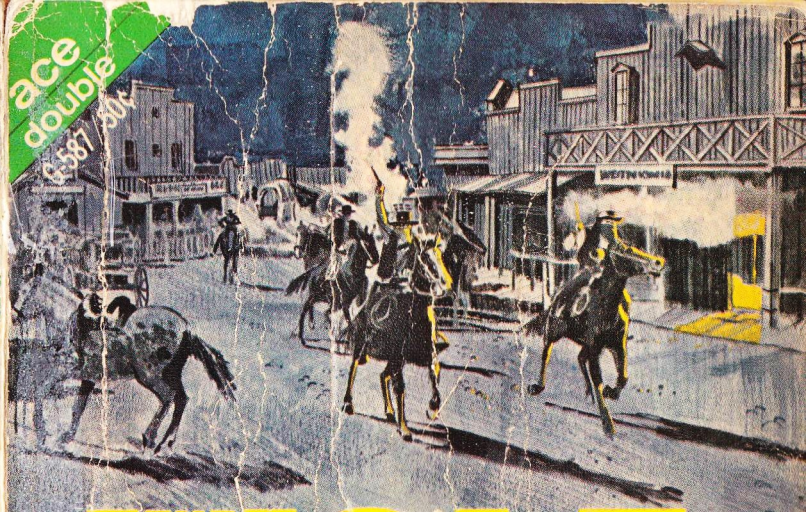
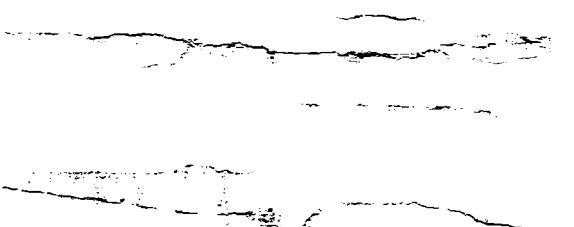


THE WOLF PACK

FRANK WYNNE

The outlaws are gathering for the kill

First Book Publication



THE CALL FROM COYOTERO COUNTY

...tion as a hard m...

...victim ...

Now Cord had a message from Martha Justice, the girl he had once almost married. She was in trouble, and she needed a fast gun by her side. She wanted him.

Even as Cord strapped his gun low on his hip and mounted up, he knew this job would require more than just looking tough—two-bit hairpins who'd have run from him once would be itching to go up against him now, for the glory of killing tough Dave Cord. But he wasn't going to let Martha down—unless, he thought bleakly, the rumors were true and he really had lost his guts. But he'd find that out soon enough, when the lead started flying.

Turn this book over for second complete novel

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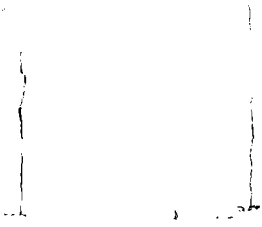

Ace Books has published his novels under three different by-lines, all variations of his full name. Books still available include:

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I

THE ROAD went down a gentle slope toward the banks of the Yankee, where it turned downriver toward Aztec town a few miles down-valley. From the slight elevation of a hummock, Dave Cord surveyed the panorama, liking what he saw. He sat his saddle comfortably, a tall man at ease on horseback.

Undulating grassland rolled up against the foothills of the mountain ranges that surrounded the valley: the timbered Arrowheads, the high dark Ocotillos, the boulder-strewn dry Lomas. All of it was splashed with the bright glare of the ungiving Arizona sun.

Immediately below Dave Cord's post, the road ran down an easy pitch into a dark shady thickness of cottonwood trees and water-bloated mesquites that greened up the riverbank. The road made a bend and ran down toward town under the arched shelter of the heavy cottonwoods.

It was down in those vague shadows that Cord saw the advancing rider; and it was something about the strained urgency of that horseman's ride that narrowed Cord's attention and made him straighten in the saddle. He pointed his dun cowpony down the slope and spurred to a canter, planning to intercept yonder advancing rider.

The horseman's speed and quick over-the-shoulder glances were evidence enough that he was fleeing for his life. The man careened around a last bend of the Yankee and came drumming up the road toward Cord at a full-out run. The rider bent low over the withers of his pounding horse, lashing it with a quirt. Dust raveled high in his wake.

Dave Cord reined in just outside the shadow of the trees, in the fork of the road. The fleeing rider swept across an intervening seventy yards and was all but on top of Cord before seeing him.

Cord had a glimpse of the startled, familiar features of an old man and a quick sudden grin.

The old rider wheeled his horse to a halt in a vast choking swirl of dust: he seemed about to speak to Cord.

That was when two horsemen burst around the bend down below, not more than a hundred yards distant. They halted precipitously. One man snapped a rifle to his shoulder. Beside Cord, the old man's head snapped around. The old man shouted a warning and laid spurs to the heaving flanks of his horse. Down below, the rifle barked, almost casually. Its muzzle winked brightly; the sound of the report was a hollow crack that echoed along the timber banks; a wisp of cordite smoke lifted from the barrel.

The old man's head dropped forward but his eyes rolled up, as if he were trying to see the sky. His mouth fell slackly open. He collapsed across the saddlehorn.

Cord spoke aloud: "What the hell?"

