then said, "Go on, Barr. Get going. We been friends. But don't push it."

"Maybe I got a little more to say. Something that might change your mind, after all."

There was a silence that hung between them tautly. At last Evan said, speaking tiredly, "Get it said and get out of here."

"I offer you food, water, a doctor for that scratch, or we can do it your way, Evan. But I want you to look at it. You can stay holed in here until you run out of ammo. You can stay up here until gangrene sets in that—scratch. You can run until you starve, starve until you fall, keep moving until somebody kills you. That's what you're up against, Evan. And you ain't got one slim chance on God's green earth."

Evan's laugh was bitter and savage. "And if I had one slim chance, you'd tell me about it, wouldn't you, old pal?"

"I'd tell you, Evan. But I know better. Inside, so do you. You don't have to die up here. Come back with me, and you got one chance, stay up here and you got none."

"I reckon that's the way it's going to have to be, friend," Evan said. "I'm going to count to ten. I hope you

got sense enough to turn around and walk out of here before I reach—”

“You don’t have to count, Evan. I’m real smart. I’m going now. . . . So long, Evan. . . . Take care. Huh?”

Evan didn’t speak. He pressed his fist tightly over his lips to seal off a cough. He leaned against the boulder, seeing the faint trickle of bleeding glittering redly in the sun.

He stayed there and watched Barr Kingan walk down-slope on the goat path, going slow, head down, shoulders sagged round.

When Barr was within a foot of the end of the goat’s path, Charlie Tyler suddenly sprang to his feet across the narrow strip of open land, yelling, waving his hat.

“Kingan’s down out of there! Cut loose! Cut loose!”

From the rocky hills on both sides of the goat path to the ledge where Evan Landrews crouched, rifles opened fire, zeroed in on him.

For one second in eternity the sheriff stood frozen. He glanced over his shoulder toward that ledge, then he turned and sprinted across the mesa.

Charlie was yelling, waving his hat when Barr reached him.

“You stupid son of a bitch!” Kingan said. He was still moving forward and his fist smashed into Tyler’s face, the sound loud and sharp even in the reverberating noise of gunfire.

Tyler’s face bled, his eyes widened, and he stared at the sheriff as if puzzled.

Tyler toppled back against the rocks. Instinctively, his hand moved to his holster, his fist covering the gun.

Kingan lunged forward. “Go ahead, you son of a bitch. Draw that gun. So help me God, I’ll take it away from you and beat your head in with it.”

His bleeding face ghostly, Tyler drew his hand away from his gunbelt, shaking his head. “What’s the matter with you, Kingan? You loco?”

“What’s the matter with you? Didn’t I tell you to keep these men here?”

Tyler straightened slowly, mopping at his bloody face with a bandana. He drew a deep breath, his voice wounded. "I got 'em over there. Nobody hurt—that's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"I tried to stop him, Barr," Sam Butterworth said.

Barr nodded, not taking his raging gaze from the rancher's stricken face. "I told you to keep them here. I gave that man my word."

Tyler nodded, forcing a laugh. "Sure you did, Sheriff. Your word. But I didn't give him mine. Hell, I done what you should of ordered done. I got them men over there into them rocks while you kept him busy talking."

Barr didn't speak for some moments. At last he seemed to have himself under control. "I'll tell you how it is, Tyler. If I was you, I'd get on my knees and start praying. If one of those men get killed, I'm charging you with murder, and, as Sam Butterworth is my witness, so help me God, I'll make it stick."

"Now don't be loco, Barr! A fool thing like that. Them men over there are my men—and Hal Thompson. He'll tell you, he wants Landrews taken. It means his job. And Blaisdell, and de Brasa. They weren't under your orders. Those are my men over there—and they're doing your job for you. You ought to thank me instead of going wild and making threats."

Sheriff Kingan stared into Tyler's gray face, feeling the blaze of the sun on his shoulders, hearing the report of the rifles from the hill across the mesa. His voice shook. "I'm loco then, Tyler. Because I don't thank you. And I warn you, don't ever push me, or reach for that gun around me, because I'll take it as meaning you're drawing on me, and I'll kill you."

