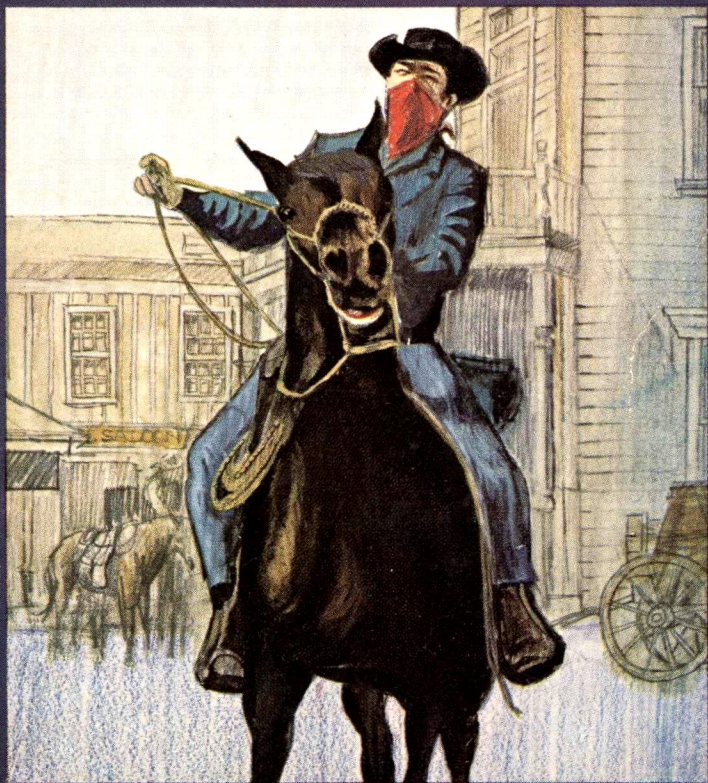


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FRANK WYNNE

CALL ME HAZARD

...and watch for me in gunsmoke!



ARIZONA MOUNTAIN HELLION

A mile away, at the bend in the road, he watched the six horsemen thunder forward. Where the road widened, the riders fanned out and drummed ahead six abreast, Hazard walked out exactly into the middle of the road and spread his feet a little way apart, and stood that way, facing the onrushing six.

"Canreen is mine. You two watch the others," he said.

When Hazard glanced at his two partners, he saw sweat-beads standing out on their faces. His own eyes were bright as he watched the riders bear down on him. For a moment it seemed they did not intend to slacken pace.

"Good luck, boys," Hazard said, and dug in his heels.

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BRIAN WYNNE GARFIELD was born in 1939, which makes him one of the youngest writers of Western novels in print. Ever since his first book sale at the age of eighteen, he has been pounding the typewriter successfully. A former ranch-hand, he is a student of Western and South-western history, an expert on guns, and a sports car enthusiast.

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CALL ME HAZARD

by

FRANK WYNNE



ACE BOOKS, INC.

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THE RINCON TRAP

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I

GRAVEN-FACED, Jason Hazard dismounted and gave his attention to the big horse's forefeet. Steamy heat glued the wet shirt to his back. A leather-hilt knife hung sheath-sewn into his butternut trousers at the left hip; he slipped the knife into his hand and dug a pebble from the horseshoe rim. The big sorrel put its foot down gently and blinked at him. Jason Hazard squatted motionless on his heels, tipped his hat back wearily and dragged a sleeve across his forehead. Heat blasted the mountainsides. Here and there he could see the tailings of abandoned silver diggings. There was not a single tree anywhere in sight, not a blade of grass.

Canyon walls spilled away below him. Down through the foothills he could see the dust-grey town squatting in the sun. From this altitude the length of the western desert seemed foreshortened; it unrolled from the cactus-studded hills, expanding in hot yellows and greys to the far horizon. Curling along the bases of the foothills, the track of the Rio Soldado marked itself with brush clumps and dead trees, all of it dry and dead. The river was only sand—two years' drought had boiled away the last drop of its water.

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Heat haze undulated over the far desert, making it shimmer. The sky was brass; Jason Hazard kept his eyes hooded against it. A vulture swept down from the higher peaks and planed overhead, silent, not beating its wings. Jason Hazard touched the backstrap of his holster gun and got to his feet. The vulture swooped away, dropping in a sideslip of graceful flight.

Jason Hazard pulled his hatbrim low, put his back to the desolate panorama, and had another look at the sorrel's hoof. He made a judgment and lips formed the words: *Tender but sound.*

Ready to mount, he gathered the reins and half-turned. Some sound arrested him there and he stood bolt still, listening past the quiet puff of the horse's breathing. He turned his head slowly, to expose the flats of his eardrums to the compass points. Under the heavy drooping mustache his lips drew out, flat and thin, cruel.

For a time he heard nothing, and then it reached him—the scrape and rattle of horsehoofs clattering faintly through the rocks. He turned his attention toward a narrow sidecanyon that broke out of a boulder-sided mountain; he stood facing it with a hand locked around the grip of his revolver.

Jason Hazard was a big-shouldered man without the slightest hint of softness anywhere. A matched pair of deep vertical trenches ran down his cheeks to the corners of his mouth. His eyes were couched in hollows under overhanging tawny brows. His mustache, exposed to the weather, was a lighter shade of ash than his hair. He had a long blade of a nose and an expression that gave away nothing at all; while he watched the canyon mouth, his face held its air of fatalistic calm.

Sound carried a far distance in the rock hills; it would be a little while before the advancing horse would come into view. Jason Hazard walked unhurriedly around to the near

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side of the horse and stood with his left elbow crooked over the pommel, looking across the saddle at the canyon. He wore a peaked tan hat with a wide disc-flat brim that made a severe line across his forehead; he wore a flannel shirt that did not conceal powerful arms, and a calfskin vest held together by a silver chain across the belly.

His eyes reflected a cool shine. The sound of approaching hoofbeats stopped abruptly, and with a slight flicker in his glance Jason Hazard lifted his revolver and laid it gently across the saddle, hooking his thumb over the hammer and drawing it back to full-cock.

The unseen horse started up again. Jason Hazard did not move. In time the advancing rider came into sight a quarter-mile distant, smoking a cigarette: it must have been to light the smoke that he had stopped.

Jason Hazard uncocked his gun and put it away; he stepped out from behind his sorrel with arms hanging free, and stood waiting for the rider to come up. The horseman trotted forward, cigarette glued to a lip-corner—a short man, sturdy and wide in the face, crowned with a mat of flaming red hair. The eyes were Irish green and the jowls set for easy laughter, but just now the rider's expression was troubled.

Jason Hazard said, "Flynn McGrath."

"Aye—it better be, or I've been sufferin' forty years for the wrong party." Flynn McGrath's voice was thick with the brogue of the West Counties. He dismounted and wiped a sleeve across his face, snorting like a horse. "I have been waiting two days on this God-forsaken mountain."

"And?"

"You're after to be askin' me what's the matter, Flynn McGrath? Well, I'll be tellin' you, Jason. The matter. The rub." He reached for his canteen, uncorked it, and drank. With a belch and a sigh he went on: "The matter's with Turk Ames.

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It would appear the worthy gentleman's left our fair company."

Jason Hazard said indifferently, "What of it?"

"My dear, dear friend," Flynn McGrath said drily, "you wasn't exactly after being Turk Ames' closest bosom supporter."

Jason Hazard tugged his hat down and said, "It's hot and dry, Flynn, and I've had a long dusty ride. Quit beating around the bush and get at what you mean to say to me."

"Our fine trustin' neighbors have been adding two and two. One day word comes that Jason Hazard's been seen riding the trail toward Stinking Springs. Next day, Turk Ames disappears off the face of the earth. It makes for interesting coincidence, they're all thinking. Especially after you and Turk had a bit of a falling out. Which is to put it in charitable terms."

While the Irishman talked, Jason Hazard climbed into his saddle. He said mildly, "They can think whatever they want to think," and lifted his reins.

"Hold on," said McGrath. "You're not getting this yet, Jason. The Butterfield driver said you was on the road headed this way, and there was nothing to it but that next thing you know Turk Ames was all saddled up and polishing his gun. Turk rode out of Stinking Springs swearin' on an oath by his mother's grave he'd settle with you—and that's the last anybody seen of him. The town figures Turk rode out looking for trouble and found himself a nice quiet grave, and they figure it was one Jason Hazard who put him there. Let us not be forgettin' that Turk Ames is superintendent of the Pitchfork mine, than which there is no bigger silver operation this side of the Mogollon Rim. It ain't as if he was a common saloon drunk. Turk is an uncommon saloon drunk at the very least, and I'm thinking it's a good idea to be warn-

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ing you before you come riding big as life down into Stinking Springs."

"You should have been a politician," Jason Hazard told him. "I never knew a man who could find so many ways to circle around a statement. Are you trying to tell me Zachary Miles intends to lynch me because his superintendent disappeared?"

"No. Zach Miles hasn't been so much as saying a word about you. After all, his beautiful witch of a daughter's still pining after you. He can't be sticking his neck out yet. But you might be remembering that Zach Miles is not the only red-blooded hooligan in Stinking Springs with a tongue in his mouth, hey?"

"All right. Who, then?"

McGrath lifted his shoulders and turned his palms up. "Who knows where a rumor starts? The point is, there's a smell about the thing, and I said to myself, McGrath, it would be a prudent thing to be warnin' your old friend Hazard before he comes blundering into Stinking Springs in his usual wide-eyed innocent fashion, I says."

Hazard was regarding him without a hint of expression. "You're not too sure I didn't put a knife in Turk Ames' back and bury him in the hills, are you?"

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure of hearin' you speak one way or the other on the subject."

A thin cruel smile touched Jason Hazard's lips briefly, and was gone; it was all the answer he gave to McGrath's implied question. He turned his horse away and McGrath said, "I'd be careful where I put my boots down, was I you."

"Thanks for the warning."

McGrath let him ride twenty feet away before speaking again:

"You ain't even asked about the mine."

"That's right," Hazard said over his shoulder.

"Don't you care about it?"

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"I'll see for myself," Hazard said.

Hazard was still riding down the slope and McGrath had to shout after him: "It's a fine how-d'ye-do if you won't even be trustin' me, Jason!"

Hazard made no reply. In a short while he was out of sight, lost in the tall boulders below. Flynn McGrath scratched the back of his neck and frowned angrily after him. The Irishman's square face set itself into grim ridges; he got on his horse and trotted back into the canyon he had come out of.

Flynn McGrath had touched his share of wild coasts; it was a continuing source of surprise to him that he, a sailor by birth, found himself not only landlocked but surrounded by interminable miles of deserts.

Puzzled by Jason Hazard's close-mouthed air of mystery, McGrath dropped along a rock trail through the foothills. As he drew nearer the base of the hills his ears picked up a familiar, insistent mechanical chugging that drifted across the air from the district to his right. It grew steadily louder until the road lifted him across the crest of a hill. From that point of vantage he had a clear view of a dense plume of smoke rising from the stack of the Pitchfork mine's reduction mill—a big, dirty corrugated building, fed by crude conveyors from a string of shacks higher on the slope. The stamping of the big steam engine pounded against his ears as if there were no distance between them; in fact the mill was at least half a mile away. Above it on the steep tilts stood derricks supporting heavy windlasses. Tunnels penetrated the mountain fed by narrow railway tracks. While Flynn McGrath rode forward, a steam-powered winch hauled a half-rusty ore cart from a lower tunnel and a team of brawny men in overalls pitched forward, dumping the cart over on its hinges, spilling the chopped rock into a great metal chute that humped down

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the hill like an angleworm. The avalanche of ore made a tremendous hollow clatter, tumbling down the clanging chute.

McGrath went on down the trail and the heavy shoulders of the hills quickly blocked his view of the mill, although for quite sometime he could still see the open mouths of shafts higher along the slope. The heat was oppressive: his shirt clung to his back and the wind sawed painfully in and out of him.

He was thinking, all the while, of Jason Hazard. It had not escaped McGrath that Hazard had said no word of thanks, beyond a grudging offhand remark. Hazard had always been inscrutable; but the years since McGrath had last seen him seemed to have laid an extra layer of armor over Hazard's already hard surface. McGrath had known the man for years; he had never once been able to get inside him. But Flynn McGrath was unwilling to leave it at that; he refused to allow Hazard to remain an enigma. Somehow, he vowed, he would find a way to learn what lay inside that shell of cruel granite.

Jason Hazard had discovered the silver lode on the foothill rim, just six years ago. It had been Hazard who had staked the first claim, Hazard who had dug the first shaft, Hazard who had built the first silver mill in the Arrowheads. Two years of sweat and bonecrushing work; and then one day, without explanation, Hazard had saddled his horse and spoken tersely to his foreman, Flynn McGrath:

"I'll be gone a while. Run the mine as you see fit."

That was all. Hazard had disappeared four years ago. Twice in the interim McGrath had heard from him. Once, it was a request to send a \$5,000 bank draft to Hazard in Cripple Creek. The second time, it was a note as curt as Hazard's way of talking: *Am making you full partner in Silverbell Mine. Bank my half profits for me.*

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That had been eight months ago. The generosity had amazed McGrath; the brevity of the note had not.

The Arizona sun beat down on his shoulders. Traveling at a steady gait, he reached the east bank of the dry river at two o'clock and had a brief disgusted look at the loose sand of its bottom. The coach road came along, intersecting his trail, and he turned onto the road, going around a sharp river bend and following the bank. From here he had occasional views from high spots of the town three miles away.

Stinking Springs owed its existence to Jason Hazard and his discovery, but the town had never acknowledged that debt, nor in fact would Hazard ever expect it of the town. McGrath remembered the first meeting with Hazard. McGrath had come riding across the desert hills, seeking the road to Washington Camp; his navigation had failed him and he had lost his way. He had topped a hill and found a big-boned man staring mildly at him over the barrel of a revolver held hip-high, relaxed but wary. McGrath had recognized Hazard immediately; he had never been introduced to the man but he had seen Jason Hazard twice: once in a poker game at Sutter's Fort, the second time in a gunfight on the street of Spanish Flat. Jason Hazard, even then, had been no stranger to any man west of the Rio Grande. He was known the length and width of the Southwest, a man who measured his words with care and let his gun talk for him.

That first meeting had characterized the two men's relationship from then on. McGrath remembered it with an image of crystal clarity. Hazard had given him a quick scrutiny and a cup of coffee, and had spoken quietly: "If you're looking for work I've got a mountain full of silver here. I could use help digging it out."

It had started that way. The mine grew; they laid in a crew of hard-gutted miners—Mexicans, Irish, Welshmen, Dutchmen. The mill went up. Zachary Miles and a dozen

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other Coloradans came down to stake claims, and brought with them endless trains of freight wagons piled high with machinery. Swarms of miners dug into the sweltering Arizona hills. They came by thousands; the town sprang up to service them. And then, on the peak of the boom, Jason Hazard had received a feather-light letter in one Wednesday's stagecoach mail, and the next day Hazard had ridden away across the mountains.

"Aye," Flynn McGrath breathed, "and now he's back. Now he's back. Well, we'll see."

The sun thrust at him with heavy-handed intensity, making the air thick and sluggish. When he entered the single street of Stinking Springs the horse waded fetlock-deep in loose powder dust and suspended a silver cloud behind itself. The pall settled with slow choking weariness.

It was midafternoon and there was no traffic whatever. In this country *siesta* was not a custom, it was a necessity of life. Flynn McGrath stepped down at the dark mouth of the livery stable and led his horse inside, and read the thermometer hanging inside the door. He muttered out of a grit-dry throat: "Hundred and three in the shade," and loosened the saddle girth. The Mexican stable boy came down the stable aisle without hurry, shuffling his sandaled feet. McGrath turned his horse over to the boy, dropped a coin in his palm, and walked away, hearing the boy's soft "*Gracias*" hang on the air behind him.

His first stop was the Occidental Saloon. The place was empty but for the barkeep. McGrath had one mug of beer to moisten his throat and tongue. He went outside immediately, splashed water over his head at the Wells Fargo depot's horse trough, and walked across the street to the deputy's office.

He stepped inside and found the little bald deputy-sheriff perched on the desk corner reading a dime novel. Owney

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Nash was a tiny man with a billiard-round bald head and inquisitive grey eyes. He had a wrinkled blade of a nose that wiggled at the tip when he talked. It was unlikely that he weighed more than one hundred and thirty pounds in all his clothes. He had a belligerent face; he looked up sourly and the tip of his nose twitched.

"Find him?"

"Who?" McGrath said innocently.

"Your partner," said Owney Nash. "Who else?"

"Now, what would be giving you the idea I might ever have been looking for the likes of him?"

"You had it written all over you when you rode out of here. First the mail driver said Hazard was aimed this way. Then Turk Ames disappeared. Then you saddled up and rode for the mountains."

"For a scuttlin' little spalpeen you see a lot."

"That's my job," Owney Nash said with a testy clip to his words. "I hope you didn't find the son of a bitch. I hope he rides in here cold and they hang him from a rafter."

"Is that what you'd be calling upholding the law, Owney?"

"Law—hell, law's too good for Hazard. I seen that arrogant bastard a time or two. Serve him right if they strung him up. And you can bet your boots I ain't risking my neck to save his worthless hide."

Flynn McGrath said quietly, "I'm thinking Vic Olsen maybe took you off in a corner and told you how to feel about it."

Owney Nash flushed deep scarlet; he was not looking at McGrath when he answered: "You'd better keep that kind of loose talk to yourself, Flynn. I only take orders from one man, and that's Sheriff Morgan up at the County Seat. Vic Olsen don't run me."

"He runs the town," McGrath said. "And you might correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't believe I've ever had the pleasure of seeing you dispute the gentleman."

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Nash was frowning, as though a new thought had just struck him. "Listen, does Hazard know about Vic Olsen?"

"I hadn't the chance to be asking him."

"If he don't, he's maybe got a surprise coming." Owney Nash smiled with a display of crooked teeth. "Lew Canreen and Vic Olsen could make hash of Mister Jace Hazard in no time flat."

McGrath, close by the window, had glanced out at the street. Now he said, "Speaking of the devil, wouldn't that be Lew Canreen's horse tied up by the cantina?"

"Lew generally comes in to drink his lunch about this time."

"Ah," McGrath breathed, and turned away from the window. "Olsen and Canreen. A fine pair of scallawags. It was Canreen who started the talk that Jason ambushed Turk Ames—and I'm wondering how Canreen figured that out. You can bet Vic Olsen put him up to it, and you can bet one other thing—if Olsen's trying to get Jason lynched, then he's got his own good reasons for the trying of it."

"You're a fine philosopher," Owney Nash said. "Why bitch to me about all this?"

McGrath turned to face him directly. "Because, my bloody little bantam rooster, you are the law in this stinking city of Stinking Springs, and I expect to see to it that you uphold the laws of the community—disregardin' your buttered bread, for a change."

Nash stiffened. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, Owney, that if Jason Hazard rides into town and any man threatens to be tying a rope around his neck, you are going to stop it. Even if it is Lew Canreen holding the rope—even if it is the high-and-mighty Vic Olsen himself. Am I making myself clear?"

Nash slipped his hip off the desk and stood up to his full diminutive height. "Flynn," he said tartly, "just who the hell

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do you think you are busting in here and trying to tell me how to run my office?"

McGrath moved a pace forward and touched his finger to the tip of Nash's nose. Nash skewered away and McGrath held his finger there, poised toward the deputy. "Mark me, little man—if you turn your back to that glitterin' brass badge of yours, you'll be answering to these big hams of fists of mine, and I can make you a solemn promise that you'll not live to regret it."

With that Flynn McGrath turned on his heel and strode out. A torrent of high-pitched words piped after him—Owney Nash's splutterings: "You can't get away with threatening an officer of the law! By God I'll—" McGrath let the door slam behind him and with a tight, brief little grin he turned up the street.

II

JASON HAZARD rode without hurry, letting the horse choose its own pace. He was thinking about Turk Ames, and turning things over in his mind. Looking down past the hills and river he could see the desert expanse stretching westward, flat and dead, sprinkled with alkali-bleached bones and the splintered grey wood of abandoned wagons.

Not a single cloud hung on the sky. Jason Hazard marked that fact and found himself thinking with distant regret of the weightless cotton-ball clouds that drifted over Virginia, which had been his birthplace; another world, far across the planet, where issues were never so clear-cut and danger seldom as absolute as in this stark and untamed land. Memories sprawled across his thoughts but then he was brought sharply out of his reverie by the sight of a faint spire of dust plumbing on the road below him. It swelled slowly toward him and Hazard squinted as if to pierce the distance with his gaze.

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The approaching traveler climbed the hill ahead, riding at an easy pace. Mica particles and pyrites in the earth glittered with brittle savagery, making vision difficult. The rider advanced and slowly emerged from his own dust cloud, a medium-tall man with fat shoulders and a wry, amused expression. He came right up and halted his horse ten feet ahead of Hazard, and spoke without preamble:

"How do you like it in Hell, Jason?"

Hazard sized him up slowly, not answering. The man was Vic Olsen, and Hazard remembered him all too well. Olsen wore octagonal eyeglasses. When Hazard did not reply, Olsen's lips pressed into a quick thin line of displeasure and he took his glasses off to polish them with a bandanna, blinking myopically; when he hooked the glasses around his ears he made another try at conversation:

"Old Vic's gained a little weight since last time, eh Jason? Well, I like my comforts and I'm getting too old to pretend I'm tough any more."

"You never were."

"I guess I wasn't," Olsen admitted without reluctance. He had a square Scandinavian face, a little slurred around the edges by softening flesh; his eyes were clever and sardonic. He had a wide mouth, heavy at the center; his forehead was high and broad. His talk was colored by some secret shading of irony:

"I always thought you were smart, Jason. Now I'm not so sure. A smart man wouldn't have come back here. But I'm glad you did. I'll have my fill of enjoyment, just watching you keep proving how tough you are."

Hazard had a deep, slow voice. "I may just spoil your fun, then."

"I doubt that. You've got the smell of trouble all over you. You can't stay out of it, Jason." He smiled slyly. "Do you recall the time we took apart Freighley's buggy and put it back

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together up in his second-story bedroom? He was a little surprised when he came back with his new bride. High old times, Jason. I wish we still had them."

"A lot of miles ago."

"Uh-huh," Olsen said, and went on in the same musing tone: "I wonder what became of Delia?"

"That's what's been scratching at you all these years, isn't it?"

"Why shouldn't it?" Olsen leaned forward, hands on the saddlehorn; his brows dropped over his eyes and in a sudden angry voice he said, "You took her away from me, Jason, and by God I'll see you pay for it."

Hazard said, "She made her own choice between us." He lifted his reins to go around Olsen and added softly, "She died three years ago."

Olsen stiffened. "I didn't know that."

"She'd married a cattle broker in St. Louis."