The rifle cracked again. A bullet whacked into the old man's saddle. Cord reined across the road, bent and grabbed the fallen reins of the old man's horse. Jerking it along behind him, he wheeled into the shelter of the trees while the rifle down at the turning began to talk with an insistent, harsh clatter. Five shots later it subsided, probably empty. Cord rammed deep into the trees and slid his horse to a halt.

He dismounted and hauled the old man's limp weight out of the saddle. He let the wizened frame down gently onto the mossy earth.

The river lapped its banks softly. Cord thought the old man was dead, but then the seamed eyelids fluttered open. Recognition was a little while coming. A glaze began to film the old man's eyes. Cord knew what that meant, and so did the old man, evidently, for he spoke calmly: "Not much time left now. Howdy, Dave."

Cord tried to stop the blood that made a flowing gush from the back of the old man's neck. In a moment the old man stirred. "Ain't no good," he murmured. "You may as well quit that and listen to me."

Cord sat back on his heels. "I'm listening." His eyes were hooded and his face seemed cold, expressionless. "Who's the gent with the rifle?"

"I dunno," the old man wheezed. "But I know who he works for, sure enough." Then his back arched with an attack of coughing that seemed to rip out his lungs. The old man had always been consumptive; now the coughing fit made his body jerk, and blood flowed more heavily from the disturbed wound. A fugitive smile seemed to cross the old man's cracked-leather face. Before his body relaxed he was dead.

"So long, Utah," Cord murmured; and as the last syllable left his lips he wheeled away into the shadows of the trees. . . .

The rifleman who had shot the old man was around here somewhere with his saddle partner. Cord doubted his own presence would discourage the backshooter from finishing his business. And by now that rifleman would have had plenty of time to come up. He could be anywhere. The crow's feet bunched up around Cord's eyes. He melted into the deep shade and stood bolt still, turning his head slowly to catch any little sound on the flats of his eardrums, searching each shadow, his Remington revolver coming up in a big-knuckled hand.

Almost too soft to be audible was the click of a rifle hammer being drawn to full cock. But it was enough. Cord sprawled flat just as the rifle roared. Leaves rattled over-

head. The rifle's muzzle-flash, not fifty feet distant, became Cord's target, and he laid two deliberate shots on that point before he rolled behind the solid protection of a massive cottonwood.

He could still hear the echo of his two bullets screaming away in rocochet, deflected somewhere by twig or branch. The rifle cracked angrily in reply; Cord could not tell where its bullet went. Someone was scrambling around in the brush not too far away.

Cord poked his gun around the tree and fired an unaimed shot toward the rifle's general direction, and meanwhile swept the dim grove with his wary attention, trying to spot the rifleman's partner. The last gunshot echo died away and silence settled down, grim and threatening; he could hear only the lapping of the river and the occasional soft movement of one of the horses in the tiny clearing where the old man lay dead.

Leaves rustled. He put his head around the tree trunk for a look. Drawing no fire, he studied the forest shadows. A patch of sunlight showed a horse moving, and beyond it a man crouching by the dead man; the other man turned back into the shadows out of sight, and Cord had not had a good enough look at him; Cord felt the silent run of his own oaths. Across the grove a voice lifted:

"The old man's dead. Let's get out of here before some joker comes along." It was just a voice, muted by the trees, nothing to distinguish it by. Bootheels crushed the groundcover and shortly thereafter Cord heard the breakaway of two horses pounding into an immediate gallop, going away.

Stillness descended on the grove. The acrid stink of cordite fumes bothered Cord's nostrils. He stood up and moved cautiously forward—it might have been a ruse, the two horses going away; one man might have been leading both of them, leaving the second man behind to ambush Cord. But it hadn't sounded that way and when, after ten minutes, nothing disturbed the silence, he decided he was alone in the copse. Alone with the body of an old man who had called himself Utah Overmile.

Cord went back to the clearing and stood looking down at the old man. Muscles relaxed in death, Overmile wore no

particular expression. His eyes stared at the cloud-drifted sky with the motionlessness of a tintype. Cord closed the old man's eyelids gently and hunkered there, crouching over the dead man, reloading his revolver. His horse moved nervously. Cord stirred. He picked up the old man, grunting with effort, and struggled to lift the dead weight belly-down across the saddle. Then he mounted his own dun and rode out of the trees leading the old man's horse with its grisly burden.

Riding down the road he kept his alert attention on all the possible points of ambush along the way. He was a tall man with a horseman's narrow girth, a wide-shouldered, long-legged Texan with a face as ungiving as granite. Sun-dried skin creases and streaks of gray in his brown-black hair suggested his age, which was thirty-eight; and it was testimony to his skills that in a business where most men died young, Dave Cord was still alive. For his business was fighting.

Or, at least, it had been. Until a year ago, when another man named Cord had died of a bullet in the heart.

Once on the way into town he had to stop and readjust the balance of Overmile's corpse to keep it on the horse. Then he climbed into the saddle again and rode slowly into Aztec under the merciless burn of the sun.