Tyler's eyes widened, and his lips parted. He stared at the sheriff, incredulous. "You hear him, Butterworth, he is loco. By God, he means it. By God, he is loco."

The rifles were well-placed in the rocks on each side of him. Evan crouched first to his knees, and then slid out on his belly, hugging the ground, and the crossfire crackled near his head. They had him spotted and he had

to clear out. The thought of trying to travel, even crawling with his belly on fire, filled him with nausea and he stayed for a moment, his face pressed against the rough texture of the rock.

His jaw was set, a muscle working along it. The rage churned in his belly. He reckoned he had lived long enough anyhow. He was overwhelmed with outrage at the evil, the injustice, and the deceit of men the world considered honest.

He closed his fist on the metal of the rifle, seeing the way Barr Kingan had stood down there, trying to talk him off this ledge. Sure, that was all they wanted, to get him out in the open so they could cut him down easily.

He swore, forgetting the agony in his belly in his wild rage against Kingan.

He hugged the ground, the bullets biting into the rock and slate around him. He had a new reason for staying alive a little while longer. He wanted to repay Barr Kingan for this trick. Sure. It was clever. Clever and fair, because anything was fair when the law dealt with the lawbreakers.

He breathed raggedly against the rock. What a hell of a thing. The way he had trusted Barr. He had been so tired, so ill, he'd been tempted to surrender to him—the thought of food, of water, of resting, of getting this wound tended and maybe something to ease the fever in it. He had been tempted. Fine. And when he had stood up, Barr Kingan's men would have cut him down.

He cursed. I'll stay alive, friend, somehow, long enough to pay you back. It's time to die anyhow, when you've lost the last shred of faith. Hell, next he'd see Lupe with the bounty hunters.

Clinging to his rifle, Evan wriggled backwards, going out of the small ledge, upward into the narrow path where he was protected by the boulders.

The men out on each side of him yelled to each other, but they could no longer get a shot at him. One of them yelled across the mesa that Landrews was off the ledge, climbing.

Six feet up the path, Evan pulled himself around a

boulder and studied the rocks. He saw a shadow move and fired on it. The recoil of the Winchester almost knocked him unconscious. He bit down on his mouth until his lips bled. The man down there screamed like a woman and hit the dirt.

Volleys of gunfire opened up on the boulder, splatting on the rock near Evan's face. He slid to the ground, crawling upward again.

He could smell the hot sweet stickiness of his own blood. The wound had slowed to a trickle as long as he lay still on that ledge down there; now it was seeping again.

He pressed his hand against his side, feeling the blood running between his fingers.

He sagged face down on the path for a moment, hearing the gunmen still firing at that boulder. He pushed his palm against the bullet wound, feeling the heat and pulse of his blood.

It was time to quit. He was too tired and too ill to fight any more. He was too beaten to move, and he lay there, tears brimming his eyes, the agony burning in his belly. All he had to do was stand up and it was all over. Nothing else made sense. He had fought them as long as he could. They cheated him, they robbed him, they lied about him in court, and they hunted him like an animal—injustice. He had come out here looking for something else, but this was what he found, and this was what he left to Lupe. They'd come in the night and they'd burn her out, and they'd take his land—in the name of justice.

The hell with it. It didn't matter any more. He had fought as long as he could, he was too beat to fight any more. Only . . . he was too full of rage to surrender to them. He was damned if he would let them take him, let Charlie Tyler stand over his body as if he were an animal on the prowl. And he could never surrender to a lying, cheating man like Barr Kingan.

No, gents, you'll have to come and get me. He lifted his head, crawling upward, going through the rocks.

He laughed suddenly, bitterly. It was funny as anything he had ever thought in all his life—the higher he climbed, the nearer he got to hell.

X

Across the mesa from the gunfire in the rocks, Barr Kingan stood up, searching the hill with his field glasses.

At his side, old Sam Butterworth said, "It's almost ended now, Barr."