"I didn't know that either. But it doesn't make any difference between you and me, does it?"

"I guess that's up to you."

Olsen was not looking at him. "We had some good times, though," he muttered abstractedly. Hazard had halted again and now Olsen giggled his horse a pace forward and drew rein beside Hazard, his right side away from Hazard and his gun thus concealed. The intentional quality of the maneuver did not escape Hazard, but then Olsen looked up at him with an amused smile: Olsen said, "No, I'd never try that. You'll dig your own grave, Jason. I don't need to do it for you. But I want to be there to see it when you do."

Still holding the rigid smile, Olsen held up his palm to halt Hazard. "Don't go just yet. I've got something else to tell you. You used to make big tracks around here, Jason, but not any more. Things have changed since you left. It used to be that Jason Hazard could say 'Frog' and the whole town

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would jump out of its boots, but I've got news for you, old friend—that's all changed. I've seen to it. Your Silverbell outfit's just another dime-a-dozen mine on the hillside now. You can thank your Irish partner for that—he's forfeited your power in this valley. Zachary Miles has got other problems that take up his time. Which just about left it up to me. I moved in here a few months after you left. Bought out Satterlee's mine and brought in my own crew. I've got the third-largest digs on the slope now, next to yours and Zachary Miles', and with you away and old Zach concentrating on his personal worries, I've had pretty much of a free hand to take over the district. So now I'm the man who says 'Frog.' "

Olsen braced both arms against his saddle horn, stood up in the stirrups, and leaned forward to peer closely at Hazard. "Do you follow my meaning, old stud?"

After a moment's silence Olsen went on: "That trick of yours fools some people, I guess. But I'll tell you something. You can keep your mouth clammed shut for the next month—it won't impress me. And in case you're not as smart as I think you are, I'll tell you what I meant. You don't swing any weight any more, Jason—not around here. I made it my business to take your power away from you. You might call it retribution. It's just a first step. I'll leave it to you to figure out what the next steps are."

Olsen's lips were pressed into a prim smile. Hazard regarded him from under half-lowered eyelids and said sleepily, "Don't try to spring Turk Ames on me, Vic. It won't work."

If Olsen was taken aback, he did not show it. After a brief interval Olsen said, "When we were growing up it was always Jason the winner, Vic Olsen the runner-up. You took everything I ever wanted out from under my nose. I'd just have it in my grasp and you'd slip by, never saying a word, and I'd stand there with my hands empty. You took my first

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job away from me. You took the class honors. You took Delia away from me. And old Vic just smiled and nodded. Right? Well, I had enough of it, Jason. A man can only bottle a thing up inside him for so long. Then it finds a crevasse. It finds a way out. Well, I'll tell you this much. You've had your turn, Jason. Now it's my whack, and I intend to drive you into the ground like a hammer driving a stake."

Olsen abruptly yanked his reins back. His eyes had turned hard and bitter, staring at Hazard. Hazard neither moved nor spoke; his countenance was guarded, giving away nothing. Olsen wheeled his horse and spurred away, laying back a thick fog of dust.

Jason Hazard sat his horse on the spot until Olsen was gone from view and the dust had settled. Then, with deliberate care, Hazard took a cigar from his pocket and licked it along its entire length. He poked it into a corner of his mouth, put a match to it and got it going; he pinched out the match and broke it and dropped it in the trail. Only then did he tug his hat down and start the sorrel moving. There was a bleak glitter on the exposed slit-surfaces of his eyes.

There was an unreasoning quality to Vic Olsen's hunger for vengeance; and that made it doubly dangerous. But, for all the anxiety he displayed, Hazard might have been without an enemy in the world. He rode down the curling, undulating wagon road as far as a fork, where a pair of deep-rutted tracks curved off to the right and a mailbox overhung the side of the road:

SILVERBELL MINE AND REDUCTION MILL
JASON HAZARD, PROP.

It was an indication of his unconcern with such things that

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Flynn McGrath had not put up a new sign with his own name added to the proprietorship.

Jason Hazard turned his horse into the ruts and let the road carry him up across the side of a slope. It climbed into an earth saddle, crossed a rock flat and turned hard-right to drop along a tilted mountainside. At the head of the series of switchbacks he could see the smoke plume and columnar stack of the mill. Nothing appeared to have changed very much; there were a few new shafts on the slope that had not been dug in his time.

The superintendent's shack squatted like a half-dugout against the steep slope. Fifty yards from the mill, it was well within ear-range of the terrible clanking of the stamp mill. A saddled horse stood outside the shack and the door hung open on its hinges. As he drew rein, Hazard had a glimpse of two figures in the interior shadows, moving in animated conversation. He dismounted and left the sorrel's reins dangling. Up the hill a line of pigtailed Chinese miners moved into a shaft like a stream of ants; the crew boss was bellowing at them in singsong Chinese. The afternoon sun baked land and men alike, pulverizing the earth and reflecting in a flinty glitter. There was the muffled concussion of a powder blast from deep within one of the shafts.

Hazard stepped up into the shack doorway and paused there, unseen, accustoming his eyes to the dimness. The room was walled with corrugated metal and the heat was intense; the man talking had his back to Hazard and his Welsh accents rebounded around the confines of the little metal enclosure like a pebble rattling around inside a tin can. Looking over the Welshman's shoulder Hazard had sight of a booted leg and a slim arm; the rest of the seated figure was hidden behind a high pile of sacks and crates cluttering the table. The Welshman was saying, " 'Ere, now, ye know I can't give yer no more of that without ye pays for

it. Flynn McGrath's been letting the two of yer get away wiv bloody murder, if yer askin' me. I got to put me foot down, that's all they be to it. No more blastin' powder on credit, ye hear?"

Hazard propped his shoulder back against the open door jamb. The long slim leg uncoiled behind the table and a slim figure followed it, standing up—a dark-haired girl with bright bold eyes and a face flecked by the sun. "Damn it, Chip, you know the fix we're in—" she began; and then she saw Hazard. Her jaw slacked open and her voice trailed off. Stark amazement widened her eyes.

Startled by the girl's expression, the chunky Welshman wheeled. "Ere now, what the 'ell?"

The girl whispered, "Jason."

Hazard said, "What's this all about, Vicky?"

The girl suddenly laughed. "Four years you've been away with never a word, and is that all you can say to me?"

The Welshman's confounded glower shifted from one to the other. "And who the 'ell might ye be?"

The girl said, "That's your boss, Chip. Be nice to the gentleman."

The Welshman's eyebrows shot up so far they threatened to merge with his flop of sandy hair. "Coo—is that a fact? Ye're Mister 'Azard?"

"That's right."

"Well, then, I'm Chip Watson, there, Mister 'Azard, and I didn' mean no disrespect at all."

Hazard dismissed it with a slight move of his shoulders. He was looking at the girl. "What's the trouble, Vicky?"

She moved toward him, lifting her hands; but something in his eyes stopped her and she dropped her arms before she spoke: "It's a long dull story, Jason. But tell me where you've been—what you've been doing. I want to hear all about it. Oh, Joe will be glad to see you!"

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The Welshman snorted. "I'll tell ye, Mister 'Azard, this 'ere girl and 'er brother been making life miserable round 'ere, and that's a fact—using up our blastin' powder and tools faster than we can freight 'em in, and never paid a farthing's worth yet. They're a bloody nuisance, that's what, and yer—"

"That's enough," Hazard said mildly. He said to the girl, "What's it all about?"

Without answering immediately, she walked past him and went outside. Chip Watson threw his hands in the air with an expression of broadly resigned hopelessness. Ignoring the man, Hazard turned to follow the girl. He found her outside, standing by the head of her horse, with the reins in her hand. She was looking up along the slope to the west, and when Hazard came by she lifted an arm to point up past the hill.

"A man named Olsen came, Jason. He bought Satterlee's mine. Ever since then, things have been going wrong. I think the man's cast a spell over us all. Nothing seems to go right. Joe and I have worked like demons, but it's just no good. Every time we seem to be onto a solid new vein, there's a cave-in or a premature explosion, or something else happens. We can't even hold our heads above water. We're flat broke, Jason. That's why we've been cadging tools and powder and even borrowing crews when we could. I can't blame Chip for being fed up—I've pestered him like a horsefly. But if it hadn't been for Flynn McGrath's big heart, we'd have gone bankrupt long ago."

Hazard regarded her unblinkingly. She had been looking up the hill. Now, brooding, she faced him. "It's the same everywhere. Zach Miles has had five men killed in cave-ins in the last two years. I don't know if you've been in touch with Flynn, but he'll tell you you've been having trouble here too."

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Hazard said, "What about Olsen?"

"Nobody knows. If he's got trouble, he doesn't complain about it. But every time he looks at me from behind those glasses of his, I feel my skin crawl. I think that man's got a lizard streak in him."

It made him smile briefly. "You always were scared to death of lizards. "

She looked down. "I'm sorry. I haven't got it in me to laugh, but you're right, I'm a silly girl." She banged her small fist against the saddle skirt. "Damn it, I wish I was a man."

"What would you do?" he said gently.

"Pick a fight," she said promptly. "Hit somebody, shoot somebody."

"Somebody like Vic Olsen."

"He'll do 'till somebody better comes along." Her dark brows were lowered; she lifted them and turned her face up pertly. "Where in hell have you been all this time?"

"Paying a few debts," he answered vaguely. It was hot and the stamp-mill pounded across the still air. He stood, watching the heavy darkness of her lawless cascading hair; he was almost relaxed, at ease with the long understanding of unspoken feelings between them.

She caught his look; she said, "How is the boy?"

"Dead."

She gave a start. Her hand lifted to her mouth. "Oh, Jason—I'm so sorry."

He shrugged and she said, "You're not unmoved—why pretend to be?"

"Habit, I guess."

"You never let yourself show your feelings."

"It's a luxury. I haven't been able to afford it."

She looked away from him. "It's terrible, about the boy."

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He said nothing in reply, and she added, "You must have done everything you possibly could."

"It wasn't enough."

"I'm sorry," she said again. She looked humble, but after a moment she looked again and her eyes were flashing defiantly. "You won't like me for saying this, but I'll say it anyway. You're better off now and I wish he had died a long time ago. It was a crying shame, Jason. I know you loved the little boy but he was a millstone around your neck that you never deserved."

"It was all written down in the book a long time ago," Jason Hazard said.

"You take things so calmly. It isn't healthy; your fatalism. But I wish I had some of it." She swept hair impatiently away from her eyes. "But it's over now. You're free—at least you have that."

"Not quite," he said, and did not add to it.

She respected his reticence by not pressing questions. She said instead, "It's been such a long time. I imagine Evelyn will want to skin you alive. She never knew about your little boy, did she?"

"She knew I had a son. She didn't know anything about him, unless someone's told her."

"Have you seen her yet?"

"No."

"Well," said Vicky, "I wish her luck, trying to get a rope around a wildcat like you." She turned, and found Chip Watson's square shape filling the shack doorway. She gave the Welshman a troubled smile and turned toward her saddle, twisted the stirrup and rose gracefully into the seat. "Jason," she said, "Turk Ames has disappeared and Lew Canreen has been stoking the fires, telling everyone you had something to do with it."

"Who's Lew Canreen?"

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"Vic Olsen's right-hand man." Her expression turned sour. "It, all seems to come back to Vic Olsen in the end. He's an evil man, Jason—you can see it in his eyes, you can feel it when he's in the room." She watched him with warm concern. "Don't let them push you into a fight if the odds are wrong," she said, and it made him look at her with fuller attention; but she said no more about it. She only said, "Come by and see us, Jason."

He nodded soberly and watched her ride away. She looked back once and waved a hand. Chip Watson stood in the doorway and said testily, " 'Round 'ere we ain't 'eard nothing but Joe Lawrence, Vicky Lawrence—Joe and Vicky wants this, they wants that. Maybe now you're 'ere you'll be putting a stop to that, hey, Mr. 'Azard?"

"Give them anything they ask for," Hazard said. He mounted his horse, gave the Welshman an unreadable look, and trotted away.

III

RIDING DOWN UPON the Pitchfork Mine, Jason Hazard reflected with a small measure of irony on the past few hours: Flynn McGrath, Vic Olsen, and finally Vicky Lawrence—all of them half-convinced, at least, that Hazard must have killed Turk Ames. *Well*, he thought, *they'll have to find the body first*. He had no idea what might have become of Turk Ames, but he was prepared to be justly amused should Ames turn up nursing a bad hangover, or should it become known that Ames was locked up peacefully in some quiet jail across the Border.

Hazard remembered Turk Ames as a tall bristling man, foreman of Zachary Miles' mining operations, quick-tempered and fast with his fists. When Miles' daughter, Evelyn, had

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chosen Hazard and set her cap for him, Turk Ames had flown into a rage.

It was a strange thing that Hazard had earned the hatred of several men, including both Turk Ames and Vic Olsen, by taking women away from them: the strange thing about it was that Hazard was not a ladies' man. He had never gone out of his way to attract women. His brief marriage had left him with a sour taste and he had treated women with extreme care thereafter. It was largely an odd brand of coincidence. Both Olsen and Ames were men with unusual blind streaks of pride. Both of them had been convinced that the women in question were theirs; both of them blamed Hazard for alienating the affections of their women, when in fact there had been no such affections to alienate.

These idle thoughts ran through his head while he approached the big littered confusion of the Pitchfork operation. On a level above his casual reverie, his senses were tuned alertly to all the movements about him. The unforgiving travels of his grim life forced a state of constant vigilance upon him.

It was because of his wary attentiveness that his glance settled on a man who stood half hidden by the shadows of the big house's porch. The man was unrecognizable at this distance, and his pose—hipcocked against the porch rail, smoking a cigarette—was far from threatening. But some hint of danger made Hazard approach with caution.

The house was built of rock—the only plentiful construction material on these slopes. Chinked together with clay mortar, two-storied and sturdy, the house brooded grey and squat over the racket and dust of the Pitchfork operations. As Hazard approached along the curving gravel drive, the man on the porch came erect and swung to face the road: a long lean man in tight faded denim clothes, with a pair of revolvers strapped low along his thighs. It was the hang of

the guns that first identified the man for Hazard; soon thereafter he was close enough to recognize the face. Bill Speed was the man's name, and Hazard was puzzled to find the man here, at Zachary Miles' house.

Bill Speed stepped out into the sunlight with both hands draped casually over the out-thrust butts of his guns. His hat was tilted far forward and he had to throw his head back to see Hazard from under the hat brim. A stalk of grass dangled from a corner of his mouth. Bill Speed was gaunt and yellow-haired, brittle of features. His eyes were the palest kind of green, almost watery. The voice that rumbled out of his thin chest had the quality of a bassoon:

"Looky what we got here, now."

Hazard drew rein a few feet from the porch. He inclined his head with exact courtesy and said, "Bill."

"You ain't welcome here."

"By whose word?"

"By mine," Bill Speed said, flat and deadly. He spat out the yellow grass stalk.

Jason Hazard lifted his right leg over the saddlehorn and dropped catlike to the earth, fully balanced at every instant. He said, "I didn't come here to talk to you."

"No talk needed," Speed said. "Get on your horse and drift."

Hazard considered him bleakly. "You work here?"

"That's it."

"Who hired you?"

Bill Speed's thin lips spread back tightly in a humorless grin. "Turk."

That made a little sense. Certainly Zachary Miles would not have hired a tinhorn the stripe of Bill Speed. But in the old days Zach Miles had exercised sole authority on his own premises. He would never have permitted his roof to shelter anyone like Speed. A current of intrigue and cool mystery

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seemed to cloud the scene. Bill Speed's presence did not make good sense.

Speed said, "I guess you know Turk was a friend of mine."

"Was?"

"Who do you think you're foolin', Jace?" The lips peeled back again. Speed's teeth glistened. "I never was scared of you. I can pull faster and shoot better than you any day of the week. Now get the hell out of here before I decide to kill you dead."

"Seems to me," Hazard murmured, "that a man who really wants a fight doesn't waste so much time talking about it. What's on your mind?"

Speed's face darkened into a scowl. He opened his mouth to speak but then a husky, powerful voice boomed out of the house, "What's going on out there?"

The main door rammed open and a big grey wolf of a man tramped onto the porch. His bushy combed-steel eyebrows shot up and he said, "Well, by God! Jason!" He came heavily down the steps, brushing past Bill Speed, and pumped Jason Hazard's hand. "Welcome, son—welcome!"

"Hello, Zach." Hazard's attention remained hard against Bill Speed, and Zachary Miles, noticing that, swung on his heel to face the gaunt gunman. "I thought I told you to find work to do."

"Sure," Bill Speed murmured. There was nothing subservient in the way he looked at Zachary Miles; if anything, his glance held a thin measure of contempt. He pushed his hat down even lower across the bridge of his nose and walked insolently away, not even looking at Hazard. What kind of hold could Speed possibly have over a man like Zachary Miles?

Hazard said bluntly, "You pick strange company these days."

"A lot of things have changed, Jason." Miles' voice was,

suddenly, the voice of a tired old man. With his first heartiness gone, Miles seemed to sag, and for the first time Hazard noticed the looseness of his flesh, the hang of his chin, the dark sacs under his eyes. Miles climbed the porch steps with no spring in his step. "Come on in," he said, and went inside without waiting.

Hazard stepped into the house. The room was just as he remembered it—long, wide, furnished with massive wooden tables and chairs covered in dark leather. Above the big stone fireplace hung an Indian blanket. Zachary Miles gave him a drink of whisky and sank into a chair. "Sit down, Jason—sit down. Damn, I'm a tired old man—sick of troubles and weary of fools."

"It looks like a blight on the whole district. Nobody I've talked to seems happy."

"And that's a fact," the old man said morosely. "I'm surprised you got this far with your skin."

"On account of Turk Ames? I heard about that."

"They've been trying to pin it on you. Did you hear that, too? Well, I guess you must have. It's a bad business, Jason. A bad business. My first big mistake was hiring Turk, and my second one was keeping him on. The man was no good, but it took me a long time to find that out—and when I did, it was too late."

Hazard did not beat around the bush. "Blackmail?"

"Exactly."

"I'm beginning to see."

Miles was nodding. He sucked a pinch of snuff up his nostril and said, "One thing. You didn't have anything to do with Turk disappearing, did you?"

"No."

Miles looked at him. "I'm sorry I had to ask."

"Glad you did. It clears up that much, at least."

"It does," Miles said, and nodded again. "Christ, you don't

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know how good it feels to me to sit in a room with a man whose word I can trust. Well, tell me—how've you been?"

"All right."

"You were gone a while. Evelyn missed you. Hell, so did I. She's gone to town—otherwise she'd have you trapped by now, I expect." He smiled briefly, wanly. "I don't know what we're all coming to—I wish they'd find Turk Ames, alive or dead, it doesn't matter."

"It would be easier on you if he turned up dead."

"Not so. Turk was too smart for that. He had insurance."

"Bill Speed?"

"Speed, for one. And somebody else, I'm not sure who. Hell, I may as well tell you about it—if I can't talk to you, then there's nobody at all. I killed a man, back in Colorado. It was a killing that had to be done, far as I was concerned. But the man I killed was a miner, and the jury was packed with miners. It was the old story of the workers against the bosses. They'd been organizing a union and what the hell did they expect me to do? Naturally I fought the union. I fought it fair, but I fought it as hard as I knew how. This man Krips was one of the union organizers. He'd never worked in my mine. For all I knew, he'd never worked a day in his life. But he talked to a lot of my crews, bought them drinks, sold them on the union. I suspect he was milking the thing for everything he could get out of it. Things weren't too bad until some of the miners began to grumble that they were paying a lot of dues and getting no results. They weren't near as stupid as Krips figured they were. They demanded results and it got to the point where Krips had to do something. So one night he came sneaking into my house with a gun in his hand. He took a shot at me, I shot back, and he ended up dead. But the boys from the union hall testified that Krips had been unarmed when he came up the hill, and that he'd only come up to my house to talk to me about

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union problems. The trick was that sometime between the shooting and the time the sheriff arrived, somebody removed the gun from Krips' body. Anyhow, I was convicted. Some friends broke me out of jail. I changed my name and came down here—that's all there was to it. But Turk Ames found out about it somehow. When he did, I told him to keep his mouth shut or I'd beat him to a pulp. But you remember Turk—he doesn't scare easy. Besides, he'd let one or two other people in on the secret, just to protect his own skin. I was on the spot. I still am. Hell, if I'd had any sense I'd have gone away and changed my name again and got into altogether a different line of work. I'd do it, too, if it weren't for Evelyn."

The speech seemed to have exhausted the old man still further. He reached for the bottle by his arm and poured half a glass of whisky, and took a long swallow. He said softly, "Don't get mixed up in it, Jason. It's none of your headache. Just pack up and move on out of this valley. There's nothing here for you. If you're of a mind to, take Evelyn with you. She'll go, or I miss my guess—the girl's always been in love with you. Her and that pert little Vicky Lawrence gal and maybe every other young female in these parts. But whatever you do, do it somewhere else. All you'll get in this part of the country is grief. And I say that out of friendship, Jason."

"Maybe," Hazard murmured. "But I hate to get pushed out of a place before I'm good and ready to leave. It goes against the grain."

"Pride's a fine thing," Miles said, "in moderation. Like anything else. But don't let it dig your grave. You've got nothing to keep you here. I'd consider it a favor if you'd take my daughter and go—it would leave me free to go out the back door and never come back." Suddenly he smiled. "I never even asked you if you wanted her, did I?"

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When Hazard didn't answer, Miles turned serious. "Was I wrong, Jason? I always thought you loved Evelyn."

"Things are a little mixed up for me, too," Hazard said. "I'm not sure what I want, Zach—and I'm not sure what would be good for Evelyn."

"You know, that's the first time I've ever seen you lack confidence in yourself. I'll tell you this much, and this is a father talking who knows his own daughter—if any man alive can keep her happy, you're that man, Jason."

"Maybe," Hazard said. "I married a girl once. I thought I could make her happy. I was wrong. It was a mess, Zach."

Miles brushed it aside with a fanning motion. "Everybody makes a mistake. You were younger. I'm telling you, son—what my girl needs is a man with a good strong hand, and you're the best man I've seen. I don't mind telling you that. You're maybe some harder than granite, but it's all on the outside. I used to know you pretty well, and I don't think you've changed that much. Underneath all that rock and steel there's a pretty damn big heart."

"Maybe there used to be," said Jason Hazard. "But sometimes I get the feeling it's been pretty badly charred around the edges."

"Horse manure," Miles replied, scoffing at him. "I give you credit for more sense than that, Jason."

Instead of answering, Hazard stood up and reached for his hat. "I'm on my way to town. Anything I can do for you?"

"Just keep your eyes open. Look out for Lew Canreen and Vic Olsen, and don't trust that sawed-off deputy of ours any farther than you can throw a full-loaded ore wagon. But hell, you don't need me to tell you that."