He passed a few disreputable shacks and entered the head of Aztec's single sprawling street; he rode by a couple of 'dobe's, a vacant stretch of land, four or five tree-shaded dwellings surrounded by precious little lawns and white picket fences, then a couple of crudely built warehouses and the beginnings of the town's commercial section: hardware, drygoods, tonsorial parlor, millinery and dresswear, ranch and home supply; Doyle's café, the office of Jonah Webb, M. D., the two-storied frame hotel. All of them were dusty faded structures with wooden false fronts faded and splintered into the common drab gray-brown of the land. The Arizona sun was not known to treat man, beast, or building kindly.

Powder-dust hung horsehock-deep in the street where he passed. Traffic was light: half a dozen pedestrians cruised the walks with the conservative pace of hot-country dwellers; one or two riders moved along the wide thoroughfare, hats

tilted against the glare; a ranch buckboard was tied up before the Aztec General Mercantile—Philip M. Landering, Prop.—which seemed to be the largest store in town. In back of the buildings marched the heavy-topped cottonwoods and planted sycamores that lined the banks of the Yankee.

He passed the ornate front of the Gold Star Saloon, situated on the corner of an intersection with a middling-wide street that ran half a block and ended in weeds; on that half-block of commerce sat a billiard parlor, one or two places that might have been cribs or boarding houses, a candy-store with its porch buzzing with kids, a tiny pharmacy. Cord passed the mouth of the cross-street, went by a Chinese café and half a dozen shops, and found the town hall.

It was an adobe-brick structure with a wooden porch. The town marshal's office was one door down from the office of *John Morgan, SHERIFF, Coyotero County*—the sign painted in a fading crescent on a fading board that hung listlessly from rusty chains.

Cord dismounted here and climbed the three steps of the porch with his shirt pasted damp against his back. Half a dozen people at various points had stopped and were looking at the dead man with mixed expressions. Cord brushed past an open-mouthed businessman and tried the latch of the sheriff's door. It was locked. He turned, frowning.

The businessman said helpfully, "Morgan's out of town."

Cord grunted and went along the ten paces to the town marshal's door. It stood open against the heat; a tall man with cream-soft skin and a round face stood just within the doorway, frowning outward at the body belly-down across the horse. Cord said, "You the law here?"

"That's right."

A small hand-inked sign on the open door behind the marshal informed Cord that the marshal's same was George Sinclair. He looked more like a store clerk than a lawman, Cord thought. Sinclair said, "Who's that?"

"He used to call himself Overmile, when I knew him."

"Old Utah?" Sinclair said, with some surprise. He walked across the porch and put his shined boots carefully down in

the street, trying not to stir up the dust; he bent down and corkscrewed his neck around to look up at the face of the dead man. "So it is," he said, and turned. "You shoot him?"

"No."

"Who did?"

"I didn't get a look at him."

"That's handy," the marshal murmured.

The businessman on the porch by the sheriff's door was still standing there, staring. A number of people were coming forward along the walks, curious. Sinclair said, "Well, let's get him down and carry him inside."

Cord gave him a hand. They lugged Overmile inside the cluttered office and put him on the floor. Sinclair stood up, breathing hard, and said, "His neck's half blown away. Can't even tell how big a bullet it was." For the first time his eyes met Cord's. "Let me see your gun."

"I'll keep my gun," Cord drawled mildly. "It's been fired, if that's what you want to know." He told the marshal as much as he knew about the killing. By the time he was finished talking, a crowd had gathered just outside the door.

Sinclair walked across and shut the door against them; them he pulled it open and spoke to the crowd: "Somebody get Macready." He closed the door and went around behind his desk and sat, propping his moon face in his hands. "That's a pat story you tell," he observed.

"I could dress it up if you want," Cord said drily.

"It's funny you should come along just at the right time to see somebody shoot him. And funny he should die after saying a few words but nothing important. You sure he didn't name anybody?"

"I'm sure."

"It sounds pat," Sinclair said again; but his eyes were on his desk top. A weak man, Cord decided. Sinclair said, "Properly it's a county job. My jurisdiction ends at the town limits. But Morgan's gone and there's no telling when he'll be back—maybe a week, maybe two."

"No deputies?"

"This is a poor county," Sinclair said. "Morgan's handled it pretty well by himself up to now. We don't get much trouble around here. It's a quiet valley."

"Yeah," Cord said, with an edge of dryness.

"It doesn't make any sense," Sinclair complained. "Old Utah didn't have any enemies. He was just a harmless old wild-horse hunter. Spent most of his time up in the hills by himself, running down mustangs and gentling them, selling them all over the county." Sinclair was brooding at the dead man laid out on the floor. "Where did you know him from?"

"Trail City," Cord murmured. "A long time ago." He was looking out the window, past the heads of the crowd, at the cloud-dotted sky. He fumbled absently in his shirt pocket for cigarette makin's, and found his tobacco sack empty.

Sinclair, noticing the gesture, looked around the office and then got up to go over to the dead man. Stooping, he withdrew a sack of Bull Durham from Overmile's pocket. He offered it to Cord: "Utah won't need it."

Cord accepted the sack but put it in his pocket without opening it. Sinclair said, "I just don't get it. Didn't you get any hint at all?"

"He said he knew who the killer worked for. I got the feeling maybe the old man had found out something. Something somebody wanted to keep a secret."

"It must have been a pretty dangerous secret to make it worthwhile killing a man."