"It can't last much longer." Barr lowered the glasses and agony showed in his faded eyes. He turned and called, "You. Billy Welch, come here." When the boy was before him, gun in his hand, ready to fight, Barr swore. "Put that damned gun away. I want you to ride down that incline out of here—"

"Sheriff, no! Not now. Not when they're going to *kill* him!"

"Damn it, boy, I want Doc Curtis brought up here, and I'm sending you. That's an order, you understand?"

Billy's face was gray, his eyes bleak, but he nodded. Barr watched him ride out across the mesa, gaze on the hill.

A man yelled from high up the rocky hillside, and then he fired upward. Barr saw that he had found Landrews, a moving target crawling through the rocks. The bullet stung into the boulders, the sound rattling across the tableland, and two quick shots coming back from Landrews' Winchester up there. The man who had yelled hit the ground hard and stayed there.

But there were no more sounds from those rocks up there. The men moved warily from their ambush positions, scaling the slick rock wall, moving upward. Still Landrews did not fire again.

Involuntarily, Barr walked a few feet out into the sun

of the mesa. The silence continued and then Tyler ran out from the rocks, standing beside him.

"They must of got him that time, Kingan!" Tyler's voice was exultant.

"Maybe."

"Come on. Let's move over there. Them boys have got him pinned down—if they ain't killed him already. Come on, Barr, let's get over there."

"Don't be in no rush to get a bullet in you, Tyler. Take it easy. They ain't got him—not for sure—not yet."

"What the hell you think it is then? Them men are climbing up to him—hell, I can see them. Why ain't he pickin' them off if they ain't stopped him?"

Kingan shook his head, but did not answer. He was pretty certain in his own mind why Landrews didn't fire at those men, but he didn't speak it aloud. He figured Landrews was out of ammunition for the Winchester; he'd had only what was in the magazine when he took it from Thompson in the prison coach. But Barr couldn't bring himself to say this to Tyler, he couldn't stand to see the pleasure fire up the rancher's face, didn't trust himself to see it.

On a shelf among the rocks high above the mesa, Evan lay on his back on brown volcanic spikes. He kept his hand pressed against the bleeding wound in his side. He was breathing raggedly through his parted mouth and his gaze was fixed on a far buzzard sailing lazily on wide-rising updrafts against a hazy, metallic white sky.

At last Evan turned his head and stared bleakly at the Winchester he had brought so far. It was empty, useless, heavy, and he pushed it away from him.

As the Winchester rolled down the narrow path, sending loose rocks and lava chips ahead of it, the men below gasped and leaped for cover, staying there until the rifle came to rest against a boulder and the pebbles stopped rolling.

Landrews listened to the gun slide away, feeling as if his last chance on earth was falling away from him with it.

He pushed his swollen tongue across his dry, cracked lips, listening to a new sound when the rifle was stilled. The gunmen to the right and left in the rock patches below were getting bolder now, moving up on him.

He lay there, hearing them climb, running from rock to rock, taking cover and searching for him above them. He could no longer make himself care, the fever was burning him and the fire in his belly killed all other sensation, even the will to stay alive.

He heard them call out across the rocks to each other. They were pushing him now, coming in for the kill, and he lay there remembering a long-ago fox hunt in Virginia, the way they had run the beautiful little animal until it lost control of itself in its exhaustion, defecating, urinating, running in sad little circles, insane with fear, and they blew horns and moved in and killed it. And now he was the fox, he was the hunted, lying beaten in his own blood and they crept upward to finish him, shouting across to the men on the far side of the mesa.

A bullet slapped into the lava beside his leg, bringing him up from his delirium and he crawled upward again into new shelter. The man who had fired laughed down there, and the laughter rattled like insanity deep in Landrews' mind, and he spun, crouched, firing his revolver twice toward that sound. He pressed the trigger again in his unreasoning rage, hearing it click on an empty chamber.

Landrews sagged into the rocks, staring at the empty six-shooter, the cartridge holes like blind eyes. He shifted the gun in his fist, drew his arm back to throw it away.