Hazard nodded. He paused in the doorway long enough to say, "Take care of yourself, Zach," and left.

All the way into town, there was the smell of dust lingering on the air. It was as clear a sign as any that a rider had

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preceded him into town, not long before. He still had an image in his head of the gaunt Bill Speed, smiling wickedly and caressing the polished grips of his twin holster-guns; and so he rode with redoubled caution.

He was coming abreast Hunter's General Store, planning to ride by the place, when Evelyn Miles came to the door and called his name. He recognized her voice before he turned.

He swung his horse in to the tie-rail. She came to stand on the edge of the walk, shaded by its awning. It was after five o'clock, and shadows were beginning to lengthen along the street. The heat was wicked, but crisper and less oppressive than it had been at midday. Evelyn wore a divided riding skirt and a green blouse that hung clinging to the curved undersides of her full breasts. He had seen many attractive women in his time, but few beautiful ones; Evelyn was a true beauty. She had the most startling pale blue eyes. It was as if she had gem crystals in the irises. She had all the sparkle of good champagne and a thought came to him as an echo. It was a thought he had had the first time he had seen her, five years ago. She had been just emerging into adulthood then, and he had thought, if you had just been belly-shot and you were falling to your knees you still would stop, turn, and take a second look at her.

She had spoken his name once, and said nothing more. He sat his saddle looking at her, penetrating those blue eyes with his own hard-hooded stare. And after an interval of wordless breathing he got down and climbed the steps and when he touched her with his fingers he felt it all the way down to his toes.

Her breasts lifted with quickened breathing. She turned and walked into the store. She went directly to the counter in back of the room and said, "Go out to the store room and find me a package of hairpins, Henry."

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"But I—"

"And take your time," Evelyn said. The storekeeper glanced toward Hazard, standing in the aisle, and abruptly turned and scuttled out the back door.

With a half-smile she turned to face Hazard. He stood his ground, not moving toward her; he wanted time to study her and he knew if he came too close he would take her in his arms. He saw a few new things in her face—a greater confidence, a cool grown-up composure, a positive self-certainty. And he saw one other thing. It was just a hint of something, but it did not please him. There was something cold, arrogantly calculating about the way she appraised him.

He was a big rugged man with a drooping mustache and eyes that had seen more than their years' worth of evil and grief; he stood before her, a legend and a fighter, a shrewd man and a tough man. And he felt like a man walking on quicksand, like an awkward schoolboy, like a commoner before royalty. He said, "Well, then," and his tongue stopped.

It made her laugh at him. She cocked her head to one side and her tawny hair swayed gently. She said, "You've lost about four pounds and you need to trim your mustache and you look a little sadder, if that's possible—I think you're descended from a long line of Bassett hounds."

She had always been expert at easy light chatter. It was not a talent he shared, and he could think of no reply that would keep the meeting on that plane. Instead, he pinned his glance against her and said slowly, "You are damned beautiful."

"Thank you."

She had learned how to take a compliment. She neither blushed nor stammered. She was all grown-up, all woman. He liked to watch the way her brows peaked up, tent-shaped, when she was earnest. She said, "I've missed you."

A lot of miles had gone by, a lot of sunsets, a lot of towns.

For Jason Hazard, there had been here and there a woman. He was not a monk. He was surprised by the sudden power of attraction she wielded over him. She pushed herself away from the store counter and folded her arms. She smiled, long and slow, into the past and tipped her head to the side. She leaned against him, moved her face, kissed him without stirring her folded arms. He put his hands softly on the gloss of her hair. Her lips parted as he kissed her and he felt the warmth of her breath. She turned her mouth aside and guided his lips down her throat. He could smell soap in her hair. Something warned him, then, and he stepped back.

The front door squeaked open. In that split second he felt irritated that he had relaxed his vigilance: he wheeled to face the door.

A miner with a close-cropped slurring of dark beard stood in the door, blinking into the uncertain light. "Mister Hazard?"

"I am."

"Mister McGrath, he sent me down here. Said he thought he seen your horse out front. Said for me to tell you Lew Canreen and Bill Speed's in the cantina, gettin' a crowd liquored up and firing them up for a lynch party."

Under the mustache, Hazard's lips flattened. "All right. I've got business to take care of first. Get back to Flynn McGrath and tell him to meet me at the banker's office, will you?"

"Yes, sir. Sure thing. Only, what you figure to do about them toughs down in the cantina? They spoilin' for blood."

"One thing at a time. Give that message to McGrath."

"Sure will," the miner said. On his way out the door he added, "Good luck to you," and disappeared.

Hazard saw the girl looking at him, her eyes gone wide. He said, "I didn't expect it to come to a head this fast."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. I've got to see Flynn and the banker."

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"Jason—stay out of it. It's not your fight. They're hungry for blood and they don't care whose they spill. Look, you go and do whatever it is you need to do at the bank. I'll bring our horses around and wait for you behind the bank. When you're finished we can ride out to Pitchfork together."

He shook his head. "I don't want you caught in anything, Evelyn. You ride home. I'll be along later."

"Jason, I—"

"Don't argue," he said gently. —

"Jason," she cried, "Jason, what do I mean to you? Can't I be a part—"

He cut off her voice with his kiss. Then, quickly, he swung away from her and walked with longlegged strides to the door.

With no effort to hide himself, he tramped along the boardwalk a block to the bank. If any of the pedestrians abroad happened to recognize him or take note of his presence, none of them raised any outcry. He glanced both ways along the familiar street before he went up the outside staircase along the side wall of the double-tiered bank building. The banker's office, as he remembered, was on the second floor. He turned into a narrow corridor and knocked at the first door he came to.

"Come in."

He went into a ten-by-fifteen office. Seated by a roll-top desk was a paunchy man in his vest and shirt, with the sleeves held up with sleeve garters. He looked more like a clerk than an owner, but Hazard said, "You run this bank?"

"I do. John Green's the name. Something I can do for you?"

"I'm Hazard. Half-owner of the Silverbell."

John Green's weak eyes went wide and then he stood up to shake hands. "Well, it's interestin' to meet you after I've heard so much about you. You'd pulled out of town before I took over the bank."

But the man's face belied the words. His hands shook when

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he sat down and it was evident he was frightened. Jason Hazard said drily, "I didn't come here to rob the bank. And nobody's going to lynch me while I'm here. Just relax a minute and answer a few questions for me and I'll be on my way. Is that fair enough?"

"Why, ah—sure, sure," Green said. He took out a handkerchief and patted his face. Sweat beaded his jowls. "Shoot," he added, with a sickly smile.

Hazard took a chair, uninvited, and sat. He hooked his hat over his knee, crossed his ankle over the other knee, and said, "We'll wait for my partner, if you don't mind."

"McGrath? Why, he—"

That was when knuckles rapped the door and Flynn McGrath walked in. He had no smile for either of them; he dipped his head to the banker and said without preamble, "They're primed for a necktie party, me boy, and if I was you I'd be after runnin' like I had a hive of wasps on me tail."

"Do they know I'm up here?"

"I'd be doubtin' it, but—"

"Then we're in no hurry," Hazard said. "Sit down and listen."

Rebuffed, McGrath clamped his mouth shut and pulled up a rickety chair.

John Green said, "Now, then, what's this all about, Hazard? If you suspect your partner of cheating you, I can assure you he's been splitting every single deposit right down the middle, to the penny. Of course, if you want to see the—"

"Never mind that," Hazard said. "If I didn't trust him I wouldn't have brought him into the operation in the first place."

McGrath's expression relaxed slightly. Hazard said, "I'm interested in one thing. The current value of my share of the mine."

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Green showed surprise. "Market value? You're thinking of selling out?"

"How much can I get for it?"

"That depends," the banker said. "First you'd have to find a buyer."

"That shouldn't be hard. It's a profit-making business."

"The mines around here have been having a hard time lately," Green said. "There's been some bad luck. Cave-ins and the like. People are scared to invest in risky propositions."

McGrath said, "I hate to admit it, Jason, but the man's talking straight. Aye, hard luck and then some. We've been hit between the eyes a few times. I didn't have the chance to be tellin' ye about it this mornin', but—"

Hazard cut him off. "I wanted you up here to give you first option on it. Can you buy me out?"

McGrath said, "I'd be doubtin' it. I ain't all that rich. How much will you be after wantin'?"

"Twenty-three thousand," Hazard said.

McGrath said, "What?"

John Green had shot bolt upright in his chair. "Hazard, you you must be out of your mind. You can get ten times that amount of money for the Silverbell. Five times that amount, for your share of the mine—and that would be a low price, at that."

Flynn McGrath said, "I always knew you had a blarney streak in you, Jason, but the banker here and me bein' gentlemen of the first water and all, we'll just be pretendin' you didn't say nothing at all."

Hazard said, "I haven't got time to waste. I want to make the sale, Green, and I want it today if possible."

Green made a point of hauling a monumental watch out of his pocket, looking at it, winding the stem, untangling the chain, and putting it back in his pocket; whereupon he said

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drily, "It's a little late in the day. At that price I can get you a buyer, but maybe not until morning."

"Hold on," Flynn McGrath said. "Wait just a Judas-b damned minute."

Green looked at him politely. McGrath swiped at his jaw with a caloused hand, glared at Hazard briefly, and said, "Ain't nobody selling half the Silverbell for the likes of twenty-three thousand dollars, not while Flynn McGrath's alive to draw breath. But if you're in need of that peculiar sum of money, Jason, I'll just be advancing it to you out of me own share. Which ought to solve—"

Hazard said quietly, "I don't propose to stand in any man's debt. Not yours, Flynn, and not anybody's. I've had enough of that."

Green's voice rose, exasperatedly: "But good God, man, you can't—"

"I can do any damned thing I please," Hazard said, with a sudden low but wicked edge on his voice. "Now, then—Flynn, you can buy me out at that price, or I can offer it up for grabs. Make up your mind. "

McGrath began to open his mouth but the banker shot in ahead of him. "Look, both of you—there's a simple way out of this. Hazard, you'll sell your half of the partnership to McGrath. At the same time McGrath will give you an option to buy your share back for the same amount of money whenever you're ready. Now, is that fair?"

McGrath said instantly, "It is, by God, and if you so much as open your mouth, Jason, I'll be puttin' me big fist in it up to the elbow. Am I makin' myself clear?"

Hazard's glance moved from one man to the other. "Done," he said.

"I'll draw up the papers," said Green. "It will take an hour or so. Do you want to wait?"

Hazard's cool gaze had gone to the window. He got out of

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his chair and moved that way, looking out. The hitching rail in front of the general store was unoccupied—a fact that drew Hazard's interest because he had left his own horse tied up there.

McGrath must have seen the hardening of Hazard's cheekbones, for the Irishman came to stand by him in the window and, making his own guesses about the vacant hitchrail, McGrath said quietly, "Supposin' we just rest ourselves here until the papers are after bein' signed. Then I can whistle us up a horse or two and we'll just be on our way out of this sandhill of a town."

Instead of answering directly, Hazard said, "You said Lew Canreen's spicing up the crowd in the cantina?"

"I did. But for the love of St. Patrick, you can't be thinkin' of that?"

Hazard said, "By the time we sign these papers I'm likely to be thirsty."

Flynn McGrath groaned. "Oh, Jesus. Sweet, sweet Jesus."

IV

VIC OLSEN was a man of moods. At six in the evening he was approaching Stinking Springs, smoking a cigar and squinting through the smoke and dust that hazed the surfaces of his eyeglasses. His mouth corners were turned down, the surface sign of shrewd and calculating brain activity. An indifferent horseman, he sat his saddle without grace, slouching and looking heavier than he was.

He saw the woman riding toward him before she saw him. He pulled his horse to the side of the road and stopped, waiting for her to come by. She had the power to excite him at all times, no matter what his mood, and as he watched her, his face fell into an unguarded repose, the features lined with

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broken commandments. The day was still hot, but it was more than outward temperature that made him flush: his suddenly fevered flesh felt like molten glass, and when Evelyn drew near he gigged his horse out of the shadows into the road and removed his hat. His stiff currybrush hair twined straight up from his head.

She stopped and stared levelly at him across six or eight feet of distance, and Olsen said, "You've seen him."

"Is it that obvious? I thought I could control myself better than that."

There was a faintly wistful quality in her voice that warned Olsen. It made him say, "One look at him and you've gone soft. Next thing you know, you'll be wanting to change your mind about the whole thing."

"No," she said. Her voice went hard. "I know what I want, Vic."

"And so do I," he murmured; his narrowed eyes peered hotly at her through the dust-filmed glasses.

"Maybe love makes a person blind," Olsen added, "but I'll admit it made you see a lot more in him than I ever did."

"That's all over," she said. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Forgive me," he said. "I've never trusted him. I never will. Everything I ever owned, Jason took away from me."

Her eyes flashed. "Let's keep one thing straight, Vic. You don't own me. You never have, you never will. We can do each other a favor—we have an agreement. And that's all it is."

"All right," he said mildly, but the heat in his eyes belied it.

She wasn't paying attention to him. She said, "If he thinks he can get away with it, he must be mad. No man can walk out on me without a word and expect me to wait all these years for him to decide he's good and ready to come back."

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I can't wait to throw it in his face, Vic—but I want to get him hungry first."

He smiled thinly and he said, "You're about the only person I've ever known who could be even more cruel than I can."

"He deserves it," she said.

"Don't worry about it, love. Jason's made a lot of mistakes in his time. Too many to survive. I'm going to destroy him, and you're going to help me do it." He chuckled. "Do you know what a Judas goat is, my dear?"

"No."

"They train the Judas goat to lead sheep into the slaughterhouse."

"Jason is no innocent lamb."

"True—true."

"And I don't like the comparison. I'm not the one who's betraying him. It's the other way around. He's the only man who ever possessed my soul—and he ignored it. He'll pay for that." Her face was taut, harsh, angry. He thought he had never seen her more beautiful.

He dismounted, walked around to stand beside her horse, and lifted his arms to her. "Come down."

"On a public road?"

"Come down," he said again.

After a moment she smiled coolly and dropped gracefully from the saddle. Smoothly evading his arms, she went past him and sat in the shade of a big rock that cast its shadow half across the road. Olsen licked his dry lips and moved near her. Finally he sat down beside her and made himself smile. She said, "Your eyes are like an open book, Vic. I can read you even through those filthy glasses. And it means I have to warn you. This isn't the time to be feeling adventurous. Not quite yet. You haven't earned it."

"I will," he said.

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Her smile was thin. "I know. If I didn't think you could do it, I wouldn't waste my time on you."

"You haven't misplaced your confidence, love. I know exactly where I want him, and I've all but got him there right now. The first step was to wreck him financially. That was absurdly easy because he had some bad luck that played right into my hand. He had a son—you knew about that?" He was regarding her as if he half-hoped she hadn't known. But she said:

"Yes. He was married and his wife divorced him."

"She ran out on him, is more like it. Not that he deserved anything better. He was making his living as a gambler, then, and he was in and out of fights all the time. Fists, knives, sometimes guns. He's killed his share of men, and more. She wanted him to quit, and when he didn't, she left him."

Evelyn said, "What about his son?"

"The boy was born ill. A rare blood disease—I don't know too much about it. But Jason took it upon himself to do everything he possibly could for the boy. For years they kept the boy's life in precarious balance, but then a few years ago he took a sudden turn for the worse. That's when Jason left here. He wore out his shoe leather getting famous doctors to look at the boy. He took the boy to England and Switzerland for treatments. It all cost him a fortune. Some of the time he played cards to make the money. I know he once wired McGrath for a healthy sum. Of course in the end the boy died—you don't mean to say all this is news to you?"

Her brows had crept together into a frown. "I didn't know—he never said anything about it."

"He's not the type who complains," Olsen said drily. "But it doesn't change the fact that when he left here he didn't say a word to you—not a 'good-bye' or an 'I'll be back.' "

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"Not even a 'Wait for me, ' " she said softly. "He's a very unhappy man, isn't he?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Evelyn! Listen, if you're going soft on this, if you want to back out of it, then make up your mind right now. In a little while it will be too late for that."

"I'm not backing out," she said. "I told you before, I know what I want. Jason will never get it for me—he doesn't have enough ambition. You want the same things I want, Vic, and you're shrewd enough and tough enough to get them. That's why I'm sticking with you. Getting my revenge against Jason is only part of it."

She let her head sway back; her hands were clasped around her knees and her expression was a faraway one. "There are a lot of things to see in this world, Vic, and none of the sights I'm interested in can be found in Stinking Springs, Arizona. I want to see the capitals and the ballrooms. I want to waltz in Vienna in the finest gown to be had in Austria. I want to be aglitter with jewels—I want to take society by storm. And when you've got a father who's content to hide himself down here in the desert with a silver mine that could pay ten times what he's getting out of it, just because he's got an old murder charge hanging over his head and he doesn't dare step out in the sun—when you're in my shoes, Vic, there's only one way to reach my goal. My father knew what I wanted, but he betrayed me. Jason—Jason betrayed me too. And I'll tell you this, Vic—if you betray me, I'll kill you for it."

Her head had turned around and her eyes were flat against his. Olsen's answer was a tight little smile. And then, abruptly, he leaned over and kissed her, hard, on the lips.

Jason Hazard fixed his signature to the bill-of-sale in his crabbed hand; he folded the option document carelessly and rammed it in his pocket, along with the bank draft in the

sum of twenty-three thousand dollars. He had already endorsed the draft over to Doctor Hans von Lieder, M. D. It was sealed in an envelope and after Hazard got up and glanced out the window, he turned back to the banker and said, "Will you mail this for me?"

"Of course." Green took the envelope and put it in his pocket. "That's quite a sum of money to be sending all the way to Switzerland."

"It's been hanging over my head altogether too long," Hazard said. "Thanks for your help." He glanced at Flynn McGrath, and turned to the door. His hand swept past the grip of his holstered gun as he went out onto the stairs and surveyed the street. The sun was low over the desert to the west; bloody rolls of cloud lanced across the sky. McGrath followed him outside onto the landing and said, "You're kind of young to die, me boy. I'll just be suggestin' again that we ride out of Stinking Springs and find a nice quiet place to get drunk and pass the evenin'."

Hazard ignored him. The pitching rattle of an advancing buckboard swiveled his head up-street; at the same time, McGrath said, "Look there, now—that's Vicky Lawrence and her brother. Now, what do you suppose would be bringing those two into town on a fine quiet evening like this?"

Hazard's eyes were narrowed in thought; he was still considering the vacant hitching rail where his horse had stood. The buckboard came squeaking and swaying down the street, two figures on the seat. Joe Lawrence was driving and it struck a part of Hazard's attention that Joe had filled out in the past few years; where he had been a gawky youth, he was now a solid young man with a sturdy, square-jawed face and full shoulders. Joe wore miner's overalls and no hat.

Vicky had a triangular face and dark, expressive eyes. Her face was turned upward and Hazard realized she was staring at him. She touched her brother's arm and Joe looked up. His

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face cracked into a broad smile and his hand lifted in a wave. Beside Hazard, Flynn McGrath was grumbling: "Maybe those two can be talking you out of suicide, if I can't."

"I'm afraid it's not my day for suicide," Jason Hazard said, and went down the staircase.

He reached the ground in time to meet the buckboard. Joe locked the brake-handle with his foot and draped the reins over it. He jumped down and pumped Hazard's hand, talking rapidly. "Jesus, it's good to see you, Jace. Vicky said you were back—we came into town to see you. How've you been? Rambling all over the landscape, I reckon—that right? Hell, you don't look any older. Well, how about a feed? Food's still good down at the Dutch Kitchen."

Hazard reclaimed his hand—young Joe had developed a handshake like a tourniquet—and turned to help Vicky down from the wagon. There was a distant sadness in her eyes and as she descended, his hands under her arms, she kept her distance from Hazard. There was something on her mind, but she said nothing just then. She managed a small smile for him.

Joe was still talking—" . . . hell of a drought here the last couple years running"—and Hazard was turning to listen to him when Flynn McGrath shouted hoarsely:

"Heads up, Jason!"

But it was too late then. By the time Hazard wheeled, the air was shaking with the sudden double-throated roar of a shotgun. The blast half-deafened him. His keening eyes were aware of a number of things happening at once. He had felt the tug of projectiles in his clothes, the hard sting of a pellet slicing thinly across his back. He glimpsed, out of the corners of his vision, McGrath spinning uncontrollably toward the wall, and Joe Lawrence folding up at the waist and sagging back toward the wheelhub of the buckboard. Joe had

grunted weakly, the sound almost drowned in the loud echoes of the twin shotgun blasts.

But the center of Hazard's attention focused upon the skinny bearded man on the far corner of the intersection—a lean yellow-bearded man in filthy clothes, crouched over the smoking muzzles of his scattergun. As the sixgun slipped into Hazard's hand and his thumb peeled back the hammer, the yellow-bearded man let go of the shotgun, dropping it in favor of his belt gun, screaming high-pitched curses across the sunset air. The man had his gun halfway out of holster when Hazard steadied his revolver and fired with deliberate care. The sixgun rocked back against his hand and the shot's round boom racketed through the street.

The bullet took the yellow-bearded man straight in the heart. It slammed him back against the wall of Fry's Photographic Studio like a hard-swung fist. The man's eyes glazed before he slipped lifeless to the ground.

Hazard cocked his gun and braced it; his eyes made a rapid sweep of the shadows and rooftops. He turned a steady full circle on his heels, making a complete survey. Nothing stirred in sight. When he came around to the wagon he saw a ghastly sight: Joe Lawrence, pressed back against the buckboard wheel where the shotgun blast had thrown him. Joe's head was thrown back, his mouth was open and the front of his shirt was a red pulsing circle of glistening blood.

Flynn McGrath came away from the wall staggering and shaken, but alive. The edge of a buckshot charge had bloodied his right arm below the elbow. He was muttering monotonously, "Sweet Jesus. Sweet, sweet Jesus. Sweet—"

"Shut up, Flynn," Hazard said mildly. He took another look at the yellow-bearded man, sprawled at the base of the photographic studio with his head at an awkward angle.

Vicky was kneeling by her brother. Hazard crouched down beside her. The girl's eyes had gone wide. She was staring

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vacantly into her brother's face. Hazard took her gently by the shoulders and lifted her to her feet. She did not resist him; she said nothing. He turned her away. McGrath stumbled past him and knelt down by Joe Lawrence and Hazard heard the Irishman say, "May the Lord preserve us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." McGrath stood up and came to Hazard. "The boy's dead, Jason."

Hazard made no answer. His eyes were bleak and dismal. He turned the girl toward McGrath and she obeyed his touch like a woman in a trance. McGrath put his uninjured arm about her shoulders and Hazard walked away from them, going across the intersection toward the yellow-bearded man. Hazard still had the gun in his fist.