Cord made no reply. Sinclair said complainingly, "I suppose I'll have to go out and look for tracks." But he went back around behind his desk and sat down again. "Damn it," he added. Then a sudden frown crossed his bland features. "Trail City, you said. What was your name again?"

"Cord."

"Sure," Sinclair said. "I know who you are now. You were the marshal up there. Kept the lid on that town, didn't you? Hell, they wrote dime novels about you. I thought you were dead. Haven't heard anything about you recently."

"I've retired," Cord drawled. "If you need me to sign a statement, I'll be at the hotel." He moved to the door without waiting for the marshal's permission; when the marshal said nothing, Cord opened the door and stepped outside.

The crowd was still crushed against the door. As soon as he appeared they began to pound him with questions. Cord pushed through, saying nothing, ignoring them all. He

picked up the reins of his dun and led it down-street toward the livery stable, which was a small building with a large corral behind it.

There was no hostler in evidence. He unsaddled the horse himself, rubbed it down, watered it at a trough and fed it oats in a nosebag; afterward he let it out into the corral with eight or ten other horses. He left a coin on the empty desk and penciled a short note identifying his horse, and left the note under the coin; he took his saddlebags and rifle and blanket-roll up the street with him to the hotel.

No one was at the desk. Everybody was apparently gathered at the marshal's office. He found the leather-bound register, signed it, and leaned across the desk to hook down a key from the dusty board behind. The keys all looked alike; one would do for any room. He carried his belongings upstairs and found himself at the middle of a narrow dim corridor.

The first door he unlocked evidently belonged to someone; a carpetbag sat on a chair and clothing hung on the back of the door. He backed out, relocked the door, and went on to the next room. It seemed vacant. He tested the thin straw-tick mattress, put down his equipment, and crossed the room to throw open the dirt-spattered window. A gust of hot air met him in the face.

There was a dusty metal washbasin on the commode, empty. He took it out into the hall with him and walked downstairs and explored the empty hotel until he found the kitchen. Pumping the basin full, he removed his shirt and washed his face and torso with a bar of hard lye soap; he toweled himself dry with his shirt and went upstairs carrying the crumpled shirt and the basin half-full of tepid alkaline water.

In his room he unpacked a fresh shirt, a green silk-like garment that had cost him twenty dollars in St. Louis; he put this on and combed his hair and went downstairs and outside to find a meal. The crowd was still gathered across the street. Some of them swung to watch him. His spurs dragged the walk as he went down to Doyle's café and turned in. The gun bobbed low on his hip.

The café was deserted except for a waitress who was

standing at the window staring at the marshal's office. Cord sat down at a table in the corner of the room. The girl dragged herself reluctantly away from her vantage point and said, "You brought him in, didn't you?"

He didn't answer her; what he said was, "I'd like some lunch."

She looked disappointed; but he had made it evident he didn't want to start a conversation. She said, "Steak and potatoes suit you?"

"All right."

She went out of the room by a back door. Alone in the place, Cord sat looking at nothing for a while. His face was hard and slightly bitter, the face of a man who had lived a long time in a world of violence and intolerance. After a while he took a soiled envelope out of his trouser pocket and removed the letter from inside it. Smoothing the letter open, he read it, for perhaps the tenth time in as many days:

Dave,

I need a job done. As you may have heard my husband is dead. The wolves have gathered. I had to leave Aztec on business. No one expects me to be back before August. Meet me there on July 19th.

—Martha.

After he had read it he let the letter lie before him. A hundred memories came sudden and bleak before his vision. His face revealed none of this. He took the tobacco sack out of his pocket and absently rolled a cigarette; and when he lighted it he remembered that the tobacco had belonged to Utah Overmile. He wondered what it was that Overmile had died for. Had it had anything to do with Martha Justice's trouble?

The door slammed open to admit a broad-beamed man in range clothes, followed by a chunky Mexican cowboy with impassive features. The big man blinked against the room's relative dimness. Something about him looked vaguely familiar to Cord; he knew he had met the man somewhere, long ago.

The big man's clothes were coated with trail dust. He

stood near the counter, feet slightly spread, batting dust from his hat against his leather chaps, and his small-eyed glance came slowly around to rest on Cord. His expression changed and he said in a soft wicked toné, "Well, well. Look what we got here."

Cord watched him, saying nothing. The big man took two paces forward and stopped again. Behind him his Mexican companion closed the door and stood with his back to it. The big man said, "You don't remember me, hey, Cord?"

"Should I?"

"Trail City, the summer of 'seventy-six."

It meant nothing to Cord. That had been a busy summer. He said as much: "I don't know you."

"Name's Saunders," the big man said. "Joel Saunders." His eyes fell on the open letter on Cord's table. Cord folded it, put it in its envelope, and pocketed it. Saunders grinned without humor. His face was broad at the cheeks, hard-slabbed at the jaw hinges; he was not tall but his build was powerful, heavy of arm and chest. Saunders said, "This time you ain't got four deputies to back your play. Maybe that's how come you don't remember me."

"Maybe," Cord said mildly.

"But," Saunders went on, "I remember you good enough. You damn near laid my head open with your gun barrel."

Cord shrugged. "I had to buffalo a lot of men who got out of line." But his hand slipped off the table edge to hang nearer his gun; any man who would carry a grudge over ten years was a man not to be trusted to behave reasonably.