He changed his mind. With his arm back, the gun heavy in his palm, his gaze struck the meadows and the tablelands on the mountain far across the pass. Even with the sun high on it, the broken ridges were strangely lovely, darkly yellow, and palely purple with a green mist over it all: a place of shade, food game, grass for cattle, water. It was impossibly far, and he would never make it, but even with the rifles cracking intermittently below him, he stared at it, thinking it was a big and very lovely land.

There was nothing wrong with any of it except the men who despoiled it.

Still holding the gun, he lowered his gaze, seeing the buzzard swinging lower, as if he could scent the blood Landrews had trailed upward through the rocks. Then he saw where he had run to—the jumping-off place. He had finally let them box him off on a lava ledge that was the end of the road.

Above him were rock walls, a straight climb upward that a man might make if he didn't have a wound in his belly, and his ex-neighbors shooting at him from the rocks below.

He moved slightly and his legs swung out over a drop that was a forty-five degree incline to a level valley below that stretched cool and green between two incredible mountains.

He wanted to laugh, but he did not. Laughter wouldn't help his belly any. But still it was ironical as hell. He had found the pass out of these mountains, the way south into the plains through that valley. Only it was too late. It stretched out, beckoning, down there, only God knew how far down this steep, rocky incline that would rip him apart and anyhow, he had nothing left inside that would carry him out of the hills.

A rifle fired, the sound loud, the bullet whistling near him. Landrews slid to his back, turned, staring out toward the place where those men were. The hell with them. Let them come and get him.

He closed his eyes, pulled his levis as high over the belly wound as possible, shoved the gun into his belt over the tear. He pushed out, going over the brink of the shelf. It was as if he were caught suddenly by a torrent of pressure thrusting him downward. He broke his fall by digging his boot heels as long as he could. But a giant hand seemed to slap at him, throwing him over and over through the rocks. As he fell, he could hear the men yelling at each other from the hill above him. And then there was only the savage thunder of the rocks and his body pounding downward faster and faster, his hands

clinging futilely as he hurtled along in a hailstorm of pebbles and debris and a powdering trail of dust.

When Blaisdell shouted at them, Barr sprinted across the mesa, followed by Tyler, Sam Butterworth and the men of his posse.

Barr was first on the path, and he set the pace, moving upward steadily, but with caution. He heard Tyler, gun drawn, swearing at his back, but he ignored the rancher.

Barr saw the trail of blood that Landrews had left as he had wriggled upward through the rocks from the ledge.

Hal Thompson stood up with the Winchester where Landrews had thrown it.

"He's out of ammo," Tyler said. "We can move in on him now, can't we, Sheriff?"

Blaisdell was standing on a volcanic escarpment above them, rifle in his fist at his side.

Blaisdell's voice raged back down the incline to the gathering hunters. "He's falling down this incline like a sack of feed, Kingan. If the poor jasper lives through this, I don't reckon you *can* kill him."

Barr didn't answer, but climbed through the rocks and stood beside the bounty hunter staring down into the dust cloud.

At Barr's shoulder, Tyler laughed. "All right. It's over now. Let's go down there and pick him up."

Barr turned his back on the rancher. "Men, we stay together. We can go down the incline at the east end of the mesa and circle around the mountain to that valley down there. I don't think there's any need for hurry—I don't think he's going anywhere."

The men stalked down through the rocks, none of them speaking. It had been a long, hot hunt, and some of them couldn't believe even now that it was over. The thought that Landrews was dead brought home to most of them a fact they had put out of their minds in the last five days: he was their neighbor, he had been a good man, a hard worker, a generous and kindly ranch-owner, a man who got in bad trouble, but gave them a gallant battle against overwhelming odds.

They mounted up in silence, holstering guns, shoving rifles into saddle scabbards, not speaking and not looking at each other. There were only the sounds of creaking leather, the cllop of shod hoofs on the rough ground.

Barr rode at the head of them, crossing the mesa and going down the incline into the piñon thicket. He picked his way carefully, aware of Sam Butterworth's riding behind him, going in a long circular trail into the valley at the other side of the mountain.

Forty minutes later they rode into the valley, a long twisting gash cut between two ranges, tufted with sage, stunted piñon, mesquite, and in the distance larger trees and promise of shade and a long, slow incline south.