Charlie Fry came out of his photographic studio with his Adam's apple bobbing up and down in a series of unwilling swallows. Fry bent down over the yellow-bearded man and when Hazard came up, Fry said to him, "You killed him good and dead, Jason. Welcome to Stinking Springs, by God. You know this corpse?"

"No."

"They called him Calico, account of he always favored calico shirts. Friend of Turk Ames'."

"And a friend of Vic Olsen's?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Oh, Christ, Jason—what a mess!"

Hazard said, "You'd better go back inside, Charlie. It's not your mess."

Fry turned toward the door of his studio. Before he went inside, he paused and looked back, a forlorn little man with an enormous mustache. "Jason?"

"What?"

"I hope you ain't planning to stay in town very long. This kind of thing's no good for business. No good at all."

"Don't worry about it, Charlie."

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Fry nodded. "Whatever you say, I guess." He disappeared inside. The door closed softly behind him.

The street was beginning to fill with people. They came out of doors and alleyways—the bloodthirsty and the simply curious. They came down the street from both directions, gathering in little moving knots and talking excitedly. Sam Littlejohn, the blacksmith, was standing in the open front of his smithy across the street and now Littlejohn came out and quickly crossed the street, and said to Hazard, "I seen it, if you need a witness, Mr. Hazard."

"Thanks, Sam."

"I guess he was kind of worked up by all the talk about you and Turk Ames. Calico was kind of a strange gent. Nothin' he ever done made much sense to me. He used to sit around my shop pulling wings off horseflies. I 'spect he must've been aiming at you. He never was a very good shot, not even with a scattergun. Did he hurt Mr. Lawrence very bad?"

"Killed him."

"Oh, God," the blacksmith whispered. He rubbed his hands up and down the swells of his brawny arms. "Oh, God. Listen, he was after you, Mr. Hazard—not Mr. Lawrence. And Calico wasn't the only one hungry for your hide. You watch out, hear?"

The advancing knots of people had gathered into a ragged crowd that hung back a little way staring. Hazard walked over to the dead Calico and picked up the man's shotgun. It was a heavy weapon, a double-hammered ten-gauge stagecoach gun. Hazard broke it open and tossed away the empty cartridges. Blood had seeped over the front of Calico's shirt. Hazard reached into the damp pocket and found a pair of loaded buckshot shells. He pushed them into the shotgun chambers and locked the weapon shut.

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After a moment's consideration he reached down again and rolled the eyelids down over Calico's staring dead eyes.

He straightened, then, and hung the shotgun across the bend of his elbow. Because of his height he could see over the head-tops of the crowd, well enough to discern a separate gathering of men in front of the cantina three blocks down the street. That group was not moving forward; they were all gathered around, standing still, listening to someone talk. Hazard could not make out who the talker was but he saw a burly frame and big, thick arms waving up and down in emphasis as the man shouted. There was too much talk going on for Hazard to make out the words. He suspected that the big man at the cantina would be Lew Canreen.

He felt half-dead; his expressionless eyes revealed it. He walked through the crowd of scared, speculative onlookers as if they were not there, and they opened up to make a path for him. Hands plucked at his sleeves and voices assaulted him with questions but he paid them no mind. He went to the buckboard and put his dismal glance on the dead young man, Joe Lawrence, who had been full of energy and fight a moment before. Flynn McGrath stood with his hand around Vicky, half supporting her; his injured arm hung limp and scabbed with drying blood.

Vicky looked at Hazard, but she did not seem to recognize him. McGrath said, "Calico didn't have enough gumption to make the decision himself, Jason. Somebody put him up to it, I'm thinking. Lew Canreen, most likely. Calico wasn't after Joe, that's for sure."

"I know."

"You better get out of town until it cools down."

"In a little while," Hazard said tonelessly. His eyes lay against the distant cantina and the group standing in front of it. Canreen had stopped talking and they had swiveled

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around. Now all of them were staring down the street toward Hazard. One man was spinning a slow rope loop in the air. Hazard put his left hand over the breech of the shotgun in his arm. McGrath spoke flatly:

"That'll be getting you nothing but killed."

Hazard did not answer. He put one palm softly against Vicky's cheek and when her head made a slow turn toward him he said, "Vicky?"

"I'm all right, Jason." Her voice was dull.

He said, "You'll have to blame me for this—for Joe."

"No," she said.

"If it hadn't been for me, he'd be alive."

"That's wrong. You're not thinking straight, Jason." Her eyes suddenly moistened and she flung up her hands to hide her face. Her body trembled and Jason Hazard dropped the shotgun and folded her against him. Over her shoulder he saw McGrath looking at him grimly. The girl pressed herself tight against Hazard as though to draw strength from him, and after a moment she drew away from him to lift her head in a gesture of courage and defiance. "I'm all right," she said again. "And I'll never blame you, Jason. Joe wouldn't, and I can't."

"Nobody can," said Flynn McGrath.

Hazard's face looked drawn, gaunted. Vicky said urgently, "You can't take the blame, Jason. Joe wouldn't have let you do it. Jason—Jason. Listen to me—do you remember what you said to me this afternoon? We were talking about your son dying, and you said it had all been written down in the book a long time ago. Don't you see, this is the same thing?"

"It's not the same thing, Vicky," Jason Hazard answered. He bent down to retrieve the shotgun. He held it in both hands and turned away, facing the cantina now.

McGrath said, "You can't walk into a blast furnace and

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be expectin' to live through it, Jason. They won't let you live five seconds if you go up there. For the love of the saints, man!"

Hazard said, "Take Vicky to Doc Culpepper's office, Flynn. Get that arm looked at and tell the Doc to take care of Joe." Without waiting an answer—without even listening to McGrath's protests—he stalked away, once again beating a path through the crowd. Suddenly aware of his intentions, the crowd stood rooted, watching him with fearful awe.

He broke out of the crowd and walked steadily, not hurrying, toward the cantina. They saw him coming, they watched him. As he came within a two-block distance of the place, the knot of men at the cantina door spread out along the adobe wall and faced him in a ragged skirmish line. In the middle stood a great hulking figure who must be Lew Canreen. It ran through Hazard's mind dimly that this was part of the old game that was never played to a finish—that the conflict of man against man was eternal and there was never a hope of victory, but only the knowledge that in the end every man had to meet his own death in the manner of his own choosing.

And yet, buried beneath the scars and scabs of grief and disillusion that colored Jason Hazard's vision so darkly, there remained a steady primitive flame, and that was the unquenched will to survive. Walking toward two dozen armed men, facing them alone and exposed on the street, he nevertheless was not at any moment intending to lay down his life without a price. He expected a fight, and it was a measure of his pride that he firmly expected to beat them. Without that self-confidence, no man would have been able to face them.

He eared back the two hammers of the shotgun and brought the muzzle up level, training it on Lew Canreen, and walked forward toward death.

V

THEY WERE TOUGHS, the men arrayed against him—hard-scrabble fighting men next to vacant-eyed drunks; pickpockets and tinhorn card-cheats standing with gun-hung adventurers and cattle thieves. They were men of every height and breadth, of every possible physical description, but they all had one thing in common, and that was the bitter-eyed look of men who knew the shadow-trails of outlaw life. They were the has-beens and the might-have-beens, the men who had failed and therefore resented the very smell of a man who had not failed. And for that reason they were the ones Lew Canreen would have been able to stir into unreasoning, deathly anger against Jason Hazard—a man whom few of them had ever seen.

He did not know any of them, either, except for Bill Speed, the gaunt gunman standing back against the door, half hidden by the bulk of Canreen's big body. A nervous smile flickered on Bill Speed's lips but his eyes were cold and steady, and Hazard knew that Bill Speed had his own reasons for being here. As for the rest of them, he had never seen them but he knew them well: he knew their kind, he knew what to expect of them. It left him with only one uncertainty. He did not know Lew Canreen. For Canreen, even from a distance of a block and a half, was not the kind of man who could be fitted into a slot. There was no way to know what Canreen might do or say under any given circumstance. He was big—big as a house, and he looked a little sloppy around the waistline. His jowls were loose and he had the superficial appearance of a common bar-room brawler. But it did not fit his role, that appearance, for Canreen was obviously a leader, or he could never have stirred up such a crowd of sour men. And there was one other factor: Vic Olsen had selected Canreen to be his right-hand

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man. And Olsen, whatever his vices, was a clever man. He would not have relied on a fool.

It was this kind of careful thinking that had kept Jason Hazard alive in past encounters. The subtle nuances of danger were important to a man whose life hung in a balance. Because he knew the other men, by type, he was able to dismiss them; because he did not know Lew Canreen, he had to concentrate on Canreen.

The last thin rind of the sun was slipping down over the westward horizon. The sky was half-covered with blood-red cloud. Dust boiled around his boots. He went up the wide street at a steady pace and put himself close to the western sidewalk, so that he would be closer to the crowd, and so that the sun would not hit him in the eyes when he faced them. But there was little sun left; it would be gone within a moment of the time he reached them. Vague shadows spilled across the width of the street; the light was grey and red, an uncertain light for shooting.

A ten-gauge shotgun was a deadly weapon at close range; at more than thirty yards it was unsure, and at much more than that it was no more than a nuisance. He had to get close if he was to make use of the threat of Calico's shotgun; otherwise he would have to rely on his revolver. Ill-designed as it was for long-range shooting, it would still be a far better weapon than the shotgun. But it all depended on Lew Canreen: what did Canreen want? A lynching or a gunfight? A quick murder, or a chance to brag before hanging his victim?

Canreen was hidden from him for a moment by the near wing of the crowd. Then Canreen stepped off the porch and took two long, deliberate paces into the street before swinging his burly frame to face Hazard. The men beyond Canreen fanned out, half across the street, to present Hazard with a quarter-circle of men. Still a block away, Hazard

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risked a long glance to either side, searching the alleys and shadows. He wanted no hidden guns behind him.

Nô one spoke; no one moved. They stood like statues. The faint grin played around the corners of Bill Speed's nervous, thin-lipped mouth. Hazard remembered the resentful, secretive way Speed had acted earlier at Zachary Miles' house. He knew Speed would not hesitate to kill him. It was then that Speed abruptly turned and walked out into the street to the far end of the line of men, and took a post there, thumbs hooked in his gunbelts. *Trying to cross-fire me*, Hazard thought calmly, and moved even closer to the sidewalk so that both Canreen and Speed were within his direct line of fire. His boots made soft little thuds in the dust as he placed one foot ahead of the other and walked at the same steady rate of speed.

He had the shotgun triggers in his left hand, to avoid waste motion: if he had to drop the shotgun he wanted his right hand instantly free to snatch his revolver.

Forty yards, thirty-five. The nearest man along the cantina wall was within twenty paces. Still they did not speak. Canreen's face was round, the eyes deep-sunk behind high cheekbones; the man appeared to have Indian blood. His hair was raven-black, glistening where it swept back along the sides. Canreen's belly arched out over his belt. He had a sixgun clipped to the belt with no holster—a rig that no working-man would risk using, for fear of damaging or losing the gun. Only a gunman would use it. That answered one of the questions in Hazard's mind.

Canreen looked big and clumsy and slow, but his hands belied it; they were long-fingered and supple. His head tipped back slightly and he stood, looking relaxed, his arms hanging free and a slow wicked smile spreading his thick lips away from crooked teeth.

Light from the west struck a window across the street, and

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in the clear reflection on that glass, Hazard plainly saw the peak of a hat lifting above the roofline of the building nearest his shoulder. Without pausing in stride, he dropped his left hand away from the shotgun forestock and slipped the revolver into his hand. The motion was smooth and incredibly fast. By the time the men ahead of him had time to react, he was half-turned and had the revolver aimed skyward.

On the roof, a man stood poised with a rifle. Hazard's lips peeled back cruelly and his voice rasped:

"Drop it. Now."

The rifle, not yet aimed at him, hesitated. The man's head whipped to the side—looking to Canreen for orders. Hazard kept his attention shifting rapidly from Canreen to the roof and back; he said nothing. Canreen's grin steadied and he said nothing. The rifleman on the roof presently cursed and dropped his rifle. It fell all the way to the sidewalk and flopped into the street.

Hazard stood a few yards away from the wall, revolver in one hand and shotgun in the other. The shotgun grew heavy in his fist but he kept it leveled toward Canreen; he spoke without lifting his voice:

"Canreen. Come down here alone."

The distance between them was short of thirty yards. Canreen spoke in a curiously husky and high-pitched voice:

"I guess not, Hazard. I like it right here."

"Then tell this pack of vultures to pack up and go home before you get some of yourselves killed."

"I guess not," Canreen said again. *"They're here to see you hang for killin' Turk Ames."*

"And maybe they will," Hazard said evenly. *"But not before they see you cut in half by this shotgun—for the murder of Joe Lawrence. Your flunky killed Joe down the street there."*

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Canreen displayed no surprise; he only said, "Calico was always, a poor shot." After a moment he added, "Been countin' up the odds, Hazard? I make it about twenty to one. You ain't got cartridges enough for half of us."

"That's a fact," Hazard murmured. "But who wants to be the first one to die making a try for me? You made a mistake letting me get this close, Canreen. Now you're fighting the drop."

"And you made a mistake," Canreen answered, "not using that scattergun soon as you came into range. Hell, you shot Turk Ames in the back—what's stopping you from shooting us?"

"Nothing," Hazard said. "And I can tell you this. I look around me and all I see is a crowd of scum. It doesn't matter to anybody whether any of you live or die. The law in this town's a joke—so you see there's nothing to stop me from gunning you all down, one at a time. It's twenty to one, Canreen, but all that means is that I've got a street full of targets. I can't miss—and you can. You boys have got exactly thirty seconds to clear this street before I start pumpin' buckshot into the middle of the crowd."

Hazard's face was flat, grim. He said, "How about it, Canreen?"

Canreen laughed. "You try firing that shotgun that way, you'll bust your hand."

"A broken hand against your life—it's a cheap trade."

"I got to give you one thing, Hazard—you got nerve, and I credit you that. But it ain't going to do you much good."

"Fifteen seconds, Canreen."

Canreen said, "Stay put, boys. Don't move a muscle. Let's call the man's bluff, hey? Hazard, listen—you're a dead man, either way. Hard or easy. You can take your choice—or you can run. Maybe you got a chance to make it around the corner before we cut you to pieces. If you're smart,

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though, you'll drop those peashooters and let us have you. We'll give you a trial before we string you up." He laughed again.

"Both barrels in your gut," Hazard said in a low deadly tone. "Five seconds."

A horseman rounded the corner beyond the cantina, both hands well up in the air: Vic Olsen. "That won't be necessary, Jason," Olsen said calmly, and halted his horse at the edge of the line of men, near Bill Speed. Olsen swung his head toward Lew Canreen and said harshly, "How in hell did you let him box you all like this? Christ—do I have to do everything myself? Do I have to draw you a Goddamned blueprint for everything? Listen, all of you—break this up and go inside the cantina. Go on—move! And don't make any sharp moves or you're likely to be full of shot."

"What the hell?" said Canreen.

"Go on—go on," Olsen said impatiently. He paid no attention to Hazard. He took off his glasses and wiped them on his sleeve, and put them on again. A mutter of grumbling started up and the toughs turned slowly, herded by Lew Canreen, moving reluctantly back inside the small low doorway of the cantina. Hazard watched expressionlessly, showing none of his puzzlement. He held his guns steady. Finally only Bill Speed and Canreen were left outside the door. Olsen sat his horse looking at them with evident disgust. Canreen shot words at Olsen angrily:

"I wish you'd make up your Goddam mind. We'd had him dead in another half minute."

"And you'd have been in the grave right beside him."

"Hell, he ain't that good. I've killed better men."

"No," Olsen said. "You may think you have, but you're wrong, Lew. Now go on inside. You too." Olsen gestured at Bill Speed. "And close the door."

"Jesus," Canreen said. His baleful glance swept from Ol-

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sen to Hazard; he swung abruptly into the building. Speed followed him and the door closed. The cantina, characteristic of its type, had no windows in the front. Olsen folded his hands across the saddlehorn and smiled crookedly. "Well, now, Jason—it appears as though you owe me one."

Hazard let the shotgun slack into the bend of his arm; he holstered his revolver and held his hand near it, and said, "I hope you've enjoyed yourself."

"Yes, indeed, old stud. You can bet your boots on that." Olsen chuckled and swiveled his head to call out:

"You can come on out, Owney."

The tiny deputy appeared at once from behind the corner of the block. His bald head aglisten with sweat, Owney Nash came forward leading two horses. One of them, still saddled, was Jason Hazard's big sorrel. The other was a roan, and there was something strapped across the saddle: a man's body, tied belly-down.

Vic Olsen talked conversationally. "Guess there's no call for a lynching any more, Jason. That's Turk Ames, across the saddle. One of my riders found him, up in the mountains. He's been dead two, maybe three days. Shot through the chest, front to back." Olsen added drily, "I always told the boys you weren't the kind to backshoot a man. Seems I was right."

Owney Nash's pointed nose twitched. He halted the two horses and walked around to the off-side of Hazard's sorrel. When the deputy reached up to draw the rifle from Hazard's scabbard, Hazard felt his muscles tense, but Owney Nash held the rifle carefully by the butt and let it dangle muzzle-down when he lifted it out. Nash came around and stood within a foot of Hazard, craning his neck back to see up into Hazard's face. Nash said belligerently, "This your rifle?"

Hazard glanced at it. "Yes."

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"Sharps forty-five-ninety. Buffalo rifle. Kind of uncommon in this part of the country, seein' as how we ain't got no buffalo down here." Owney Nash nodded as if to agree with himself, then turned back to the horses. He lifted Turk Ames' head up. The front of Ames' shirt was bloodstained. Owney Nash said, "Dug the bullet out of him a little while ago. I don't suppose you'd be able to guess what caliber it was?"

Hazard said, "It doesn't look as though I have to guess."

"How about that, now," murmured Vic Olsen, with pleased amusement.

Owney Nash turned around again to face Hazard. "I guess you know me, Hazard. I ain't no gunfighter. I come around here to arrest you, but I ain't going to fight about it. Either you give yourself up or you don't. If you don't, I'll go in the cantina here and deputize a bunch of men to help me out. It's kind of up to you, know what I mean?"

Hazard said to Vic Olsen, "It's a pretty raw frame, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know anything about that," Olsen said complacently. "The man wants to arrest you, Jason. What do you say?"

Hazard considered the square, Scandinavian face, half-hidden behind its spectacles. The twilight was deepening. Owney Nash stood by the heads of the two horses, rubbing the point of his nose with a finger, watching Hazard with a measure of anxiousness. Hazard heard footsteps behind him and turned his head; he saw Flynn McGrath coming up the street, a rifle in his hand. McGrath's arm was still unbandaged. He came up and stationed himself beside Hazard. "I had you covered the whole while from down the block. Canreen started anything, I would have pumped the worthless lot of them full of Mother McCreary's Revenge. What's these spalpeens up to, now?"

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Owney Nash said, "You just keep out of this, Flynn."

"Sure, sure," McGrath said sardonically.

Olsen said, "What do you say, Jason?"

"You'll have a hard time proving your case in any court," Hazard said. "But I don't propose to be a sitting duck in Owney Nash's jail."

"In other words," Owney Nash said, "you're resistin' arrest?"

"Arrest?" said Flynn McGrath. Then he walked over and had a look at Turk Ames. His expression darkened and he said angrily, "I see."

McGrath had his back to Olsen just then, and that was bad luck: Olsen slipped his hand down and spoke sharply, "This is a derringer I've got against your partner's back, Jason. If you want him in one piece, drop your guns."

Hazard kept his features impassive. Without argument he let the shotgun fall and unbuckled his gunbelt. When it dropped, Owney Nash scuttled forward and bent down to pick up the weapons. That was when Hazard whipped his arm down, collared the deputy around the neck and yanked Nash back against his chest. His arm locked about Nash's scrawny neck, Hazard said sharply, "Now *you* drop the gun, Vic—or I'll snap his neck in two."

Olsen chuckled. "In the first place I know you too well, Jason—you'd never do it. You're bluffing. And in the second place, I don't give a damn whether you break his worthless neck or not. I can always get another deputy down here. In the meantime the derringer's still cocked."

Flynn McGrath's skin was flushed dark red. "Go on, Jason—don't let the son of a bitch get away with it. Kill the little bastard and clear out of here. I'll keep Olsen busy."

"Sure you will," Olsen murmured.

Hazard's bleak glance locked on Olsen. Finally he loosened

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his grip on the deputy and pushed Owney Nash away. "All right, Vic."

"Now you're getting smart," Olsen said.

Owney Nash drew his gun and turned around to face Hazard. His face was livid with rage. "That was a bad mistake, Mister—a bad mistake. You ain't going to like living in my jail, I can promise you that. Now get a move on, before I pump a few bullets into you."

Saying nothing, Hazard turned and began to walk down the street. There was no indication of defeat in his stride. But his lips were clamped thin and a muscle rippled at the hinge-line of his jaw.

VI

HE CAME TO the cell's small high window and gripped the bars, looking out at the night. His eyes reflected a cheerless cold, almost a despair. Behind him a door opened and a long splash of light flowed down the jail corridor. Owney Nash appeared in the light. "Last cell," Nash grumbled unhappily. A fat man came past him and walked forward. Hazard waited far back in the cell until the fat man reached the door of iron bars; the fat man said, "Hazard?"

Hazard nodded. The fat man said, "I'm Ted Logan. Lawyer. Come to talk to you." Logan was short of breath—asthma, possibly—and spoke in quick bursts of talk.

A small curiosity stirred Hazard's interest. He moved nearer the door. "Who sent you?"

"What difference does that make? I need a client, you need a lawyer."

"Maybe."

"Well, Hazard—you're in trouble. I can help you try to get out of it. You know any law?"

"Not too much"

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"Then you'd play hell conducting your own defense. Right? Look, I'm reliable enough. I handle Zach Miles' law work."

"Did Zach send you?"

"No."

"Somebody did. You didn't volunteer for this—not in Vic Olsen's town."

"Vic Olsen doesn't own every soul," Logan said. "I was hired and paid a retainer. That will have to be enough for now. I'll do my best by you, but you've got to tell me the truth."

"About what?"

"Turk Ames."

"I didn't shoot him. Hadn't even seen him in five years. That's the sum of it."

"Can you prove it?"

"I don't know."

"Then we're in fine shape. Just fine." Logan had a hat on. He took it off and wiped his brow with a yellow handkerchief. Lamplight from down the corridor illuminated his fat face faintly. He peered through the bars and said, "That rifle of yours was cleaned recently."

"I clean my guns every night."

"In this case, that's a bad habit. Ames was killed with a forty-five-ninety—the same caliber as your rifle."

"What does that prove?"