Abruptly Saunders turned away and sat down at a table near the door. His compadre moved up and straddled a chair backwards on the far side of the table. The Mexican never looked at Cord, but Cord had the feeling that those bright dark eyes missed nothing.

The waitress came into the room with a plate full of fried potatoes and a slab of steak. She set it down before Cord and looked at Saunders. "You want something?" she said, and there was no friendliness in her tone.

"A meal," Saunders said. "And look out who you talk to like that, Sadie. I ain't one of your two-bit cowhands."

"No," she said, "I guess you're not. Not since you pulled the wool over the widow's eyes."

Saunders' glance grew hot but the girl turned back to the kitchen and went out of sight behind the closed door. Saunders laughed hoarsely. "Women," he said. His attention shifted around to Cord, who was silently eating his meal; Saunders said, "Look at him, Ruiz. Gettin' old, he is. I'll bet he don't swing as mean a gun as he used to."

Ruiz's face moved back and forth. "We got work to do. Let's get home."

Cord finished his lunch and pushed the plate away. The meal prices were chalked up on a blackboard at the end of the room. He left fifty cents on the table and walked to the door. Saunders' voice arrested him, harsh and abrupt: "Wait a minute, tinhorn."

Cord turned slowly and put his even glance against Saunders. "If you've got something to say to me, spit it out."

Saunders laughed. There was no mirth in the sound. He said, "I'd like to cut you down a notch or two."

"You can try," Cord intoned. His eyes were hooded.

"What's a used-up gunny like you doing in these parts?"

"Minding my own business," Cord answered shortly, and went outside, not hurrying.

He walked back to the hotel, noticing that the crowd had diminished outside Marshal Sinclair's door; inside the hotel he took out the letter and read it once more. July 19th—that would be Monday. Today was Friday.

He had a weekend to wait. But there was a killer loose in this valley. That killer had seen Cord with Overmile, and had no way of knowing whether Overmile had talked to Cord. It added up to only one thing: *danger.*

II

GEORGE SINCLAIR stared morosely down at the corpse, laid out flat on his office floor. Macready, the carpenter-undertaker, was taking measurements, his watery eyes dull and

emotionless. Sinclair sat down, leaned back, and looked up at Joel Saunders, who stood watching Macready work. Saunders' ever-present companion, Ruiz, stood wordless by the door, looking uninterested. Sinclair said caustically, "I like the way people go out of their way to make my job easy."

Macready got up, coiling his cloth tape-measure and pocketing it. "All right if I leave him here till nightfall? I'll have the coffin ready by then."

"All right," Sinclair said distastefully.

"I suppose, seein' as how he didn't have any kin around here, he's a county job?"

"That's right," Sinclair said wearily. "No trimmings."

"Right," Macready said smartly. He turned his spry form and went out.

There was still a small gather of people out there and suddenly their voices lifted, hurling questions at Macready. The noise died away as the crowd followed the carpenter back to his shop.

Sinclair said, "I hate cheerful birds like that." He looked at Saunders, who was making himself comfortable, hipshot against the desk corner. Sinclair said, "Naturally you wouldn't know anything about this, Joel."

"Naturally." Saunders' face was bland with innocence.

Sinclair flared up. "Damn it, I didn't bargain for murder."

Saunders shrugged and turned his palms up, Indian fashion. "Don't make much difference. He was just about all used up, the old man."

"Sure," Sinclair muttered morosely. "We all are, when it comes to that. You can't go anywhere but the graveyard."

"That's a fact," Saunders said. "So quit worrying."

"What about Cord?"

"What about him?"

"I wonder how much he knows," the marshal said. He looked up. "It seems to me you've been taking a lot of chances lately."

"That bothers you?"

"My neck hangs with yours," Sinclair said bluntly.

"You're a confident buzzard," Saunders observed. He looked down at Overmile's corpse and nudged it with his boot-toe. After a while he got up and went to the door.

Sinclair's voice stopped him: "How long have we got to wait?"

"What are you gettin' spooky about? The widow won't be back for two weeks."

"The widow's not the only one in this valley with eyes."

"Aagh," Saunders said, dismissing it. "Nobody cares what happens on Horsehead."

"Davenport does. He's got a long nose."

"He might get it knocked off, then," Saunders said. He smiled without friendship, without anything. "Quit frettin'," he said, and left the place, trailed by the taciturn Ruiz.

In a little while Sinclair went out to the Chinaman's café to eat lunch. Then he came back and sat in his chair with the dead man on the far side of the desk. He felt spooky; he went over to the Gold Star and bought a drink, played a few hands of cards with DuBoff, the house gambler, went up to the hardware store to see if his bird gun had been repaired yet, and returned to the office at three. The body was still there; it hadn't gone anyplace. He looked at it for a while and then looked away. He didn't like the jumpy feeling he had.

A buckboard came down the street, entering his range of vision through the window. It was the Bell ranch buckboard, with May and Jim Davenport on the seat.

Sinclair's pulse quickened and he got up to move to the window.

The buckboard rolled up to Landering's mercantile, and Davenport reined in, reaching out for the brake handle. Davenport was dark and wiry-strong. He got down and stood impatiently waiting for May to slide across and step off the wagon. He didn't offer to help her down.