They rode to the place where a pile of small rocks and pebbles showed the violent end of Landrews' plunge down the incline.

They did not find Landrews. They found a shred from his shirt and streaks of his blood, but he was gone, and there was at once no trace of him in the mesquite wilds of the valley.

Staring down at the bloody place where Landrews had stopped rolling, Barr Kingan winced, shaking his head. What kind of man was it they were trying to kill?

Hands shackled, he escaped two armed guards in a prison coach. He stayed alive in a barren country, and he fought them, desperately wounded, until his ammunition was gone. Now, he got up from a fall that should have killed a well man. Barr Kingan suddenly hated his oath, his job, and all he was sworn to do. God made men, and made them want to live through a hell like this, and yet other men trailed them, with guns ready to blast this God-given life out of them. He shook this thought from his mind. He felt sick, but he had his work cut out for him, it was all he knew, and he would finish it.

"Holy Mary," Sam Butterworth said. "He got up from this—and he walked away. We won't see many men better than him, Kingan."

Charlie Tyler was impatiently angry. "He's still alive, but he can't be far. Let's go get him now."

Barr glanced at Tyler and the rancher fell silent under

the burn of the lawman's gaze. The sheriff jerked his head at Butterworth.

Sam ground-tied his horse and walked out into the valley. He found no blood. The ground was covered with small stones, thin sand. There was nothing to hold a print.

"Nothing out here, Barr."

"Oh, for hell's sake," Tyler said. "He must have run out there into the valley. We spread out, we move forward and we'll find him."

Kingan ignored him. "We best look for overturned rocks or scuff marks out there, Sam."

Sam looked up from searching the ground. "It don't make sense and I can't see him having strength to do it, but he must of run out of here on his heels so's not to leave that torn sole print."

"The hell with it!" Tyler's voice raged. "The man's shot, bleeding. He can't go far. Damn it, Kingan, I say he's sprawled out there in that mesquite on his face—and all we got to do is go out there and get him." Tyler jerked his arm upward. "Look yonder. See that buzzard. He knows Landrews is out there, dead or dying."

"A dying man can be like a hurt animal," Kingan warned. "He can be the most dangerous when he's dying."

Tyler's control broke. "What do we do? Wait here until that buzzard lights on his body and shows us where he is?"

"I think we ought to wait a while," Barr said, watching Tyler's face.

The rancher blinked. "Then you wait. I've followed you five days—as far as I will. I'm taking my men. We're pulling out. I figure we've stayed with you as long as our oath demands. We've brought you to where that killer is and you won't move. That lets us out."

After a moment, Kingan nodded. "That's fair enough, Tyler. You take your men. You search the valley, you ride out. It's up to you." He turned. "Any you other men want to ride off with Tyler, it's up to you. I release you as deputies."

He waited, but the posse men shook their heads. Somehow they had no stomach for riding in for the ruthless kill they saw Tyler planned. Butterworth spoke for them. "Reckon we come this far, we'll stick with you, Barr."

The others mumbled assent, none looking at the sheriff.

The rancher called his men out. They rode forward, sitting sweated, bearded, spiritlessly in their saddles.

Tyler said, "How about you, Thompson? You want to get Landrews, don't you?"

Hal Thompson scowled, glanced at the sheriff, at Lucas Cross, Pete Necomber and at Ed Blackburn. They did not meet his gaze. He nodded. "I'll ride with you, Tyler."

Blaisdell said, "I'll go along. But I warn you. Do I come on the man—or the body—first, the reward is mine."

Tyler shrugged. "All right, let's go."

The Mexican, de Brasa, shook his head. "I've had enough. I got no belly for it from here. That man fought me clean, and he could have killed me, but he didn't do it. I ain't going in on him like this when he's unarmed and helpless."

"I come for the money," Blaisdell said. His voice rasped. "That's all it means to me. He don't mean nothing to me."

He moved his horse forward, following Tyler in the lead and his ranchers strung out behind.

Kingan did not watch them. He sent his deputy at a gallop to bring the chuckwagon from the night camp, and swung down from his horse seeking shade.