Logan sighed. He was a dumpy man in a shapeless suit that had gone shiny at elbows and knees. He propped one shoulder against the bars and got out a small notebook. "Ames was killed two or three days ago. The body was found in a gully on the side of Antelope Mountain. That mean anything to you?"

"I know the area."

"Been there recently?"

"No."

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"Where were you when he got killed?"

"I can't say—I don't know when he was shot."

Logan grunted and shifted around to look at him. "You're not being a hell of a lot of help, Hazard."

Hazard was paying him no attention; he was frowning with thought. "The body," he said. "There was mud on the clothes. How'd that come to be there?"

Logan thought about it. "It rained over the mountains, day before yesterday. Wait a minute—you mean he must have been killed before it rained? Sure, that's got to be it, because the cowboy who found the body said all the tracks had been washed away. If he'd been killed after the rain, the tracks would still be there. That narrows down the time of death."

Hazard said, "I didn't get over to this side of the mountains until after that rain."

"Can you prove it?"

"Maybe. I met a cowhand in Verde Pass when I was coming through the gap. That was two days ago, in the morning—probably about the time Ames must have been killed. And Verde Pass is forty miles away from where you say he was found."

Logan grinned. "That gets us somewhere. You know the cowhand?"

"Never saw him before. I didn't get his name. He borrowed tobacco from me and we passed the time of day."

"Describe him for me."

Hazard thought back. "Maybe forty-five or fifty. Not too tall, on the thin side. He had a brown beard and a Mexican hat. Talked like a Texan."

Logan said, "That could describe half the cow hands in Arizona."

"He was riding a bay gelding with a Hash Knife brand."

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"You'll find Hash Knife horses all over the Southwest. It's the biggest ranch on the Mogollon Rim."

Hazard shook his head. "I can't help that."

"Wasn't there anything distinguishing about him?"

"Not the cowhand. The horse you could pick out without much trouble. A bay, about fifteen hands high, with a white blaze down the forehead and two black fetlocks, both on the off side. Bobtailed. It had a crossed-out Chisum brand on the right flank and the Hash Knife mark on the left shoulder. The saddle was a double Texas rig with a wide flat horn and brass conchos."

"Did the cowboy say where he was going?"

"Asked me what the weather was like to the north."

Logan groaned. "North of Verde Pass you've only got half of Arizona and all of Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. Did he look like he was rigged for a long trip?"

"You can't tell, with a cowhand. They travel light."

Logan slapped his notebook shut and put the pencil away. "Well, it's a place to start, anyway. We'll send riders up the trail to scout for him."

"Who's paying for it? I haven't got money to hire riders."

"I thought you owned a mine?"

"Not any more."

"Well," Logan said, "don't worry about it. It's taken care of."

Hazard walked flat up to the bars. "By who?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell you. It isn't Olsen or Canreen, if that's what you're suspecting. It's a friend of yours."

"McGrath?"

"No. And I won't answer any more questions about it. You'll just have to put up with it for the time being. If the party who hired me wants you to find out who it is, then you'll be told. Not before. I'll be back when I've got some-

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thing to go on. Circuit Judge will be here in three days—I guess you'll get your hearing then." Without further talk, Logan turned and waddled away. Owney Nash came and stood in the corridor, and when Logan was gone, Nash came forward with a taut grin and a twitching nose. Nash spoke vindictively:

"I hope you're good and hungry, Hazard, because I ain't giving you nothing to eat tonight. Maybe if you behave yourself I'll feed you some mush and water, come mornin'." He grinned wickedly. "Sleep tight, bucko." And he left the jail, slamming the door.

Hazard lay back on the iron-frame cot, laced his fingers under his head, and stared at the ceiling. He had his doubts that Logan or any other lawyer would be able to do him any good. The west had its Daltons, the East its Boss Tweeds, and throughout the country the law was a joke. In such an atmosphere a man like Vic Olsen had no great difficulty, by using money as grease, in controlling the courts of his district.

Olsen was clever; he was the more dangerous because he was slightly mad. There was no way to know whether Olsen would be content to wait for a trial, or whether someone would fire a shot through the cell window. It was a frightening speculation. It was, Hazard knew, exactly the kind of thinking that Olsen wanted to inspire in him.

It was training that allowed him to mask his feelings and keep his mouth shut when all his impulses urged him to cry out against the world. He felt backed into a corner; despair flowed around him. But beneath all that, there lay a deeper layer of calmness—a fundamental fatalism. Jason Hazard had lived thirty-six years in a world of good and evil, pleasure and pain; in the end it all balanced out, and in spite of the hard and sometimes bitter roads he had traveled, he had no particular regrets.

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His father had been a circuit-riding preacher on the frontiers of Illinois and Missouri: a stern spade-bearded man with, a sharply defined code of right and wrong; a stolid, dependable man with deep capacity for anger and for love. Hazard remembered him vividly and observed that at no point during his years had he betrayed his father's codes—the codes that had shaped Jason Hazard's life. A man lived by principles, or not at all. Issues were clear-cut; there was always a proper answer if you asked the right question. The trick was to learn not to waste time asking meaningless questions. In the end, for Jason Hazard, it had come down to the basic question, and he had provided his own answer to it: if a man did not make the rules, at least he could live by them.

And that was what he came around to, this night: what was more important, the rules or the threat upon his life?

It was a question full of subtle turnings. He had to try outthinking Vic Olsen. And in the end he decided that it would please Olsen to make him fear an ambush bullet out of the dark; but a real ambush would put an end to Olsen's warped pleasures. Olsen was far more likely to keep the suspense high as long as he could. It was likely that Olsen would do nothing until he saw which way the trial went. It might be that imprisonment leading up to execution would suit Olsen's schemes more than a quick death for Hazard.

So deciding, Hazard dismissed the problem from his mind with characteristic confidence, and turned his attention to a less deadly speculation: who had hired Ted Logan?

But he reached no conclusion that time; and presently he fell asleep, his last thought being for his stomach: he had had nothing to eat in a good long time.

The gruel Owney Nash provided as breakfast was all but inedible. Hazard swallowed it because he had to. He re-

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fused to satisfy Nash by acting hungry; he simply ignored the tiny deputy when Nash came and went. Nash shouted curses at him and Hazard paid no attention. Presently, livid with rage, Nash slammed out of the jailhouse.

Evelyn Miles came down with her father at ten o'clock. Old Zachary Miles looked drawn and beaten. He said, "I'm sorry as hell about this, Jason. Sorry about Joe Lawrence and sorry about you. Listen, I can rip this ramshackle hoosegow down around Owney Nash's ears and get you out of here."

"No," Hazard said. "Wait for the trial, Zach—let them have their fun."

There was something out of place in the look Evelyn gave him. She stood beyond the bars looking preoccupied. There was a strange set to her features: determined, slightly angry, and yet still so beautiful he could not help but be stirred.

Zachary Miles said quietly, "Vicky Lawrence came to me last night. She wanted me to buy her mine. Said she didn't want to run it any more, now that Joe's gone. I couldn't help her out—we're just about flat broke ourselves. My last two payrolls were hi-jacked on the coach road, and just this morning there was a cave-in down in number seven shaft that will set us back three weeks. Vicky told me she was going to see about selling the mine to Vic Olsen."

Evelyn said coolly, "At least Vic seems capable of handling his business affairs."

The use of Olsen's first name was not lost on Hazard, but he said nothing. Her father was staring angrily at the girl. "The man's a cheap crook, Evelyn, and you know it. I wouldn't doubt for an instant that he was behind those payroll robberies."

"What if he was? At least it's better than murder." Evelyn's pale eyes clashed defiantly with her father's.

Inside the cell, Hazard watched her face, and felt a slow

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hollow emptiness creep into his heart. He had a feeling he knew exactly what Evelyn was going to say to him.

But Zachary Miles seemed blind to that; perhaps his own misfortunes had dulled him. He managed a ragged smile and said, "Well, I'll leave you two alone. I understand you've got a lawyer—Ted Logan's a good man. As good as you'll find in this bailiwick, anyhow. Evelyn, I'll leave it up to you to cheer him up. Anything you need, Jason?"

Hazard shook his head. Miles glanced at his daughter and walked slowly out.

When her father was gone the girl moved up against the bars and put her fists around them. "Well, Jason."

"You've got something to say," he said. "Go ahead."

"Kiss me, first." She pressed her face between the bars. "Please, Jason."

Her lips were cool, all but unresponsive; but then she reached through the bars and clutched his collar, drawing him forward. Her mouth opened and he felt a sudden heat in her kiss. Then, just as abruptly, she drew back and laughed at him—a brittle, cold laughter that made him narrow his eyes and clamp his lips tight.

She said, "Does that make you feel as though you might have thought of me once or twice in the past few years? Maybe written me a letter? Maybe even said good-bye when you left?"

He murmured, "I had no claim on you, Evelyn. And I don't want to fight with you."

"I'm not fighting," she said. "Only lovers fight." She smoothed her hair back with both palms and tipped her head back proudly. "Love doesn't wait, Jason. You can't put it off until it's convenient. Love dies, and you should have known that—it dies, Jason. Only it leaves its corpse behind and after a while the corpse begins to stink."

She was more bitter than he had ever seen her; for this

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one moment she ripped away all the gloss of warmth and beauty, and he could taste the venom of her. She was a round, full woman, brimming over with drives, energies, life—with needs that sucked. He said slowly, "When I left here I was in no position to make any promises, Evelyn."

"How was I to know that?"

"You can't expect a man to act according to your wishes if you never speak up. I never figured there was much of anything between you and me. Evidently you had a different idea. I'm sorry about that."

"Four years," she whispered; "four years I waited, and that's all you can say to me?" She swayed forward as if to spit in his face. Hazard did not move. Suddenly the girl smiled coyly; her voice went soft and throaty:

"I have a feeling you're putting on a mask to avoid being humiliated, Jason. I have a feeling you're in love with me but you're too smart to admit it. Isn't that right? Of course it is. You've always been in love with me, ever since the first day you set eyes on me. Remember it, Jason?"

"You'd be making a mistake, thinking that," he said mildly. "When I came into this valley I had other things on my mind besides you. Whatever you thought you may have seen in me, it wasn't love, Evelyn. You were just fitting your own feelings into a picture of me."

"That's easy for you to say, now," she snapped.

"No," he said. "You're a beautiful woman. No man in his right mind could avoid being attracted by you—and you know that. But it doesn't mean every man alive is going to fall in love with you. You haven't learned what love is, not yet."

"And I suppose you have!" she countered testily. "Well, I can tell you something, Jason. I'll tell you exactly what I intend to do. I'm going to wait until they sentence you and then I'm going to marry Vic Olsen."

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He said, "That would be the greatest mistake of your life."

She smiled with mock sweetness. "You're jealous, Jason," she said. She tossed her head and walked out.

When she was gone, Hazard walked back to the cot and sat down. His feelings were mixed. When he had left, four years ago, Evelyn had been a girl—young and skittish, not sure of herself as a woman. He had smiled at her, and obviously she had read too much into his smile. But then he had returned. He remembered meeting McGrath on the trail, and McGrath shocking him by saying, *After all, Zach's daughter's still pining after you.* It had been the first Hazard had known of it. But then he had seen her yesterday, in the store, and she had been all woman—exciting, beautiful, enchanting. He had felt a sudden hard attraction, and for a moment it had seemed as though she were answering it with feelings of her own. But all the while she had been holding something in reserve, and now he knew what it was. He felt sorry for her. She had planned this scene today with care; that much was obvious. She had meant to rip him to shreds—but when she had slashed away, she had struck only a shadow. There was no love to destroy. His heart had not been hers to break.

He wondered if she realized that, or if she was so blinded by the certainty of her omnipotent power over men that she really believed he must have loved her.

And it made him feel sorry for Zach Miles. Zach had lost so much, and now stood to lose his only daughter as well.

Life had not treated any of them very handsomely. But life, Hazard thought, was no more than footprints on a sandy beach. The past was washed away, the future untrod, and only the present existed. It was a man's business to make his way through every moment the best way he could, and not brood upon the past.

He lay back and watched shadows slide across the ceiling.

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The heat began to build, toward noon, and his shirt began to stick to the cot. He wished he had a drink of water.

VII

THE COURTROOM was jammed beyond its capacity with spectators, taking a holiday from work. Hazard's expressionless glance swept the faces in the room. He recognized a good many of them. Judge Roy Conrad sat on the bench, a grizzled old lawyer with flame in his eyes. Hazard had developed respect for the Judge during the days of the trial.

Zach Miles sat alone in a corner. Evelyn was not with him; she sat boldly beside Vic Olsen. Olsen took every chance he could get to smile at Hazard. Canreen and Bill Speed were back in the crowd. Vicky Lawrence sat with Flynn McGrath, and that had been a bit of a surprise: Hazard knew that Vicky had sold her mine to Olsen, and he had expected her to leave Stinking Springs, but she was still here; she had never missed a moment of the trial.

Owney Nash sat, preened with self-importance, beside Hazard; at Hazard's right sat Logan. Logan's eyes were hot and round and he bent forward to whisper in Hazard's ear:

"There's no way to get around it, Jason. The Judge can't overrule the jury verdict. You'll have to face that."

Hazard glanced at him and said nothing. Logan said, "Somebody planned it pretty carefully. If it hadn't been for that pocket knife of yours that Nash said he found in Ames' pocket, they never would have had a case."

Logan was going on, but the Judge rapped his gavel and the babble of voices in the room died away. The bailiff spoke in a weary voice:

"The prisoner will rise and face the Court so that the Court may pass sentence upon him."

Hazard stood. Judge Conrad steepled his fingers before

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him. The Judge said, "It is the opinion of this Court that the only men involved in this trial who deserve sentencing are the witnesses for the prosecution and the jurymen. However it is not within this particular Court's power to direct or set aside a jury verdict in a capital case, nor is it possible to appeal a criminal case from this Territorial Court to a higher federal bench. There is, however, one recourse left to an unjustly convicted defendant, and that is the pardoning power of the Territorial Governor. Those who have taken an interest in this case will be interested to know that upon its next session in the Territorial capital, this Court intends to bring to the Governor's attention what the Court feels has been a lamentable miscarriage of justice."

Conrad paused and glanced, with some disgust, at the prosecuting attorney. Thereupon the Judge resumed:

"Jason Hazard, you have been tried before a jury of twelve men for the crime of murder in the second degree, there being no proof of premeditation. You have been found guilty of that crime by a jury of your supposed peers. It is, therefore, the unwelcome duty of this Court to pass sentence upon you. The court hereby sentences you to the minimum term of imprisonment allowable under the law, that being a term of not less than five years incarceration in the Territorial Penitentiary."

The Judge rapped his gavel sharply. "Court's adjourned."

In the anteroom beside the courtroom, Hazard waited under Owney Nash's watchful eye. Nash was picking at his fingernails. His nose wiggled when he spoke: "Too bad they couldn't pin first degree on you, bucko. But five years ought to give you time to suffer." He grinned.

Hazard did not grant the deputy the pleasure of a reply. In a short while the door opened to admit Ted Logan, who came in with a troubled gaze and snapped at Nash:

"Get out of here."

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"What the hell? He's my prisoner."

"There's only one door out of this room. You can stand guard on the other side of it just as well as in here. Now get out, or I'll have the Judge throw you out."

Nash grumbled and went through the door. When it closed behind the deputy, Logan said, "This is the rawest frame I've seen in a good long time, and I've been a mining-camp lawyer for some years now. Olsen packed the veniremen's panel with so many of his handpicked scum that I couldn't stop them from packing the jury. You saw me use up my challenges. Hell, any honest jurymen would have seen without being told that your pocket knife had been planted on the body long after he was dead. And without that pocket knife, they had no clear piece of evidence connecting you with the dead man. The whole thing makes me sick. But you've got one thing you can count on. Judge Conrad meant what he said about laying your case before the Governor. It shouldn't be long before you're pardoned."

"By Governor Husman? He's an old crook. I wouldn't doubt that Olsen can get to him first."

"He's soft and drunk, most of the time, but the Governor's not that cheap a crook. He respects Judge Conrad." Logan shook his head. "I wish to hell we could have found that Hash Knife cowhand you met on the trail. That would have proved your alibi."

"Well, it's too late for that now."

"Maybe not. If we can find that cowhand, it will add weight to the appeal to the Governor."

Hazard shrugged. "I've always believed in letting the chips fall. When you can do something about your troubles, then do it. When you can't, you just have to wait and see what happens. Don't lose any sleep over me, Ted. But thanks for all you've done."

"Christ. I wish it had come to something."

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"You can do one thing for me," Hazard said.

"What's that?"

"It's over now—it shouldn't make any difference. I'd like to know who retained you to fight my case."

Logan met his eyes. "I wish I could," he said, and turned to the door. He forced a smile and said, "Don't worry, Jason—we'll have you free in no time." After a firm, quick handshake, he left.

And Owney Nash came in with a tight cruel grin and a pair of handcuffs. "All right, bucko. Time to go back to your cell. We'll be shippin' you off to the pen in a day or two—and I hope you rot."

The warden sat behind a scarred, splintered desk. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. A sultry, damp heat hung in the room. The warden spoke in a tired voice: "Well, Hazard, I'll put you straight about this place. You're a prisoner here like all the rest. You've been convicted by the law and according to that law you're a criminal. I can't give you special treatment, even on Judge Conrad's say-so." The warden leaned forward and regarded Hazard closely. "I want no rough stuff. If you've been railroaded, then that's hard luck. But I won't have you taking it out here. I can get mean as hell when I'm provoked. Now beat it. Go down to the end of the hall. The trusty will take your clothes and give you a uniform. Maybe you'll get lucky and be pardoned out of here in a few weeks, but in the meantime you'll behave like anybody else in the yard. Understand me?"

Hazard turned to the door. He palmed the knob and walked down the narrow hallway, smelling the stench of the countless men who had trod it before him.

In the afternoon he stood in a long, low-roofed area divided into cells. A dour guard pushed him along the corridor with the end of a truncheon; the guard took out a ring of

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keys and unlocked a heavy wooden cell door. "If you please," the guard said with heavy sarcasm, and shoved him roughly inside. With a sardonic flourish the guard bowed before he slammed the door and locked it on Hazard.

A slight, dark-haired man sat on the lower bunk, pale-skinned and sensuous of lips. He had a one-sided smile and a voice rooted in some far distant cultivated education. "Well. You're new around. About time they sent some company my way. Have you got a name?"

"Hazard."

"Just so," the little man murmured. He stood up and it was evident that in better clothes he would have been dapper. "My name's Jim Baragray. Well, do you play pinochle?"

"Sometimes." Hazard had his look around the six-by-eight cell. The small man was shuffling a worn, dog-eared pack of cards. Baragray said mildly:

"I see they gave you number thirty-seven-twelve. The last bully boy that wore that number got himself killed trying to go over the wall. Well, make yourself at home. They'll be putting both of us to work in the morning. The only reason I'm here is that I've been laid up in the hospital with scurvy. That's what comes to you if you eat the hog-slop they feed us here. Don't look surprised if you find maggots in the biscuits."

Baragray lay on his bunk, propped himself up on an elbow, and laid out a game of solitaire. "What are you in here for?"

"Murder," Hazard said curtly, and went to stand by the door, looking out through the tiny square opening. All he could see was an identical door across the dim corridor. The heat was intense and stifling.

Fatigue came over him suddenly. It brought a cramping fever that made his muscles ache. He felt his life and buoyancy sink low. Doubt, uncertainties and discouragement

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dropped upon him, with fitful feelings of guilt. He felt vaguely that he had dishonored himself, that he might have done more. It was not like him to accept adversity passively. He had always been a fighter. But up to now the issues had been more clear-cut and the enemies had been easier to fight. Even his son's illness—he had been able to face that and to fight it on simple terms. It took good medicine to combat the disease, and good medicine took money. And so he had set out to win his fight by making money. In the end he had lost, but not for lack of trying. He had fought as hard as any man could.

But had he fought Vic Olsen as hard as he could? Now he began to wonder about that. The dark, hot depression of the cell came flowing around him, filling with the realization of where he was. The future was dark. He had fought according to the rules, laid down for him hard and fast and inviolable. But the rules had failed him; what was a man to do?

Baragray's voice broke across his thoughts. "I was down on my luck and held up a store. Caught on the first try—the story of my life." He grinned crookedly at his solitaire game. "How come they didn't hang you?"

"Second degree."

"In other words it was somebody that needed killing."

"Maybe," said Hazard. He turned away from the man again.

In the morning the guards herded them into a foul-smelling mess hall. Hazard spoke to no one and ate without relish. During the morning he was set by himself scrubbing the cell corridors with mop and bucket. A guard watched him, holding a shotgun idly in his arms.

After lunch the prisoners had a half hour outside, in the walled compound of the prison. The ground was loose dust. Powder in the air half-choked a man. Hazard stood by a

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wall, watching. Men milled aimlessly, talking softly. A pock-marked man with round shoulders wandered by and stopped to talk to Jim Baragray. "Got the makin's?"

Baragray handed over cigarette papers and tobacco, watching the newcomer with a kind of unsympathetic amusement. "You're in safe company, friend."

"Am I?" said the pock-marked man. He murmured, "That would be something new," and rolled up a cigarette carefully, not spilling any tobacco. He shaped it and licked it. "Now. Has anybody got a match?"

Baragray held a match to the man's smoke. The pock-marked man put his eyes on the flame and observed, "All we need to go with that is a stick of giant powder."

Baragray answered, "The last ones who went over the wall ended up in the cemetery on the hill."

"Ah," said the pock-marked man. "But they wasn't smart." He blew out the match and sucked a deep drag of smoke into his lungs. Expelling it, he eyed Baragray thoughtfully. "I ain't seen you before."

"Been in hospital a month."

"Well, then, that explains it. I only came ten days ago. They call me Luther. It ain't my real name, but it'll do."

"Jim Baragray. That's Hazard beside you."

Luther glanced at both of them before he nodded. He said, "Jason Hazard, ain't it? I seen you a time or two. You handle a fast gun." Saying no more, Luther drifted off into the circling crowd.

A blue-clothed guard moved purposefully through the crowd toward the two men and Baragray put on his crooked defensive smile—"Look out, now."

The guard gave Hazard a malevolent gaze. Baragray said, "What's the matter, Mulligan?"

"That ain't your business," the guard said. He turned to Hazard. "You been a miner, somebody said."

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"I've dug holes in the ground," Hazard admitted evenly.

"Well, then. Maybe we'll get you out on the farm. And you, Baragray, you're moving up there in a week." Mulligan glared at them for a moment and pushed away.

Baragray regarded Hazard quizzically. "Usually a man's here a year or better before they transfer him to the farm. You have something on the warden?"

Hazard made no answer; he turned away, puzzling it out in his mind. It was time to make a decision, and privately he knew he had already made it—to fight. The question was, how?