Sinclair smiled slightly; every little inconsiderate act of Davenport's would only serve to drive his wife more irrevocably away. She looked pretty today, Sinclair thought, dainty and fresh in spite of the depressing heat.

Davenport took her arm and spoke to her briefly. May's glance slid past her husband and came to rest on Sinclair's window. Sinclair couldn't tell whether she was able to see him through the glass. Her expression turned slightly wistful; she nodded in response to something her husband said,

and turned alone to go up into the mercantile. Thereupon Davenport wrapped the reins around the hitchrail, made sure the brake was set, and began to walk forward.

It looked as though Davenport was coming straight to the office. Sinclair's eyes widened with alarm. Did Davenport suspect? He went quickly back to his desk and sat down, rapidly fumbling through a drawer until he found a stack of reward flyers. He was perusing them intently when Davenport came into the office without knocking.

Sinclair looked up with guarded eyes and tried to make his voice sound casual: "Afternoon, Jim."

Davenport was looking with surprise at the old man's corpse on the floor. "What the hell is this?"

"What's it look like?" Sinclair immediately regretted his sarcasm; he felt edgy and defensive, not knowing what had brought the rancher here. He softened his tone: "Somebody bushwhacked him on the road north of town."

"The hell," Davenport said. He was a tall man, possibly forty years old, rugged of features; pride and arrogance were stamped on his face. It was easy to see how his masculine strength might have appealed to a woman; it was also easy to see how his unbending strictness and total lack of considerate gentleness might have driven her away. Davenport added, "Any leads?"

"No. I had a look at the tracks—they got lost in all the traffic on the road up there. No distinguishing horseshoe marks. Couldn't even find the bullet."

"Who'd want to murder him?" Davenport gave the remains another look and then turned away from it; it was like him to show immediate callous disregard for the dead man. "I want to talk to you," he said.

Sinclair felt a hard obstruction in his throat. He dropped his shaking hands out of sight and, not trusting himself to speak, merely nodded.

Davenport moved over to the window and stood looking out, his square hands hooked into the high-buckled gunbelt behind him. He said, "Before he died, Hugh Justice was a pretty close friend of mine. I've been making it a point to keep an eye on Horsehead, especially since the widow went away for a while."

Sinclair's palms were clammy with sweat. He had to swallow before he could speak. "And?"

"Yesterday one of my boys happened to mention he'd seen some strange doings over on Horsehead. He was riding the line right next to Horsehead's north graze. Said there seemed to be an awful lot of night riding going on over there. So I rode over to Horsehead this morning. I stayed away from the headquarters and didn't run into anybody, just looked around." He turned back from the window to face Sinclair. "All the cows I could find were bunched up on the west side of the ranch, near Quade's boundary."

"What of it?"

"This is a hell of a funny time for a roundup," Davenport pointed out. "And you've got to think about that hardcase crew that Saunders has hired. He let every one of the old Horsehead crew go, except Ruiz, and replaced them with that bunch of hairpins that look as though they'd as soon knife you as talk to you." He shook his head. "She was a fool to make Saunders foreman. I told her so at the time—and she gave me one of those typical answers of hers, that it takes a tough man to do a tough job, something like that. You know her."

"Yeah," Sinclair said. He wondered why Davenport didn't notice his nervousness. "Well, what's bothering you, Jim?"

"I don't like the way those cattle are all bunched up on the west end of the ranch. It looks to me like Saunders has been makin' hay while Martha Justice has been away."

"I see," Sinclair said slowly. His pulse raced.

Davenport watched him steadily. Was that accusation in his eyes? Davenport said, "I want you to arrest Saunders."

"What for? Have you got any proof against him?"

"Just what my eyes saw. But if you don't arrest him, chances are he'll be out of the territory with that whole herd by the time she gets back."

"I doubt it," Sinclair said. "He wouldn't do anything like that."

"No?" Davenport said contemptuously. "You don't think so? Hell, I know a crook when I see one."

Sinclair swallowed. His hand under the desk had crawled up to sit on the butt of his revolver. "You must be reading

the sign wrong. If Saunders had been making off with the widow's cattle, he'd be long-gone by now. And if he plans to take them off Horsehead, he'll have to cross Quade's ranch to do it. Quade will see him. That's time enough to do any arresting—when you've got evidence of theft."

"Maybe," Davenport said. "Then again, maybe he's got something else in mind."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I'm not a crook—I don't think that way. But I'll tell you this much. You'll suffer the consequences if you don't put Saunders and his crew under arrest right now."

"All by myself."

Davenport regarded him in that impersonal, half-contemptuous way of his. "That's what you get paid for. It's about time you did something to earn your keep, don't you think?"

Sinclair flushed. "I'm a town policeman. Horsehead's not in town. Talk to Sheriff Morgan."

"He's out of town and you know it."

"I can't help that."

Davenport uttered a quiet oath. "You're the most gutless excuse for a man I ever saw, George." He went back toward the door, hesitating when his glance fell on Overmile's corpse. "When will Morgan be back?"

"A week, maybe more. He wasn't sure."