He counted off his men. "I want you men to ride wide in this valley on one side, you other men across from them, go four or five miles and then spread out, heading back. We ought to pick him up somewhere in there."

Butterworth spoke flatly. "As much as it agonizes me to agree with Mister Tyler, I think he's right. I think that young Landrews is sprawled out there in the mesquite. After that fall, and that bullet in him, he couldn't go far."

Barr glanced up. "Not unless he was fevered, and out of his head. A hungry man and a sick animal get so they live on rage, and try to die in rage."

Butterworth frowned, his gaze fixed on the sheriff's face.

At that instant there was a sudden scream, high pitched and as wild as an hysterical woman's, from out in the valley.

Barr Kingan ran and leaped into his saddle as if he had been alert, waiting for this sound. He rode fast into the mesquite. Butterworth was at his heels, staring at Kingan's back with a new and deeper admiration than he had ever felt before for the lawman. Maybe these people didn't know and never would know what a magnificent man they had in their sheriff, but Butterworth felt good because he did know.

The posse, numbed, followed.

They rode into the mesquite to where Tyler's men and Blaisdell and Thompson had stopped, dismounted.

Before them they saw something they would never forget. It would haunt their dreams and grow into legend over bars and campfires as long as any of them lived.

What they saw they found their eyes unwilling to believe. Tyler was caught, his knees bent, his hat gone, his head back, his throat hooked in a bloody arm that seemed to have no covering of flesh remaining.

The bloody apparition holding Tyler no longer looked human. They believed it was Evan Landrews because reason told them it had to be. He was cut, raked, torn, gashed and bleeding. He looked barely able to stand and yet there was about him the strength of ten men, the strength of mortal outrage.

They saw his blood on Tyler, on the mesquite, and on the earth he had banked as an ambush in the open while he waited, crouched, hidden in the underbrush until Tyler walked past him. They saw where he had lunged upon Tyler's back, imprisoning him, holding him in the crook of a bloody arm, holding the pistol in a mangled fist, warning the others to stand back.

"Stay where you are," he said, blood spraying from his

torn face when he spoke. His eyes were wild fires in the bloody mask.

"Drop the gun, Evan," Kingan said. "You can't kill us all."

"Won't try. But try to stop me and I'll kill Tyler. I'll kill him, the first one that moves."

Tyler sobbed, trying to speak. His eyes were still shadowed, swirling with the insensate terrors that struck him when Landrews leaped suddenly upon him from nowhere, like something from the pits of hell.

Tyler shook his head, wildly, begging them to stay where they were.

Barr held up his hand. "Hold it, men," he said. "What do you want, Landrews?"

Landrews' bloody arm tightened on Tyler's throat, the gun pressed hard into Tyler's temple, the hammer trembling. Tyler cried out, an unintelligible sound cut off in his windpipe.

"Tyler knows what I want!" Landrews' voice shook with the rage in it. "Tell them, Tyler. If you want to live, you tell them. You cheated me. You set Harden to rob us on that trail. You lied in court."

Landrews thrust the gun harder, raking Tyler's face with it. His arm closed on his throat. Tyler's knees sagged, his eyes rolled in their sockets. His tongue was forced across his lips. He gasped, trying to breathe, clutching at Landrews' bleeding arm, trying to pull it away from his throat. The breath was cut off, and he struggled, strangling, suffocating.

He nodded frantically and Landrews released his grip enough to permit Tyler to breathe.

"Tell them!" Landrews raged.

Tyler only nodded, as if now that he had started moving his head, and gasping for breath he could not stop.

At last he wailed, "I lied! I lied!"

Landrews' bloody face ruttled, and he thrust Tyler from him, sending him staggering and then sprawling into the dirt at the feet of the nearest men.

Landrews stood a moment then, looking at the gun in

his hand. It was as if he could no longer go on standing there.

None of the men spoke, and nobody moved to cover him with a gun.

Suddenly, Tyler pushed up to his knees, massaging his throat, the front of his shirt smeared with Landrews' blood.