Vicky Lawrence rode with a long-accustomed ease, sitting straight in the saddle and balancing her weight by habit in the stirrups. She wore men's trousers and a flannel shirt, neither of which quite hid the rounded suppleness of her figure. Her dark hair was pinned back out of her eyes and she wore a broad, flat-topped hat to keep the sun off her face. Once she saw a rusting tin can by the road; out of pure restlessness she drew her carbine from the boot and put a well-placed slug into the tin can, and with satisfaction watched it jump. She passed a southbound wagon and ran along the plateau, seeing occasional abandoned mine tailings and now and then passing a ranch headquarters. She saw one lone rider in the distance, waved to him, and rode on. At intervals she pulled the horse down to a walk, then let it singlefoot, then sent it forward again at a mile-consuming canter. At noon she was climbing a canyon's grade into Dragoon Pass. In two hours she reached the summit, and looked down upon the broken land behind her.

From this altitude she could see a lone habitation down the trail to the north—a hut set back from the road in a small hollow. Pines lanced up from the mountainsides like armies of spears at attention. She began the descent, dropping into a

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canyon and then following a winding trail that switch-backed down a precipitous hill so steep that she could almost reach out and touch the tops of pines that had their bases fifty feet below. This was the northern part of the Territory, the high-altitude mountain country above the vast Mogollon Rim. The air was cool and crystal-clear. Long miles of travel lay behind her. She went down the steep trail and high, narrow walls above her brought the world close in, and then dropped away, letting her see a panorama, the canyon spreading and sprawling out ahead. In this way, cutting through the trees and swapping through hairpin turns, she pressed deeper into the wilderness until at last she came upon the hut she had spied from high above, and let her call sing out.

A fat woman came to the door, brown and round in a shapeless faded dress. Thin dusty hair hung over her face in tangled knots which the woman was plainly too indolent to sweep away. She stood, heavy in the doorway, and squinted at Vicky. She said in an unfriendly voice, "*Qué desea?*"

The woman's eyes ran up and down Vicky's body and the lips turned down at the corners. Vicky glanced around the slovenly place and spoke in Border Spanish: "A man maybe rode by here at the end of last month. A gringo vaquero on a bay horse with the brand of the Hash Knife. Did he stop here?"

"Your man?"

"No. Did he stop here?"

"I do not recall."

Vicky opened the flap of her saddlebag and took out a coin. The ten-dollar eagle glimmered in the sun. The fat woman's eyes fixed themselves hungrily on it; it was probably more money than she had ever seen at once. Vicky held the coin in her hand and said nothing. Finally the fat woman said, "My husband, maybe he can help you."

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It was after dark when Vicky rode into the tired, quiet town of Arroyo Seco. She put her horse away at the stable and walked to the town's only hotel; at the desk she paid for a room and asked, "I'm expecting to meet an Irishman named McGrath. Is he here?"

"Dining room," the clerk said, pointing with a dirty finger.

Vicky's face was flushed with excitement when she turned into the dining room. McGrath was at a table near the door and the look on her face brought him out of his chair; she hardly noticed that McGrath, too, was smiling. She started talking before she sat down:

"I found a trace of him, Flynn. The cowhand on the Hash Knife horse. He stopped overnight at a Mexican's shack in Dragoon Pass, and when he left he was headed this way. I think we're really—"

"I know," McGrath said. "Sit down—you must be starvin', and that won't be doing you no good just now."

McGrath held a chair for her and sat back down. A cup of coffee steamed before him. His arm was wrapped in a bandage; he flexed the fingers and said, "Going to be good as new. Look, darlin', I've got me own piece of news too. The cowhand came down here, all right. He was as broke as the Ten Commandments, if I'm to be believing the stable hostler. The cowhand's name was Jaynes, Waco Jaynes. He worked two weeks for the livery-stable owner, pitching hay and the like, and then rode out north saying he was after finding a cool country to spend the summer in. That was only last week—we're gettin' close to the gentleman."

"Waco Jaynes," Vicky whispered, and repeated the name again and again. And finally she said, "Flynn, for the first time I really believe we're going to find him. He's got a name, now—he won't be so easy to lose a second time, will he?"

"Not if I've anything 't-all to say about it," said the Irish-

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man. "Now you fill up your belly with food and get a good night's sleep on a soft bed. In the mornin' we'll be riding north after Mister Waco Jaynes."

VIII

HAZARD CLIMBED ONTO the seat of the wagon and gigged the team across the field, hauling fresh-cut hay to the jail-farm's animal stock. The work had worn him down and tired him out; after two weeks of it he was ready for nothing more than sleep at the end of the day.

When he reached the far fence he glanced at the guard in the watch-tower, and got off the wagon to water the team at the trough. While the horses nuzzled the tepid water, Hazard took Ted Logan's letter from inside his uniform shirt and reread it. This dozenth reading added nothing to the bleakness the letter had provided the first time he had opened it, a week ago:

Sorry to have to tell you Judge Roy Conrad was killed in a runaway accident at Tucson. There is some suspicion it wasn't altogether an accident, but nobody can prove anything. The Judge had not been to see the Governor yet about your case. I intend to appeal it to the Governor myself, but before I do, I hope we'll be able to find the witness who can testify to your alibi. We have learned that the witness's name is Waco Jaynes, and we have a fair idea where to find him. It is a matter of time, now; I hope you will be able to put up with it a while longer until we can straighten it out to your satisfaction.

The rest of the letter consisted of apologies and small talk. Hazard put it away and went back to work, glancing once

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at the guard in the watch-tower. The guard's rifle was aimed slackly in his direction and the guard's eyes were on him steadily.

It was always like that; and a hard, sour knot had gathered in his belly. He knew one thing—he had known it for a long time, but had only confessed to himself its full importance recently: Vic Olsen had to be stopped. The time would come, this week or next or perhaps not for a year or five years, but one day the prison gate would open. On that day Jason Hazard had a job to do. There was no question in his mind any more, although for a long time he had searched his soul carefully. It went beyond a grudge and it went beyond revenge. The fact was that Olsen had to be stopped cold, and if there was nobody else able to do it, then Jason Hazard would make himself into the instrument of Olsen's fall.

In the evening after mess he lay on the hard thin ticking of his cot in the prison-farm barracks, awash in heat and the strong smells of a dozen men with whom he shared the long, narrow room. They were all kinds: the rough ones whose crimes had been acts of violence or hate, or the pure pleasure of destruction; and the mild ones who could sometimes be the most dangerous of all. There was a meek soft-bodied man, pale and limpid, who had stabbed his wife's lover; there was bluff and hearty O'Boyle, who had led a gang of railroad hands on a mad pillage of a railhead tent-town; there was soft-spoken Jim Baragray, who looked upon life with a twisted smile and yet, underneath his shell of cynicism, owned a warm heart and a real capacity for friendship.

O'Boyle, the big railroad trackman, stood in the midst of a knot of men, hurrahing them with tales of his army days, and breaking off dourly to comment, "Ah, I am dry clear to the linin' of me shoes." O'Boyle was leathery and only half-tamed, scarred by countless brawls. His talk was a hungry

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sort of talk and it reminded Jason Hazard of things he had almost forgotten; it made him realize how much had shriveled within him.

The group around O'Boyle broke up, and O'Boyle retreated into a dark corner of the room and hunkered down like a wolf at bay, glaring with dark suspicion around the room. O'Boyle filled his pipe and scratched a match alight on the coarse fabric of his prison uniform trousers. He held the match steadily to the pipe's bowl; his broad Irish face turned amber in the glow and his eyes shone yellow—and all the light in them was not reflection from the match. There was a scheme working around in O'Boyle's primitively clever brain. Hazard watched him idly. The match burnt O'Boyle's fingers, and he dropped it and watched it burn out on the dirt floor. The pock-marked prisoner, Luther, came over and squatted beside O'Boyle and said, "Free room and board, but I like it better outside."

"Exactly," said O'Boyle, and dropped into pondering silence. After a long and dark time he said, "Me boy, I'll be going out of here not long from now." His eyes lifted to meet Jason Hazard's. Hazard met his glance evenly. Luther looked at O'Boyle and said, "You will kill yourself for trying that."

O'Boyle shook his head. "The chances are with me."

Luther said, "Is it worth it?"

"It is to me. There is no future in staying here the rest of me days."

Luther put his mind on that thought; he finally said, "I will go out with you. Have we got a plan?"

Hazard turned away from them and closed his eyes. When he felt the weight of O'Boyle's presence looming over him, he spoke without opening his lids: "You'll have to go it without me, O'Boyle."

"All right. Just keep your mouth shut."

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Hazard opened his eyes and looked up at O'Boyle, and O'Boyle grinned. "I guess them was unnecessary words, to you."

"All right," Hazard said, and closed his eyes again.

Jim Baragrady sat down on the cot beside Hazard's and began to unlace his boots. Baragrady said, "They'll both get themselves killed. Damn fools."

At daybreak, guards herded the prisoners onto the hay meadow to harvest the tall grass with curve-bladed scythes. Hazard saw Baragrady straining with a small man's determination. O'Boyle hefted his blade and laughed, and bit into the hardy grass with great swipes of his scythe. Hazard tooled a full wagon of hay down to the barns and unloaded with a pitchfork; he came back to the field and dropped off the wagon, and saw a husky guard drift by with a carbine on his shoulder.

As the guard passed O'Boyle, the Irishman leaped astraddle the man's back and swung a powerful blow at the back of the guard's neck. The guard collapsed silently. No one spoke. O'Boyle said calmly, "Come on now, Luther," and took the guard's carbine and set off across the meadow afoot. Luther turned his frightened face toward the felled guard, and took off after O'Boyle, crying, "Let's get out of here!"

The sun was wicked and hot. A guard appeared at the far corner of the field and flung a shot at the fleeing men. O'Boyle abruptly dropped to one knee and fired an unhurried bullet into the guard's chest. The guard dropped like a plumb stone. O'Boyle was up and running again, but now two guards had reached the end of the meadow with raised shotguns.

When the guards started shooting, Luther flung his arms high in the air. "Don't shoot—for God's sake, don't shoot!" But O'Boyle dropped flat in the grass. Hazard, standing by

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the wagon with an impassive face, saw the grass ripple where O'Boyle was creeping forward.

The two guards reloaded their shotguns and advanced with care. Suddenly O'Boyle loomed up straight before them and began pumping lead out of the Winchester. One guard went down with a slug in his leg. The other emptied both barrels of his shotgun into O'Boyle.

A look of profound amazement flashed over O'Boyle. He felt at his chest with groping fingers. Flat-footed, he stood squared off for a long time before he slowly toppled.

Hazard turned away and picked up his scythe, and went back to work with steady sweeps. Baragrays said, "Damn fool Irishman," but there was a break in Baragrays's voice when he said it and his head was bowed low so that no one could see his face. Hazard swung the scythe with angry strength, his face taut and grim against the iniquities of life.

In the evening he lay on his cot unable to sleep and heard Baragrays's soft sober voice: "O'Boyle's voice is a voice that I miss. It was that way with him. Jesus. I used to think I wasn't made for work, but this little holiday's educated me. I guess when I get out of here I'll try to find some kind of honest job. I don't want to go the route O'Boyle took."

Hazard could not see Baragrays's face in the dark. The little man said, "When I was in college I used to think the world was an orderly place where things made sense. Well, either you live and learn or you don't learn anything and wind up like O'Boyle. Kind of a hard choice, either way."

After a dark interval Baragrays said, "You're like a clam, Jason. Hell, didn't you like O'Boyle?"

"I liked him," Hazard said.

"I'm getting out of here in ten days. Know some place I might be able to find work?"

Hazard said, "Look up Flynn McGrath at the Silverbell

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mine in Stinking Springs. Use my name. He'll put you on the payroll."

"Sure—I'll do that. Thanks, Jason."

Hazard said, "Can you handle a gun?"

"Too well. That's what got me into this trouble."

"All right," Hazard said, and rolled over to go to sleep.

McGrath was waiting for him in the warden's office. His face was wide with pleasure as he pumped Hazard's hand eagerly. "Ye don't look too much the worse for it, I must tell ye."

The warden said, "Your pardon," and handed forward a folded paper. "If you'll allow me, I'll say I'm glad it came through. And thanks."

"Thanks?" Hazard inquired.

"Sometimes when a man gets railroaded it makes him want to take it out on me and the guards. Thanks for keeping out of trouble. I wish your friend O'Boyle had had as much sense."

Hazard said, "You can't tame a man like O'Boyle, I'm afraid."

"Good luck."

Outside, climbing onto the horse McGrath had brought for him, Hazard smelt the cool crisp winter air and allowed himself the luxury of one brief smile. McGrath caught sight of it and said immediately, "I'm relieved to see you're able to do that, Jason."

"Did you bring my gun with you?"

With a blank face, McGrath reached into his own saddlebag and brought out Hazard's revolver, wrapped in holster and gunbelt. Hazard buckled it on and inspected the six-gun's charges. "Any sign of Olsen or his boys on the way down here?"

"No. They've plenty of time—they know you'll be after

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coming to them. But look now, Jason, I've got to tell you how I feel, the straight of it—you had a lot of luck getting away with your life, and next time you may not be lucky again. Vic Olsen is a smart man and a tough man, and he's been surrounding himself with toughs. He's too big to knock down, Jason. Do what's important—think about your own skin. There's plenty of good green earth that ain't after being tainted by the hand of Vic Olsen and his kind."

Hazard said softly, "You're a good man, Flynn, and I thank you for the advice."

"But you ain't going to take it."

"No. It came to me, in there—Olsen's got to be stopped."

"It ain't you has to be stoppin' him!"

Hazard shook his head. "If any man's got a vested interest in stopping him, I'm that man."

McGrath nodded resignedly. "Hell, Jason, was I in your position I'd do the same. No man that casts his shadow could turn and run away from what they've done to you. And there's one thing you can be countin' on. I'll stand with you, all the way on."

Hazard nodded and turned his horse down the road. McGrath caught up, grumbling: "Coldest winter in five years. Ye'll be wanting a coat—I brought a spare mackinaw. Here. Jason, it pains me soul to tell you this, but somebody must—Evelyn Miles married herself to Vic Olsen in a bloody brash heathen ceremony."

Hazard made no answer; the news did not particularly surprise him but he felt a sense of irrevocable finality, and he pitied Evelyn. McGrath said, "Old Zach's been going around like a half-dead man. Olsen moved himself and his crowd of gunnies over to Pitchfork and he's running the hill like a king. He's got his own place and Pitchfork, and you'll be remembering Vicky Lawrence sold her mine to him when her brother was foul killed. You might say the gentleman's pretty

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much king of the mountain. Mind you, I can't prove nothing, but I been fighting off a crew of roughnecks slinking through the dark trying to sabotage our tunnels. That friend of yours, Baragray, came along a few months ago and I gave him the fine job of bodyguarding the mine, which I must tell ye he's taken to like a man after me own heart. Last week he caught a bloody spalpeen trying to set off a powder charge in the number three shaft. It was unfortunate, but the spalpeen elected to try his hand at shooting the good Mister Baragray, and I regret to inform you that Mister Baragray was forced to be shootin' the spalpeen dead. What's unfortunate about it is that, dead men being able to tell no tales, we wasn't after getting the name of his employer from the ruddy spalpeen. I figure, though, it's fair safe to lay it at Vic Olsen's doorstep. And then there's—"

"Flynn," said Hazard.

"What?"

"Don't you ever run out of wind?" •

"Well, I—that is, I—" McGrath spluttered and abruptly slammed his mouth shut, flushing dark at his cheeks. Ten minutes later he opened his mouth, said, "It's colder than the back of a witch's lap," and subsided once more.

Hazard dismounted stiffly in a light flurry of drifting snow. He dropped the reins and stepped up onto the porch of the little house; here, from the edge of town, he could see the lights of saloons and houses faintly through the light snow-fall. He knocked softly at the door. A lamp threw its beam out the front window, across the porch.

Vicky Lawrence opened the door, small and dark and pretty in a shawl. Her eyes became round and she said, "How did you find me?"

"Flynn McGrath."

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"He's as loyal as a granite rock. I told him to tell you I'd left Stinking Springs."

He said softly, "Do I stand here or come inside?"

Her smile was sudden and bright; she stood back and let him enter. "I'm glad they let you go."

He closed the door and took off his hat and studied her soberly. He said, "I had time to figure things out. You hired Logan to defend me—and you tracked down that missing witness."

"But—"

"Don't deny it, Vicky."

She made a small gesture of helplessness. "All right. I didn't want you to know—I know how you hate being beholden to anyone. I didn't want you to come back here just because you felt you owed something to me or my brother."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because—" Her lips were moist and her eyes shone. She turned away and walked across the room, and finally said, "Because I had to prove to you that I didn't blame you for Joe's death."

"I don't believe that."

"Then don't believe it," she said angrily. Then she shook her head: "Oh, forget it. Sit down—you're cold and tired. Let me get you something to eat."

"I had supper at Silverbell."

"Some coffee, then."

"All right," he said, and sat down. He looked around the room. It had once belonged to a miner who had made his stake and moved on. The furniture was sparse and hand-made; the walls were coarse adobe and the ceiling was laid over rough-hewn beams. It was simple and direct. It seemed to suit the girl. Hazard shrugged out of his coat and warmed his hands around the cup of coffee she brought him. Vicky took a chair facing him across the table, and he was deeply

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aware, of the stillness, the quiet fortitude, reflected in her face. He opened his mouth but could not get the words he wanted, could not find the meaning. Finally he said, "I'm not much of a talker."

"I know."

"How do you say thanks and make it sound like it means something?"

"You don't have to say anything, Jason." But he noticed one thing—there had been a drawn expression around her lips, and now it dissolved. She said, "You didn't have to come back. They'll make trouble for you."

He said deliberately, "If he doesn't do certain things sometimes a man can't face himself."

She nodded. There was a curtain of reserve across her eyes. Hazard drank the coffee scalding hot, and frowned. "That's not the way to get the taste," he said. He poured a second cup and set it down to cool and sat with evident long-traveled weariness, his chin lowered almost to his chest.

Vicky came around the table and kneaded his shoulders. She stood behind him and he felt her warmth. Fire glowed in the potbellied stove's isinglass window. Vicky moved around beside him, the curve of her breast near his face; she bent down and kissed him, lightly, and then stepped away. "I'm sorry, Jason. An accident, I guess."

"That's why you sold the mine and wore yourself out to get me pardoned."

"Yes," she said. "In my book a woman has to do that for the man she loves."

He was a long time answering. He braced himself forward on the table and stared down into the dark swirling coffee. "Vicky, your love is a very precious thing. You'd be smart not to waste it on me."

"You've still got Evelyn in your blood, haven't you?"

"No," he said, and looked up. "I never did."

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For a moment it seemed to puzzle her; and then she laughed quietly. "And all the time she had us all fooled with her lies."

"She had herself fooled," he answered soberly. "You and I are a lot alike, Vicky—we don't get over things easily. When I met Evelyn, my wife had just left me. That was the only thing on my mind then—but Evelyn didn't know it."

"She must have been too occupied with herself to see it."

"Maybe," he said. "But what I said before is still true. You're the kind of woman who can only love one man. Don't let it be me—you'll only come to grief. I may be dead before this is over."

"I guess I have to take that chance," she whispered. Her eyes lay directly against him, wholly without guile.

What happened to him then was something that might have been put down to the long months in prison, the constant tension and hardship, the bleak and unhappy turn his life had taken; but he knew it was more than that when he got out of the chair and took two longlegged paces to take her in his arms and bend his head down for her kiss.

When he lifted his head she searched his face with an odd intensity. Hazard's solemn features lost their weariness and with a finger he brushed back a stray lock of her hair. A piece of a smile shaped his mouth and he suddenly knew that the glisten of her eyes was more beautiful and more honest than anything he had seen before; her love made the women of his past seem unformed and vacuous in memory. She pressed herself to him, becoming smaller and heavier in his arms, and with her cheek against his chest she said, "I didn't know how long I could stand by myself, Jason. This is what I needed—knowing I can borrow your strength now. The nights keep getting longer and sometimes I wake up thinking you'll never come—but that's over."

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He tipped her head up with his hand and kissed her, and felt her rock gently in his arms.

IX

IT WAS MIDNIGHT; the snow had quit, the air was sharp with chill and crystal clear, and Hazard curled past the shack into the front yard of Zachary Miles' house and dropped off his horse there. A man's high, flat silhouette retreated around the far corner of the big house; and two others rose in unison from porch chairs.

Vic Olsen was there, but it was Lew Canreen's voice that laid its toneless challenge across the night: "Who's that?"

The front door stood open, its inner light casting a fresh butter-colored gleam through. When Hazard climbed to the porch he had to cross that light and Canreen said from the shadow, "Holy Judas. You're just too damn much to believe, Hazard."

A cold wind roved the blackened yard, throwing up the chill scent of manure and the sweat of work—and a vague aura of trouble. Hazard moved into the darkness and searched the yard, remembering that man who had retreated around the corner. But now a dark knot of men emerged from the shadows and stood around in the yard, curious and silently waiting.

Vic Olsen had not yet spoken. His breathing came out of him in hard sighs, and Lew Canreen was an immense, still shape in the darkness. A thin whisper of death raised the hairs on the back of Hazard's neck but he walked forward boldly and stepped through the door into the house. He said, "Vic, come in here." He crossed the low-roofed room and swung to face the open door. The room was as it had been the last time he had seen it; it reflected not Olsen's personality, but the memory of Zach Miles'.

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Olsen walked in and then Canreen followed him, spurs rattling coldly, and shut the door, resting his huge body against it. Canreen's eyelids were dropped into an angular squint, half hiding his thoughts; but his taciturn attention was alive.

There was no way to guess Olsen's feelings. They were hidden behind the polished surfaces of his glasses. Olsen took on an air of saturnine indifference, and said nothing.

Hazard said, "Where's Zach Miles?"

Canreen answered with distinct unfriendliness. "Asleep."

"And your wife, Vic?"

"Her, too," said Canreen.

Hazard was watching Olsen all the while; he saw an ironic, somberly amused twist move Olsen's lips. Hazard murmured, "You have come up in the world, Vic."

A rider ran forward into the yard, his horse's fast-pounding hoofs telegraphing along the hard earth. One of the men outside ran along the porch and stopped, and the rider trotted into the yard and called out: "Olsen here?"

Hazard heard that voice, and watched Olsen closely. The man's eyes were almost closed behind his glasses; he put his hands in his pockets and stood with his legs braced apart.

Someone spoke softly out there. Olsen turned; his eyes opened slightly wider, calculatingly watching Hazard's expression. The arrival in the yard was being warned of Hazard's presence, but Hazard raised his voice and called: "Come on in, Speed," and waited woodenly.

Boots banged on the porch; the opening door pushed Lew Canreen aside and Bill Speed came into the room. He said quickly, "What's this—what's this?"

Olsen said mildly, "I guess you came to tell us that Jason Hazard's come back to the valley."