"Too long," Davenport said. "We'll have to do something. I'm going to post a lookout on Horsehead. Saunders starts to move those cattle off the widows' grass, I'm going to commit my crew against him."

Sinclair shrugged. His heart was pounding in his ears. "That's your privilege. But you'd better be damn sure you've got proof. Otherwise you might all wind up in Yuma, for assault and trespassing."

"I'll take that chance," Davenport said stiffly. The look he gave Sinclair was far from friendly. He turned with a brisk snap of his wide, flat shoulders, and walked out of the office, leaving the door yawning wide behind him.

Sinclair chewed his lip. Everything was going wrong. His own mistakes were closing in on him. He wished he had never met Joel Saunders, never agreed to throw in. It had always been that way; he had always chosen the wrong

turning. All his life he had been on the run from past mistakes.

He got up and stepped over the body. It was beginning to stink up the room. He went back into the cell block, which was uninhabited, Aztec being a small town and, ordinarily, a quiet one.

At the far end of the cell corridor a mirror hung on the wall above a washbasin full of tepid water with a film of dust on its surface. He dampened his comb and ran it through his long dark-blond hair, adjusted his hat carefully, and smoothed out his cheap dark suit, trying to brush the dust from it. It was a hell of a country.

Back in the office he threw the windows open to air out the place; he went outside and locked the door against the curious, and looked up and down the street.

May Davenport was standing in the doorway of Landering's store across the way. Sinclair caught her attention and lifted his eyebrows and looked pointedly down-street, toward the livery stable. The woman gave an almost imperceptible nod. Thereupon, worried and bleak, Sinclair turned and walked toward the stable, trying to act unconcerned and indolent.

He tipped his hat and managed to produce a courteous smile for Mrs. Schollenberg, going by under her parasol; he crossed the street, stopped and stood and slowly turned his head to look both ways, and walked into the stable. No one was in the place. A horse's tail, hitting at flies, kept striking a stall partition. The place smelled of horse, of straw and manure. He wrinkled his nose in disgust and tipped his shoulder against a support-column. While he waited he tried not to think.

In time she came along and entered the stable. She blinked forward into the dimness and Sinclair spoke across the stifling heat: "I'm over here. We're alone."

She came forward quickly and said, "I was so worried. What did he want to see you about?"

"Didn't he tell you?"

"He never tells me anything. Was it about us?"

"No," he said, and added evasively, "Just a piece of business."

"Oh," she said with relief. "Every time I look at him now I wonder if he suspects. I'm going to be a nervous wreck, George. I'm sure he senses something wrong."

"I doubt it," Sinclair said. He walked to the door to look out. No one was in sight. He came back to her and said, "He doesn't think either one of us would have the guts to do anything behind his back."

"Don't talk like that," she said. "It doesn't suit you."

He laughed nervously. "It'll be very soon," he told her, "one way or another."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't ask questions," he said, more harshly than he intended; he tried to soften his words with a smile. "Sorry. I'm spooky, too. Can't be helped, I guess. Anyway, a few days should tell the tale—two weeks at most. My business will be finished. Then we can go."

"I can't wait." She spoke quietly and lowly but it was, all the same, a dismal wail. Sinclair cursed inwardly because there was so little happiness allowed in the world. He kept watching the door; he said: "We can't take a chance of being seen together here. Meet me tonight at the usual place."

She made a small sound in her throat. Sinclair turned to her. His anxieties, the wreckage of his nerves, the tautness at which he had had to live every recent instant, the pervading tenseness of ever-growing fear—all these things rushed forward within him; he smothered her against him, and, with a frightened shake of his head, he turned her away and walked rapidly out into the sun.

At sundown Dave Cord stepped out of the hotel and stood on the porch in a gray broadcloth suit, a slim dark cheroot tilted upward in his lips. Over the westward peaks hung lances of crimson cloud. Cord scratched a match to his cigar and felt the soporific weight in his belly of the heavy supper he had eaten an hour earlier. He put his back to the wall and lifted one knee, resting the foot toe-downward against the wall.

Hat tipped back, he stood that way, watching night come upon the town with a layered shifting of vermillion, cobalt, violet, and finally gray dusk. A breeze came up from the

river, picking up dust. Heat still hung close and depressing in the dark air. Along the street lamps winked into life one by one, splashing yellow illumination out of windows and doorways. Shopkeepers were closing up.

Across the way, in a sun-dried rocker on the town hall porch, a man sat gently rocking, the red dot of his cigarette swaying up and down. That was Ruiz, Joel Saunders' companion; Ruiz had been there all afternoon, watching the hotel. It didn't particularly trouble Cord's nerves but it stimulated his curiosity. Evidently Saunders had enough interest in Cord to keep a lookout on him.

Was it just because of Saunders' old grudge, or was it the fear that Cord might have learned something from Overmile before the old man died? Was Saunders the rifleman who had shot Overmile?

Just now there was no way to tell; and until Martha Justice returned to Aztec on Monday, Cord could only bide his time. But he had felt the touch of death and mystery in this sun-blasted valley; it had whetted his alertness. Only the memory of a past that he wanted to leave behind him kept him from crossing the street and forcing Ruiz to talk. There had already been too much violence in Dave Cord's life. He had a vision: his brother Walt lying in the dust, heart-shot.