He yelled, "Kill him! Kill him! A thousand dollars to the man that kills him!"

Nobody moved. None of them looked at Tyler. It was as if they could not take their gazes from the bloody apparition standing like a wavering reed in the mesquite before them.

Tyler came up to his feet.

He yelled, voice quavering, "Damn you, Kingan. It's your doing. You knew he was out here. You let me walk into this trap."

Barr shook his head. "No, Tyler. I tried to stop you. Tried to make you wait. You wouldn't listen to me."

Tyler's hand groped down, touching the gun in his holster. His face showed his shock at finding he was still armed.

He turned, staring at Landrews. "He tried to kill me. He's got a gun and he's trying to kill me!"

His voice rose and he slapped at his holster with his fist, palming the gun. "If nobody else won't stop him, I will."

Tyler's men, the bounty hunters, the posse stood incredulous as Tyler drew his gun. They saw that Landrews made no effort to lift the pistol in his hand, and that no one was going to stop Tyler from killing Landrews in cold blood.

As the gun was being jerked from Tyler's holster, Barr Kingan spoke from his left. "Tyler!"

Tyler's voice raged, high pitched, "Don't you try to stop me, damn you!" And as he spoke, he brought the gun from his holster, turned raging toward the sheriff.

What happened then was almost too fast to be followed. Landrews made no move out in the mesquite, but Kingan's gun appeared in his hand, and he fired twice.

A look of disbelief showed in Tyler's face before he

went sprawling backward under the impact of Kingan's bullets. He struck the ground, twisted on his side, his gun knocked from his grasp. He lifted his head, then sagged out on his back, face up. Tyler was dead before anybody could get to him.

Kingan stood for some moments staring at the body of the rancher. "He drew on me. He turned toward me with that gun in his hand, and I warned him never to draw on me. I had to kill him." He waited, moving his gaze along the line of the men. "Any of you men see it any different from that?"

None of them spoke. At that instant, none were sure how they saw it. They felt that Tyler had been drawing, meaning to kill Landrews who held a gun a few feet in front of him. But Tyler *had* turned toward the sheriff, and Tyler did have the gun in his fist as he turned. None of them would swear Tyler was drawing on the sheriff, but none of them could swear that the sheriff after these past five days might not have been justified in thinking Tyler was drawing on him. After all, Landrews had forced a confession from Tyler, a confession that cleared Landrews of any wrong, and made the killing in Dona Ana a matter of self-defense, and Tyler had known that Barr Kingan saw justice done at all costs, and Barr would have seen that Tyler was prosecuted. So who could say whether Barr was wrong in thinking Tyler had drawn on him? None of these men could say, and each of them knew in his own heart that he never would say. It was justice, and Kingan had dealt it.

Kingan replaced his gun in its holster and walked slowly out to where Evan stood. He took the pistol from Landrews. "It's all over, Evan. You don't need this no more."

Then Kingan turned and flipped open the cartridge chambers. The gun Landrews had used to force a confession from Tyler was empty.

"You knew it was empty," Evan said. "That's why you made him turn. That's why you killed him."

Kingan shrugged. "It don't matter no more," he said. "It's all over. That chuckwagon will be here soon, and we'll start back. We still got a long way to go."

Evans Landrews was a convicted murderer. That he had been framed made very little difference to the men who hunted him —

Barr Kingan, his best friend, who also happened to be an honest Sheriff —

Tyler, who had doublecrossed Landrews and so had to see him dead to feel safe —

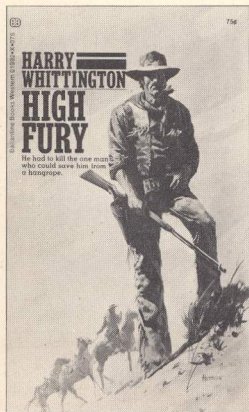
And Blaisdell, out for the bounty; a pockfaced, soulless killer with eyes as flat as a dead bird.

No one believed that Landrews had the ghost of a chance — except Landrews.

AND DON'T MISS!

By the same Author

HIGH FURY



HANGROPE TOWN