"Yeah," said Speed. "But how—"

"Shut up," Olsen said contemptuously.

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Hazard said, "Shut the door, Canreen."

"In a pig's eye. You picked the wrong house to give orders in; jailbird. You're draggin' your picket—and I figure you don't aim to live to be old or wise."

"Shut the door," Hazard said again. His glance rode hard against Canreen and presently Canreen, his eyes shifting away, reached out with his bootheel and kicked the door closed.

Olsen said, "All right. You're here. You've proved how brave you are. So now what have you got?"

There was a flicker in Canreen's eyes and it made Hazard turn slightly more squarely toward Canreen. "Go ahead, Lew," Hazard murmured. Canreen's round face went blank and his eyes displayed uneasiness, rolling from Olsen to Bill Speed, and then back to Hazard.

Olsen said, "Come on, Jason. You didn't come here just to see whether you could stare down Lew Canreen."

Bill Speed smirked mirthlessly. "Maybe he wanted to save us the trouble of runnin' him down."

"Maybe," Olsen repeated gravely; and suddenly he smiled. That smile, cold and deliberate, reached out to Speed and Canreen with pregnant meaning. It loosened Canreen's heavy lips and fashioned them into an answering grin of malice; it prompted Bill Speed to stir, to move away from Canreen.

"Uh-uh," Hazard said quietly. "Stay put, all of you, until I've had my say."

"Then get on with it," Olsen said. The haste with which he spoke was the first sign that the mystery of Hazard's arrival was scratching his nerves.

Hazard's jaw crept forward to make a grim line. His voice was cool. "Vic, I had time to think while I was away. You came into this valley with a grudge against me. You'd decided to rip me apart by taking away my possessions and then my freedom, and maybe eventually my life. All right—

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that was you and me, and you won a couple of rounds. But it's gone beyond that. You killed Joe Lawrence, you broke Zach Miles by blackmailing him, and you ruined Evelyn's life for her by cutting her off from any chance she might have had to be happy. You got Vicky's mine away from her when you knew she wasn't thinking straight, and you've done your best to ruin McGrath. You've imported a gang of tin-horns and turned a decent town into a sinkhole. All right. You had your turn, Vic, and you've done what you wanted to do. Now it's my turn."

Olsen's lips peeled back and he said very softly, "Your turn to do what?"

"We played by my rules, up to this point. Now we'll play by yours."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I intend to stop you cold, Vic. I intend to separate you from everything you've stolen. I intend to get you out from behind your hired gunnies where you'll have to fight me alone."

Olsen chuckled. "You can have fun trying, Jason."

"It was your idea to let me sweat a while before you had me killed. But I'm throwing that back in your face, Vic. I'm going to make you fight—because it will be up to you to fight or lose everything you've got. You'll fight, because you're greedy. And when you do, I'll be the one calling the rules—not you. It's your turn to sweat, Vic. That's what I came to tell you."

"Interesting, I'm sure."

"You've got one choice. You can try at me right now. Quick, cut-and-dried. Three of you and one of me. But I can promise you this much—the first bullet is yours, Vic, no matter which one of you starts to draw."

Hazard stopped talking. His words hung in the air. With rashness stirring his countenance, Bill Speed cast a quick

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look at Olsen. Olsen stood silent, weighing Hazard's words. Hazard let his talk creep into the scene. "All right, Speed. Go ahead, if you want."

Olsen jerked his head slightly. "Wait." He cast a sharp glance at Bill Speed and shook his head. "Don't draw on him, either of you."

Speed put on a pained look. "For Pete's sake, Vic, we can take him easy."

"That's easy for you to say," Olsen told him. "But there's a better way."

Speed was about to speak again when Canreen said, "Shut up, Bill. Vic's been right before."

"You're damned right I have," Olsen said viciously, and swung his head toward Hazard. "You've made your speech, Jason. Now I'll make mine. You were right about one thing—I intend to make you sweat. And this is how it's going to be. You'll ride out of here tonight the way you came. Nobody will molest you. You'll have twelve hours to think things over. If you're smart you'll use those twelve hours to give yourself a good long head start on me, because at noon tomorrow I'm going to saddle up every man on my crew and go after you. We'll hunt you down like a mad dog, and when we catch you we'll let you think about dying a while before we kill you."

Hazard answered, "It sounds good, Vic, but don't bank on things turning out the way you want them to. Now drop your gunbelt and come over here. I'm going to use you as a safe-conduct hostage to get me out of here."

Olsen smiled with his mouth. "Sure," he said. And laughed.

When Hazard was gone, Olsen stood in the doorway, his expression touched with both admiration and hatred. He spoke half to himself: "I do not underestimate my enemies,

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but it was a mistake for him to come here." He spoke in a voice remote, thin, and as dry as summer dust.

Bill Speed was petulant: "We had him. You let him go. What for?"

"I want him to suffer, thinking about it. Go on, both of you—get some sleep. You'll be in the saddle from noon on."

He watched them walk away toward the crew quarters, and afterward he turned inside the parlor and shut the door. That was when Evelyn came in from the back. There were hollow circles about her eyes. She looked pale and gaunt, tired and cranky. "What makes you so happy?"

Olsen smiled. "Why, you do, my dear." He walked across the room and reached out for her.

She pushed away from him with distaste. "Stop it, Vic. I heard every word you said in here."

His mouth retained the smile but his eyes were cold. "All right. I'd hoped we could come to a bargain, you and I. After all, you are my wife."

She slapped words at him. "You don't want a wife, Vic. You never wanted love. You just want some woman to hold onto at night to distract you and keep you from being alone. You didn't marry me—you married this house and my father's money. I know I went into this with you knowing it was no good, but I had a few hopes. But when we're alone you never relax with me—you're never human at all."

"What do you want—a weak sister to cry on your shoulder? Is that what you want, somebody to mother?"

She said in a small voice, "Every woman wants to mother a man now and then."

He answered distantly, "I never had what you could really call a mother. I can get along fine without one now. Damn it, Evelyn, you're a simple, petty woman. The only thing you've got is beauty, and that won't last. You lost the

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only man you ever really wanted because you got impatient."

Her eyes flashed. "You bastard, Vic."

She wheeled out of the room then, went into her bedroom and locked the door. The room was dark and she did not light the lamp. She went to the window and looked out. A light frosting of fresh-fallen snow crusted the ground, pale in the night. She stood altogether still, her teeth locked together, hearing her husband tramp around the parlor. When she opened the window the cold wind came in and swept around her. She stood in the draft with her mind on Jason Hazard, because she could not help thinking of him. She knew she had never loved him and yet her mind would not let the remembrance of him rest. She hated Vic Olsen; she hated the life she had elected.

Finally, not closing the window, she went to the door and unlocked it and stepped across the hall. She rapped gently on her father's door, and when there was no reply she opened it quietly. She could see the mound of his body under the blankets of the big, four-posted cherrywood bed he had shipped all the way out here from New England. The sight of her father sleeping somehow brought a bit of calm into the swirl of her emotions; she crossed the room and sat down on the edge of the bed and reached for his hand.

His flesh was cold. With sudden terror she leaned over and cried his name. He did not answer. She felt his pulse; there was none. Zachary Miles was dead in his sleep. Screaming, Evelyn threw herself to her feet and ran through the house.

X

FROM THE BRUSH where he lay concealed on the hilltop, Hazard saw the black hearse draw out of the Pitchfork yard and rumble at a slow, dignified pace toward town. He had

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seen them carry Zachary Miles out and lay him in the hearse; now he watched the hearse go down the road, driven by an old man and accompanied by only one rider: Evelyn. The rest of them all stayed in the yard, milling around, their horses saddled and their guns belted. It took no other evidence to prove Vic Olsen's inhuman callousness.

Hazard looked at his watch: noon. And at that moment Olsen held up his arm and rose into the saddle. It was three hundred yards, but Hazard heard the voice clearly:

"All right. He's had his time. Let's find Hazard."

Hazard did not wait for the rest of them to get mounted. He took aim with the Sharps rifle, thankful for its heavy long-range accuracy; and felt the solid hard slam of the rifle against his shoulder as he fired.

He saw dirt spout where his bullet struck, just under Olsen's horse. The shot spooked the horse and it reared, almost throwing Olsen out of the saddle; Olsen's fat hands clutched the saddle horn in sudden panic. Hazard plugged a cartridge into the rifle breech and fired again into the yard.

Pandemonium broke loose. Men shouted and began to run, all of them leaving their horses in the yard and running afoot for the shelter of the house and bunkhouses. Coolly, Hazard put a third bullet into the ground where Olsen's horse could see it. The horse rolled its eyes and wheeled away, its neck arching. Its hoofs scrambled for balance and Olsen spilled out of the saddle, falling heavily to the ground. Then, with wicked intensity, Hazard ripped up the ground all around Olsen with his bullets.

Cringing, Olsen dashed for the house, half-crawling and half-running. Hazard's bullets sprayed dirt on his heels. The man made a dive for the porch and rolled inside the house. The door slammed; and then the yard was suddenly empty, except for the riderless horses that milled around in fright.

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Someone smashed out a window in the house and Hazard saw the fragmentary glitter of reflected light racing along a gun barrel. He crouched behind a stunted live-oak and began to spray the house windows, working from left to right, putting a bullet through each window.

The distance was well in range. The air was cool; there was no wind and the sun was directly overhead, not in his eyes. Little thin patches of snow still lay in spots of shade. The rest of it had melted away, wherever the sun had touched it.

One man, bolder than the others, dashed out of the bunk-house and snatched up the reins of a horse. The man vaulted into the saddle and rammed forward on the hillside brandishing a rifle. The rider was riding a circuitous tangential course that would take him up the hill and around behind Hazard. Hazard took aim and fired quickly—too quickly; he had meant to cripple the horse, but his bullet took the rider in the knee. The horseman threw up his arms and cried out, and pitched from the saddle. Hazard returned his attention to the yard and punched a new series of shots into the windows. Someone cried out; he could not tell whether he had hit anyone.

All along the windows and building corners, guns opened up to answer his fire. Hazard flattened himself and quit shooting until the heaviest volley ended. Then he picked up a fist-sized rock and tossed it high in the air.

On that signal, Flynn McGrath's rifle opened up, fifty yards to Hazard's right along the slope. McGrath's Winchester sprayed the yard from its new angle. The concentration of fire from the buildings shifted toward McGrath, who was well protected by a circle of boulders; and with the anger of hornet-buzzing slugs drawn off him, Hazard put his head up and began once again to shoot.

The wounded rider was crawling back down toward the

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yard. Hazard let him go. McGrath's rifle was still talking in harsh signals on the slope not too far away. Hazard looked at his watch—twelve-ten. Time was up. He backed out of the brush and crawled, belly-flat, down the back of the hill until he could stand up. McGrath's rifle fired one shot, then another, and kept firing now and then, just enough to keep them pinned down.

Down in the gully, Hazard's horse looked up from its picket. He ran down the hill, bouncing the rifle in the circle of his fist, untied the horse rapidly, swept into the saddle and broke the horse into an immediate gallop, running up the gully parallel to the back of the hill. When he passed beneath McGrath's position he looked up and waved, and saw McGrath's answering signal.

The sandy wash angled up at a steep pitch; near its crest he veered his horse out of the bottom and plunged galloping over the hilltop, concealed from sight of the house by a hump of rocky land. A long brush-studded slope fanned out in front of him and he racked down across it at full tilt.

The hard cold wind stung his face. He made a sharp turn at the foot of the rise and ran up the back of the hill behind the house. Here, near the top, he stopped and dismounted. He carried his rifle up to the hilltop and bellied down with a clear view of the back door of the house below.

McGrath was still peppering the house from the opposite hilltop. Hazard could see the orange muzzle flashes of McGrath's Winchester. There was a good deal of anxious calling back-and-forth in the compound of buildings; the wounded man was crawling into the protected side door of the bunk-house. Hazard saw someone throw the door open and bend down to help the man inside.

McGrath's rifle went silent for an interval, after which it again opened up from a new position—the position Hazard had used. It might fool Olsen's crew into believing both men

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were still on the hill, although if they stopped to consider it, there was a marked difference in the report of a Winchester and that of a Sharps. But it was a gamble worth taking. Hazard settled down to wait. He did not fire.

It was not long before he was rewarded. The back door of the house swung open and a thin man stepped out, rubbing his palms on his trousers. That was Bill Speed, gaunt and crouched. Speed stood in the doorway looking both ways for a long stretch of time before he stepped down into the back yard and walked boldly across ten feet of open ground to make a grab for the trailing reins of a horse that had drifted around behind the house. The horse was spooked by all the noise, and Speed lost the reins. The horse darted away. Another man came out of the house and there was a brief conversation between the two, whereupon the second man went back inside. Speed stood impatiently shifting from foot to foot, obviously waiting. McGrath kept shooting at sporadic intervals, now from his first position and now from his second. The answering hail of gunfire from the house was heavy and angry, but McGrath was well protected by rocks and stunt trees.

Someone yelled in the house and the shooting quit; a man called across to the bunkhouse and then the shooting started up again, but presently one man came out of the bunkhouse and caught up a horse there, and led it around behind the main house, keeping himself in the shelter of the buildings to avoid exposure to McGrath's fire. Bill Speed took the horse from the man and mounted up, drawing a rifle from the saddle scabbard and checking its load. Then, lying low over the withers, Speed guided the horse back into the brush.

It was what Hazard had hoped for; it was what he would have done, in Olsen's place: send a man out to try and circle the hilltop rifle and take it from behind.

The only path of concealment for Bill Speed would take

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him right past Hazard's position, and that was what Hazard was counting on. He rolled back into a fissure between two boulders and wedged himself there, rifle up; shortly thereafter, he heard the advancing hoofbeat of Speed's horse, rising over the din of gunfire from beyond the hill.

Speed broke into view, riding over the hill. Hazard stayed put in the shadows, waiting for Speed to come within talking distance. Rifles spoke in volleys and now and then a bullet sang and whistled, ricocheting. Speed came riding down the hill with a grim eager look of anticipation on his narrow face. Hazard was about to call out when he heard his own horse, not far below on the hill, snort and whicker. The sound alerted Speed and Speed's rifle was coming up when Hazard spun away from the rocks and braced his gun against Speed's thin silhouette.

"Freeze, Bill."

There was an instant's bright calculation in Speed's glance and for that broken moment of time, Hazard was half convinced Speed was going to try throwing down on him with the half-lifted rifle; but then Speed thought better of it and lowered the weapon, reining his horse in.

"Drop the rifle, now. Get down and walk over here."

Speed sneered. "Ain't no man alive tough enough to get away with this, Jason." But he let go of the rifle and stepped down.

"Now the belt guns. Both of them."

Speed unbuckled his belts and let the guns drop. His eyes bored hotly into Hazard's. Hazard motioned him back, and when Speed retreated, Hazard bent down, extracted one of Speed's sixguns from its holster, and aimed the gun skyward. He waited for a lull in the firing from the house, and then fired four evenly-spaced shots into the air—a signal to Flynn McGrath.

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Speed said, "All right. You got me—what do you 'do with me?"

"We stand here and wait a little while."

"I don't come back, Vic'll send somebody else up here."

"We'll be long gone by then. Sit tight," Hazard said.

"What the hell are you trying to prove?"

"You're my ticket out of here, Bill," Hazard said gently.

"And one thing more. I need a piece of information. Who killed Turk Ames?"

"You did."

Hazard showed him a thin smile. "You can do better than that, Bill—unless you want to be staked out to a tree with wet rawhide."

Speed shrugged. "Hell, it's your word against mine. Nobody'll believe I told you anyway. It was Canreen killed Turk."

"What for?"

"Turk was getting greedy. He seen we was blackmailing Zach Miles, and he figured to get in on it by trying to blackmail Vic Olsen. Handy for us you happened to come along just about that time."

"It sure was," Hazard said with quiet sarcasm.

Flynn McGrath came riding along. One side of his face was covered with blood, but McGrath was grinning. Hazard opened his mouth to speak but McGrath said, "It ain't nothing—just nicked me earlobe, that's all. I see we got us a prize pigeon."

The gunfire from the yard had lessened gradually; now, realizing they had no targets, the Pitchfork crew stopped shooting altogether. Bill Speed said, "Your time's about up, Jason. Too bad you didn't take Vic's offer. You had time to get a good head start on us."

Hazard said, "Get on your horse, Bill."

"What for?"

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McGrath tilted his rifle toward the gunman. "You ain't here to ask questions, bully boy."

Speed climbed up into his saddle and Hazard went down the hill to get his horse. When he rode up to join the other two, McGrath was balancing his rifle and eyeing Speed in a speculative way. McGrath said, "Bucko, I'd as soon shoot you as not, so don't be dependin' on me charitable instincts." McGrath looked fierce with his face half coated with blood.

Hazard lifted his rifle and held it up toward Speed's head. "Move slowly. Ride up to the top of the hill and stop there. We'll be right beside you."

Speed's jaw dropped. "You got to be fooling. You're going back up there where they can see you? Hell, man—I ain't about to—"

"Move," Hazard commanded, and jabbed the man in the ribs with the gun muzzle.

The three horsemen loomed up on the hilltop and stopped Speed between Hazard and McGrath. Below, men were cautiously moving out into the yard, their backs hunched as if awaiting sudden bullets. Hazard said, "All right, Flynn," and McGrath fired a shot into the air.

It froze the men in the yard; they stiffened and stood bolt still, like a lithographed picture; suddenly they bolted, running for the buildings again. McGrath bellowed in full throat:

"Hold it, down there!"

It stopped them in their tracks. Hazard picked out Olsen's square-bodied shape in the scatter of men; Olsen had no hat, and the sun glinted on his glasses when his head skewed around to seek out McGrath's voice. Hazard called out:

"Come up here, Vic."

"In a pig's eye!"

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"I've got your prize gunny here. If you start shooting, he'll get the first bullet. Understand me, Vic?"

Olsen made no answer. He swung around to face the hill squarely. He put his hands on his hips and threw his head back to stare up at them. Hazard called: "The rest of you men listen to me. We've crippled one of you and captured the best gun you had. It's going to go on that way until Vic Olsen decides to quit. But in the meantime we'll be cutting you men out, one at a time. Think about that, and think about whether your skin's worth the wages you're getting. Maybe you'll decide to let Olsen fight his own battles instead of hiding behind you men. I warn you of this—as long as you stay with Olsen, you're fair targets for my gun."

He spoke in a lower voice, to McGrath: "That should give them something to think about. Now let's get out of here. Come on, Bill."

Speed swore under his breath and began to turn his horse around. It was then that Olsen yelled out something that Hazard didn't catch; but on the heels of it, Olsen began shooting. Hazard saw Olsen's gun blasting; he heard Olsen commanding his men to open fire.

McGrath said, "Jesus—the crazy son of a bitch!"

"Come on," Hazard said. He fired a shot over the heads of the crowd and wheeled his horse.

Ahead of him, Bell Speed was almost over the top of the hill. But then Speed lurched in the saddle and cried out, almost losing his seat. Wheeling alongside, Hazard leaned low to grab Speed's reins, and slammed over the back of the hill leading Speed's horse. Speed veered and swayed but kept his seat. His head lolled and both of his hands were clutched white on the saddle horn.

McGrath caught up, still cursing. Hazard went down the hill at a dizzy pace and hauled up at the bottom; he jumped down and ran around to Speed. Speed slumped over the

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horse's withers and Hazard caught him just as Speed began to slip to the ground. Hazard let him down gently. A dark stain spread along the back of Speed's coat. He propped himself weakly on one elbow and spat a dark red stream of spittle to the ground, and coughed. His eyes began to glaze and he looked up bleakly. "Hazard—kill that bastard for me. Kill him. Jesus Christ." With that, Speed died.

McGrath looked down from his seat. "What'll we be doing with him?"

The shelf of Hazard's jaw made a crisp, determined line. "Leave him right here where they can find him like this—unarmed and backshot. It will make some of those gunnies think twice about staying on Olsen's payroll, if this is the way he rewards his hired help."

"All right," McGrath said. "But we'd best be pouring on the coal, brother Jason."

Hazard gathered the reins in quick smooth motions and rose into the saddle. "Head for the coach road—we'll lose our tracks in the traffic there."

"And then what?"

"Into town. I'm going to Zach Miles' funeral."

"Ain't that a little brash?"

"He'd have done it for me," Hazard said, and broke his horse into a dead run across the rocky hillside.

The Reverend Joshua Storm stood wrapped in black, intoning in his cavernous voice the last words over the body of Zachary Miles. Clouds blackened the sky, hanging heavy and unrolling over the desert. A cold wind swept up Boot Hill, roughing up the branches of a few planted trees and fluttering the veils of Evelyn, who stood by the preacher, and Vicky Lawrence, who stood near the foot of the grave staring across the opening at Jason Hazard.

Hazard stood hatless, the wind whipping through his

ash-colored hair; his ears were picking up the sounds of the preacher's voice but his mind had drifted—he was remembering Zachary Miles, the man. Miles had been a big man, powerful and virile in his prime, a man of fervent passions and great warmth. But the leeching of Olsen and the rest had sucked his blood and shriveled him; there had not been much of the true Zach Miles left. Hazard felt no grief for Miles' death; his grief—and his anger—were directed toward the hollow meaninglessness that Olsen had made of Miles' last months.

Across the grave, near Vicky Lawrence, stood deputy Oowney Nash. Nash had glared balefully at Hazard all the while since Hazard had come, but Nash would not do anything. McGrath stood, hat in hand, watching Nash unblinkingly, and Nash was no man to challenge Hazard without a crowd behind him. Nash was here for only one reason, and that was politics. He was here to impress Evelyn with his devotion.

Hazard turned his glance toward Evelyn—*Evelyn Olsen*, he thought. It took no great amount of perceptiveness to see that her father's death was not altogether what troubled her. It had taken more than a few hours to grind the dark gauntness into her features; and when, suddenly, she looked up at him, he saw even through the veil a shocking desperation in her hollowed eyes.

It was over, then; the preacher turned to Evelyn and, breaking out of her trancelike state, she bent down to toss a handful of dirt on the coffin. The gravediggers moved forward with their shovels, chewing tobacco. The preacher bowed to Evelyn and said something in a quiet tone, and went away down the hill clutching his Bible and holding his head bowed, walking downhill with an awkward-lop- ing stride. Oowney Nash turned his half angry, half scared glance on Hazard for a moment and then walked away

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with two storekeepers. Several businessmen and mine-owners clustered around Evelyn, talking in appropriately somber tones—"If there is anything we can do, my dear, anything at all . . ." Evelyn broke out of the group without explanation. She came around the grave, skirting the swinging spade of one of the gravediggers. Vicky stood where she had been all along, watching Hazard. McGrath went over to Vicky and took her arm and began to speak to her.

Evelyn touched Hazard on the sleeve, plucking it aimlessly like an old woman pulling at her knitting. Her eyes were focused on nothing. She said in a whisper, "Jason—I'm so sorry."

"All right, Evelyn."

"No—you've got to hear me." She threw her veil back and looked up into his face. "Jason, even if you can't forgive me, I've got to apologize. I can't apologize to my father—but I've got to make you understand, before it's too late. God knows I made a mess of things. I thought everyone had turned against me, and I wanted to use Vic to get my revenge for me." She looked away absently and said in a smaller voice, "Well, I got my revenge, didn't I?"

"Never mind, Evelyn," he murmured.

She went away from him talking abstractly, moving like a sleepwalker: "I wish I knew what to do . . ."

He watched her go down the hill, a solitary lonely figure in black. McGrath said something to Vicky Lawrence, clapped his hat on, and tramped downhill after Evelyn. When he had gone a little distance, McGrath turned and called toward Hazard, "I'll be gettin' the horses, Jason. We've spent too much time in one place."

"No," Hazard said. "Put the horses in the stable, Flynn. And find Owney Nash. I want to talk to him in his office."

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McGrath showed his surprise but nodded, saying nothing, and went on his way.

Shovels scraped against the flinty soil; the gravediggers worked with slow steady rhythm. Vicky's back was straight and her eyes met Hazard's squarely. He walked over to her and took her arm. She gave him an inquisitive glance and he said, "I'm taking you home." His eyes were half closed in wedges. "I want you out of the line of fire. Olsen will be along any time now, with Canreen and the crew—what's left of them."

"What do you mean? What happened to them?"

"We threw a scare into them," Hazard said. "Unless I miss my guess, half of those two-bit hairpins of Olsen's will be on their way to the Border by now. Olsen shot one of his own men in the back, and the rest of them won't like the idea of the same thing happening to them."

"And now Olsen's coming after you?"

A taut smile, utterly without warmth, fled across Hazard's cheeks. "An army couldn't stop him. He's been stung—and Vic never could stand that." The angles of his face changed abruptly and he said, "Vic's draped his shadow over us all for too long. He's like a rotten apple, turning the whole barrel sour." His face was a bitter mask. They reached the edge of town and turned back toward Vicky's cabin. At the door she turned her face up to him. "I won't tell you not to fight him, Jason. I know better than to argue with a man's sense of honor. And besides, I don't want to change you—I want you the way you are. But I don't want you dead. Maybe you'll think of that and it will keep you from taking more risks than you have to."

He bowed his head to her and said quietly, "I'll be thinking of it, Vicky."

Suddenly the poise and composure deserted her; she rushed against him and when he touched her averted cheek

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with his hand, it was wet with tears. She whispered, "I need you, Jason. I can't get enough of you. Please, please don't let them kill you."

XI

HAZARD WAS NEAR the deputy's office when he saw Jim Baragray trotting his horse down the street. Hazard turned to wait for the man. Baragray dismounted and hitched his horse. There was a sour grin on his face. "Olsen's on his way in. I spotted them coming down the hill, maybe - three miles out. Funny thing, though—he's only got five or six with him. I don't know what happened to the rest of his crew."

"Halfway to Mexico by now," said Hazard. Before he turned into the deputy's office he paused and said, "Jim, you didn't bargain for this kind of battle when you went to work for Flynn. You can ride out if you want."

Baragray shook his head. "Can't. You see, I had a reason for taking this job. When I found out who you were, and where you'd come from, I angled my way into this particular job by hinting around with you. Oh, hell—don't look surprised. I'm the type who's always sneaking in the back door. That's what got me started on the wrong trail. Listen, Jason—you may not want me on your team when I tell you this, but I guess it's about time for it to come out. I was the man who framed Zach Miles for murder, back in Colorado. I was the one who hid the murdered man's gun and made it look as if Zach Miles had shot an unarmed man. When they convicted me of robbery down here, I had plenty of time to think things over in prison. By the time they threw you into my cell, well, I'd made up my mind that I owed a turn to Zach Miles. I still do. So I'll stick, if you still want me."

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"Keep your gun hand limber," was Hazard's reply. If he was astonished by Baragray's confession, he did not reveal it. He swung into the deputy's office with Baragray at his elbow.

Baragray and Owney Nash were about the same size, but Baragray's face was more angular and did not at all give the impression that Nash's gave, of a billiard-ball with handles. Owney Nash was standing petulantly behind his desk, twisting the points of his mustache, glaring at Flynn McGrath. McGrath looked around at Hazard and said, "Owney heard his friend Olsen's on the way to town. Owney figured to take the day off and go pig-hunting. It took a little persuading to keep him here."

There was a swelling bruise on Owney Nash's cheek. His hand almost touched it, and then dropped away, his face flushed with color. He snapped, "What the hell do you want out of me?"

Hazard waved him silent and said, "Sit down, Owney."
"Huh?"

"I want you to think for a minute. Olsen's coming into town with five or six men. He thinks he's going to wipe me out. Maybe he will. Then again, maybe he'll get wiped out himself. You're the law, Owney—you'll have to figure out which side to back."

Owney Nash squared his shoulders and said bravely, "Hazard, by God if you think I aim to stand up for you, then you got another think coming."

Flynn McGrath murmured, "Fine—fine. Only remember one little thing, you sawed-off leprechaun—if Olsen's run out of here with his tail between his legs, then you're all through in this town."

Owney Nash was about to keep blustering. But something in the quiet run of McGrath's words made him hesitate. He looked from McGrath to Baragray to Hazard. Finally

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he said, in an altogether new tone, "You know something? I'm beginning to think you crazy gents have got a chance. I always figured this was Vic's town, but maybe things are changing, huh?"

"Maybe," Hazard said, and let the word hang in the air. He added conversationally, "By the way, it might interest you to know that it was Lew Canreen who killed Turk Ames."

"The hell it was!"

McGrath said, "Can you prove it, Jason?"

"No. Bill Speed admitted it to me, but I had no witnesses."

Jim Baragray said, "Not that it makes much difference anyway. Your friend Ames is just as dead, no matter who shot him. Jason, if we've got a plan we'd better be setting it up. Olsen and his gang will hit town in about ten minutes, by my reckoning." There was a fever glint in Baragray's eyes—a hunger for action. He was a man caught up in the contradictions of his own nature. Not inherently a fighting man, he seemed to find himself uncontrollably goaded by his own conscience into performing some act of violence that might atone for his guilt toward Zach Miles. Hazard felt a moment's sympathy for Baragray, but there was little he could do for the man. Baragray would have to work out his own problems in his own chosen way.

Hazard said, "No point in crowding the town. We'll wait for Vic out by the flats on the edge of town. His crew won't have any buildings to hide behind out there." He turned, "Well, then, Owney?"

The wind had gone out of the little deputy's sails. His shoulders had sagged; he met no one's eyes. He said, "I reckon everybody knows me anyhow. I'm just a white chip in a no-limit game. It don't make much difference what I say, regardless."

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"You're wrong," said Hazard. "You carry the badge, Owney, and that makes you just as tall as any man—if you're willing to stand up behind the badge. The law is only as good as the men who enforce it. And that's strictly up to you, now."

Owney Nash spread his hands helplessly. "There's three of you and maybe six of them. Canreen's fast as hell. And Olsen—he ain't no slouch with a gun, either. The odds don't look too good for you boys."

Hazard said gently, "We're not playing the odds."

Owney argued, "What happens if I back your play and then Olsen guns you down? Where does that leave me?"

McGrath grunted in disgust. Hazard said, "Nobody's asking you to fight with us, Owney. It will satisfy me if you'll just stay out of it until the smoke clears."

Owney gave him a strange look. "Yeah—well, that's what I was plannin' to do, all along." He turned his eyes to McGrath, as if begging. "But damn it, you got me all confused. Am I doing what's right?"

McGrath said cuttingly, "That never seemed to bother you much before, Owney, now did it?"

Owney turned away and put his back to them. "I wish I knowed what to do," he muttered.

"Time's up," Hazard said. "Let's go." He walked out of the office into the street. It occurred to him that a glimmer of honor had flashed for a moment before Owney Nash's vision, but Owney had spent altogether too long training himself how to be a parasite; it was no good expecting a miraculous, instant reform. But for a moment it made Hazard regret the waste. Owney Nash was not all bad. There might have been a time when his dignity could have been salvaged.

They left Owney standing in his office with his shoulders hunched defensively and his back to the street. McGrath and Baragray flanked Hazard; walking past his tethered

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horse, Baragray reached into the saddle-boot and pulled out a shotgun, which he drooped over the bend of his thin arm. Black clouds marched ponderously across the sky. McGrath said, "I'm thinking it'll be snowing before the day's out." They walked three-abreast along the quiet street, facing into a blast of cold wind that cut up from the dry river.

At loose ends with herself, Evelyn stood just within the door of Stinking Springs' Hotel, dreading the thought of riding back to Pitchfork. She saw Hazard walk past the hotel with his two friends; she saw the shotgun across Baragray's arm and from that and the grim set of their expressions she caught an inkling of what they were walking toward. She turned quickly and walked straight through the lobby and past the staircase. At the back, past the kitchen door, a door let her out into a weed-littered yard; and from here it was only a few hundred feet back through the cactus and brush to the cabin Vicky Lawrence had been using since her brother's death.

Determination steadied Evelyn's stride. She hurried to the cabin and rapped sharply at the door.

Vicky came to the door; her eyebrows arched. Evelyn said quickly, "I've got to talk to you."

Wordlessly, Vicky nodded and stepped back to let her enter. Evelyn walked in and looked around absently. Vicky said, "I suppose it's not quite up to the standard you're used to."

Evelyn said quietly, "I didn't come here to insult you."
"I'm sorry. We're all edgy, I guess."

Evelyn nodded. "Jason and Flynn McGrath and another man are walking out toward the flats. I think they must be expecting my husband. This morning when I left the mine, Vic was organizing his crew of gunmen to run Jason down.

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I wanted to tell Vic that if he did anything at all to Jason, I'd see him pay for it. I wanted to tell him—but I didn't."

"Why?" Vicky said bluntly.

"Because I was scared. I still am. You don't know my husband. He owns the air I breathe. You don't believe me? I'll tell you something—he can shut off my air any time he likes. He knows it and it amuses him. If I threatened him he would only laugh at me."

Vicky nodded sympathetically. "But I still don't understand why you've come here."

Evelyn said, "I've done a lot of harm, Vicky. I've been rotten to Jason. I'd like to make it up to him if I could, without making it seem that I was trying to get him back—because God knows I don't deserve anyone as good as he is. And for that matter I don't really know what I want. I guess I never have. But I've made up my mind to one thing. I can't live under my husband's roof one more day—every minute I spend as his wife, I'm as much as saying that I approve of his terrible actions. I just can't do it any more. I'm leaving town right now, as soon as I can saddle my horse. There wasn't anyone else I could turn to that I felt I could trust, but I need to ask you a favor. Can you pack my clothes and have them shipped to me, without letting Vic know where you're sending them? I'll go to San Francisco, I think—I've an aunt there, she'll take me in for a while. Just send the clothes to me in care of the Wells Fargo office in San Francisco. Will you do it for me?"

"All right," Vicky said.

"Thank you," Evelyn said humbly. She turned to the door and then paused. "Take good care of Jason. I know you will, but I had to say it."

Evelyn stepped out of the cabin and walked toward town. When she had gone fifty feet she was arrested by Vicky's voice. Evelyn looked back and saw the dark-haired girl

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outlined in the cabin doorway. Vicky said, "I'll take care of him. I hope you find your way, Evelyn. Good luck to you."

Evelyn inclined her head and went on, turning up the back of the row of buildings toward the livery corral. She felt the light touch of a single snowflake against her cheek. She was almost to the stable when she heard the muffled drum of hoofbeats, distantly thundering forward from the hills.

XII

THEY STOOD AT the head of the street, the three men, watching the light snow flaking down, waiting for a first glimpse of the hard-pounding crowd of riders advancing down the coach road. They could hear the hoofbeat, an angry sound in the almost unnaturally still afternoon. Flynn McGrath said, "They're after killing those horses. Friend Olsen must be as mad as a bee-stung mule. By the way, Jason, I'll be taking this opportunity to say God rest us all and I hope ye've made your will."

"I've got nothing to leave behind."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong. Ye'll be remembering when you sold me your share of the mine? Aye. Well, being in cahoots with the honorable Mister Green, Esquire, banker extraordinary, why I just accidentally happened to drop that bill of sale into the fire. A regrettable accident, ye'll no doubt agree. But that bein' as it may, you are still owner of half of the Silverbell mine."

Hazard regarded him blankly. After a moment Jim Baragray said, "Heads up—they're coming around the hill."

Hazard spoke to McGrath before he turned. "If I draw a bust hand, Flynn, give my share of the mine to Vicky."

"Done."

"Spread out," Hazard said. His voice and his eyes had

gone, cold. To free his arms he shrugged out of his coat and hung it on a brittle mesquite branch. Before him, out away from town, the dry river wound its sandy way across the flats. The skeletons of cottonwoods, dead since the drought began, gave the landscape a ghostly air. The flats sprouted a litter of stunted brush clumps—creosote and staghorn cactus, catclaw and ocotillo, all of it spindly and jagged. A mile away, at the bend in the road, he watched the six horsemen thunder forward. Where the road widened, the riders fanned out and drummed ahead six abreast, half consumed within their own cloud of dust. Once in a while a snowflake touched Hazard's face. He walked out exactly into the middle of the road and spread his feet a little way apart, and stood that way, facing the onrushing six.

At either side of the road stood McGrath and Baragray. Baragray cocked his shotgun and cradled the butt against his shoulder, like a skeet-shooter waiting for the trap to let fly. McGrath, no gunman, held his revolver up in a gnarl-knuckled hand. Hazard spoke without turning his head:

"Canreen is mine. You two watch the others."

McGrath said, "The one on the end, that's Steve Gray. He'd kill his mother for half a dollar. He's on your side, Baragray—you be watchin' him with both eyes, now, hear?"

"I hear," Baragray murmured. His voice was taut and when Hazard glanced that way he saw sweat-beads standing out on Baragray's face; Baragray was biting his lower lip. But his eyes were bright and his hands steady.

"Good luck, boys," Hazard said, and dug in his heels. His hand hung relaxed, inches from the handle of his holstered gun.

Olsen and Canreen rode shoulder-to-shoulder, flanked by two hardcase riders at either side. They bore down toward Hazard and for a moment it seemed they did not intend to slacken pace, but expected to ride him down in his tracks.

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The crash of hoofbeat swelled to a crescendo; dust and snowflakes swirled around the pounding riders. Through it all, Hazard had an instant's clear vision of Olsen's face—the glitter of glasses, the mouth slightly open exposing the glisten of teeth, the shoulders crowding forward in anticipation. Olsen's eyes were invisible but it was not hard to attribute to them a gleam of madness.

Lew Canreen was a huge lump of a man, hungry-faced, ham-fisted. As the riders swept closer, Canreen swung his arm up and cuffed his hat back; it fell off and rolled along in the dirt behind them. Hazard swept them deliberately, left to right, with his gaze. These were all that was left of Olsen's crew of toughs—Canreen and four other bitter-faced riders, bent forward over their saddles. Hazard stood like a pillar of rock, facing the pistoning hoofs and round eyes of the horses; the pounding heads and spur-raked flanks swept closer and closer.

And then Vic Olsen held up one hand and yanked his reins back, leaning back in the saddle and shouting one crisp command. The horsemen skidded to a halt not twenty yards away, spewing up geysers of dirt that fell just short of Hazard.

The dust settled. Snow fell, flake by flake, around them all. There was a tautening, broken run of time when no one spoke or moved at all.

Olsen sat frozen, one hand on the reins and the other raised in the signal to halt; a wicked smile slowly spread across his face and he said huskily, "Well, now. Jason, you disappoint me. You're making this too easy."

Flynn McGrath said irreverently, "What in hell took ye so long?"

Lew Canreen shot back at him, "You must be in a hurry to die."

Olsen glanced at McGrath and then at Baragray. His

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eyes moved deliberately and he said mildly, "We've got no quarrel with you two."

Baragray said, "Nobody's forcing us to stay, Olsen."

Hazard said, "We can stand here and talk all day, Vic. Your boys are likely to start thinking twice—about what happened to the rest of your crew, and what you did to Bill Speed. You'd better start the ball, before you've got no crew left—"

He had been talking to Olsen, but his attention was centered on Lew Canreen. Big as he was, Canreen was still the fastest and most unpredictable of the six, and while Hazard was still talking, Canreen had uttered a small grunt of disgust. His hand swept up with his six-gun, and that was what started it.

Hazard's hand palmed his revolver with the expert speed of long training. His thumb kicked back the hammer to full-cock as he drew the six-gun. The muzzle lifted into his range of vision and then, with Canreen's gun bearing down on him, Hazard steadied his aim and fired.

Canreen was staring him in the face. Canreen's eager, strained expression did not change, but the light went out of his eyes and his muscles went loose; he slumped and the gun fell from his hand, unfired.

Canreen slipped slowly out of the saddle. He hit the ground on one shoulder, making a definite thud of sound; his boots rattled when they hit. He did not move after that.

There was a moment's stunned silence; then Olsen swung his head around wildly. "Jesus—what in hell are you waiting for? *Gun him down!*"

The men beside him only stared at him—all except the one on the right, the man McGrath had pointed out, Steve Gray. Gray was squat and had the primitive face of an ape. He lifted his reins and turned his horse, and raised his spurs as if to break into a run; but then, with his shoulder

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to Jim Baragray, the gunman brought up a gun with his concealed hand and shouted. His horse bolted; Baragray's shotgun blast missed him wholly; and Gray snapped a bullet toward Baragray that spun Baragray all the way around in a circle where he stood.

Hazard coolly fired twice at the bobbing horseback figure of Steve Gray; he saw his second shot take effect but then he had no more time to think about Gray, for Vic Olsen had his gun out and was shooting.

A bullet clipped skin under Hazard's arm; he was weaving and dodging, trying to find his target in the rising swirl of dust. Horses were pitching and milling around. Olsen was yelling hoarsely; Hazard had quick cameo-like visions, in flashes, of several things happening at once: Baragray struggling to his knees, reaching for the fallen shotgun, Steve Gray falling to the ground, unconscious or dead, Flynn McGrath firing his pistol steadily, standing stocky with his feet rooted, Olsen's shape weaving in and out of view, and, in a corner of Hazard's vision, a new shape moving forward through the brush, dressed in flowing black.

Hazard had his sights on Olsen when a tough's horse, out of control, bolted in front of Olsen and spoiled Hazard's shot. The tough had his gun up; its muzzle veered toward Hazard and Hazard fired quickly. His bullet caught the tough somewhere in the upper arm. The tough cried out, "Let's get the hell out of here!" There was a lot of calling back and forth. It was hard to make out anyone's voice. Then, abruptly, two of the horsemen wheeled out of the confusion and plummeted away at a dead run, galloping back down the road. The man with the wounded arm dropped his gun and looked around, his face a contorted mask of fear. He sank spurs into his horse and yelled in panic, and fled pellmell after his two companions.

It had all taken no more than a few seconds. And then,

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suddenly, it left Vic Olsen alone on the road, fighting down his frightened, rearing horse. Hazard had a perfect opportunity to shoot the man out of the saddle, but he held his fire. Baragray's shotgun went off with a deafening boom, but the shot went harmlessly into the air. Hazard distinctly heard the clicking of Flynn McGrath's gunhammer on empty cartridges and the steady spitting stream of McGrath's colorful curses.

There was a small corner of Jason Hazard's mind that always kept calm in the fiercest of battles. It was that cool, reasoning part of him that told him he had but one bullet left in his revolver. He held the gun cocked and aimed, and waited for Olsen to bring his horse under control. The horse came down on all fours and Hazard spoke sharply. "Drop the gun, Vic, or you'll be—"

He never had a chance to finish the command. From the brush behind him a gunshot erupted. Olsen jerked upright in the saddle. His face came around; he was looking not at Hazard, but past him. Olsen's face twisted incredibly in rage. He screamed: "You God damned bitch!" He whipped his gun around, and a second shot came out of the brush behind Hazard. It left a bloody red line along the side of Olsen's neck. That was when Hazard fired.

A tortured oath burst from Olsen's lips. He clawed at his chest, where Hazard's bullet had punched through; he picked at the cloth of his shirt and fell off his horse.

Hazard wheeled toward the brush; he saw a flutter of black cloth. It was a moment before he made it out, through the intertwined spindly branches. Then they came into sight, the two women: Evelyn and Vicky. Evelyn's face was ghostly pale. She still wore the black funeral dress; in her white hand was a tiny revolver. Vicky left the blonde girl standing by the edge of the road and came forward, walking slowly at first, then breaking into a run. She said

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nothing to Hazard. She stopped a foot short of him and only looked into his face.

McGrath straightened out of his crouch. He looked at his empty revolver, holstered it, and turned toward Evelyn. Hazard tore his glance away from Vicky and knelt down by Olsen. Olsen's glasses hung, twisted and smashed across his face. His eyes were closed. He was breathing when Hazard reached him, but with one fluttering final gasp the life went out of him. Hazard stepped across Lew Canreen's body and walked with deliberate paces to the far side of the road, where Jim Baragray lay slumped back, the shotgun across his chest. Steve Gray's bullet had sliced at an angle across Baragray's torso and penetrated his chest. There was dark red spittle on Baragray's lips. He spoke to Hazard: "I guess maybe I wanted it this way. I could have shot a little faster. Something slowed me down. But if I meet Zach Miles on the other side, maybe I can look him in the face now."

That was how Baragray went out. His head slipped over on his shoulder and it was evident by the way he went slack that he was dead.

A profound regret swept through Hazard—sorrow, for the waste of all their lives. It left him feeling washed out, empty. He turned and saw Evelyn walking up the street into town; McGrath stood watching her go. There was nothing to say to her. Vicky was there, waiting in the road, and Hazard moved toward her. Owney Nash was coming down the street; heads were poking out of windows.

Blackness rolled across the sky and the snowfall thickened quickly. McGrath walked across the road and stood staring down at Baragray. After a moment McGrath bent down to close Baragray's eyes, and afterward McGrath stayed hunkered down there, alone with his thoughts, trying to sort things out.

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Hazard stood in the falling snow, feeling drunk and hung-over at the same time. Nothing seemed very clear. But then Vicky came to him. She touched his arm gently. "It will become just a memory. We'll both have to learn how to forget yesterday, Jason."

Owney Nash reached the head of the street. Two riderless horses stood in the brush, still spooked, ready to bolt. A cold wind swept snow across the road in flurries. Owney Nash said, "I guess that's the end of it, then."

"I guess it is," Jason Hazard said, very wearily. He took the woman's arm and turned his feet toward Stinking Springs.