Two men rode down the central powder of the street and dismounted before the open, lighted doorway of the Gold Star Saloon. The two could not have contrasted more with each other: one was gross, loose, elephantine; the other was small, almost diminutive, sharp-boned and dandy. The latter man Cord recognized at once: Sam Coleman, a rider of the gamblers' circuit, a man whose reputation for quick gunplay was equalled by his taste in cloth finery.

The two men went into the Gold Star, and, after a moment, Cord pushed away from the hotel wall and turned that way. He noticed Ruiz, across the way, not getting up, just sitting in the rocker with his cigarette burning; but Ruiz's hatbrim turned slowly, indicating his interest in Cord's movement. Cord crossed the dusty intersection, paused to let a wagon go by, and went up to the corner door of the Gold Star.

The room was long, half filled with card tables. A heavy oaken bar ran almost the full length of the far wall. Six or eight cowboys rattled around in the place; Cord, at the door, was struck by the heavy pressure of stale smoke and the smell of beer. At a central table a poker game was commencing. Sam Coleman and the fat man were there with a few others. Voices were soft; there were the click of glasses, the scrape of chairs, the dragging light rattle of spurs as a cowboy crossed the room.

Two or three heavily rouged girls sat farther back in the darker area of the room, each with a cowboy and a bottle. The bartender was short, neat, and alert; he looked as though he owned the place, and perhaps he did.

Cord stepped in and began to walk toward the bar. He was near the card game when Sam Coleman looked up and grinned. "Howdy, Dave."

Cord inclined his head with exact courtesy. There had never been either friendship or animosity between him and Coleman; their infrequent meetings had taken place on the plane of businesslike mutual respect. Coleman said, "I heard you were in town. Never expected to see you in these parts. Take a hand."

Cord considered it. "All right," he murmured.

He brought up an empty chair from the next table and sat. Coleman made introductions. The gray man in the town suit was Doc Webb. The chunky professional gambler was Duboff, the house gambler. George Sinclair, the marshal, nodded brusquely and frowned at his hole card. Sinclair seemed troubled. The remaining player, the fat man who had ridden into town with Sam Coleman, was Bill Quade. It became apparent that Coleman was on Quade's payroll; Quade owned the Rocking M ranch, Coleman explained. Coleman introduced Cord to each of them in a casual way, but Cord saw the abrupt flicker and rise of Quade's eyes when Cord's name was mentioned.

Quade's cheeks were puffed with fat and behind them the eyes were shrewd and wicked; Quade's thick mouth was sensual, his hands restless. He said, "You're the man brought in Overmile, I hear. You didn't get a look at the killer?"

"No," Cord said.

Quade looked down at his cards; he seemed to have dropped the issue; but Cord wondered what had made him ask that question.

A little derby-hatted man came into the saloon and took a drink at the bar. Cord bought a stack of chips; the game was for low stakes. He noticed glances passing between Quade and Marshal Sinclair, between Quade and Coleman. The little man in the derby went back to the upright piano and began to play barrelhouse tunes, whereupon the three rouged girls got up and began to dance with a succession of cowboys all of whom danced with grim fury while the girls maintained their frozen smiles. At the poker table the house man dealt cards and talk ran around infrequently and desultorily.

Cord played indolently, with only half his attention on the game. He had it in mind to get Coleman aside and ask the dandy little gunman what he knew of the intrigues that seemed to flow beneath the surface in this valley; Coleman was at least a truthful man, and could do no more than refuse to talk. It all would depend on Coleman's allegiances—on Quade's place in the scheme of things. Cord wondered about that, again; an ordinary rancher would have no reason to hire a man like Coleman.

Did Quade have something to do with Martha Justice's problems? Was Quade one of the wolves that had gathered around Martha's Horsehead ranch after the death of her husband?

There were a lot of questions in Cord's head, not the least of which was his own presence here. A long time ago he had given up the gun trade. And now, in response to a letter from the past, he sat in the midst of a powderkeg. The question was, who held the fuse?

It soon became evident that Quade was a skillful player, and that he took vicious delight in bluffing Sinclair down. This happened several times successively, so that Sinclair's stake diminished with steady speed while the marshal tried unsuccessfully to control his obvious jitters. At one point Quade's heavy voice chuckled and the fat man said mildly, "Better straighten up, George, before you lose your shirt."

In reply, Sinclair swore quietly and upped the bet. Doc

Webb and Coleman were out of the game, and in response to this raise the house man dropped out as well. With four cards of a stud hand before him, Cord sat over a visible pair of queens. He glanced at his hole card. Beside him, Quade showed three hearts; Sinclair's hand revealed only a pair of sixes, but he had raised. Probably, Cord thought, he had the third six in the hole.

The raise went around and the house man dealt the final card of the hand. Neither Sinclair's hand nor Cord's was bettered; Quade had drawn a fourth heart. Quade turned up the corner of his hole card and grinned across the table at Sinclair, who shifted uncomfortably in his seat; but Cord had the feeling that Quade wouldn't have looked at the hole card if it had been a heart. It was just a feeling, but Cord bet accordingly, and after a high round of betting he took the pot with three Queens.

His pile was growing slowly; he played conservatively and enjoyed the fruits of a small run of luck; but the game taught him a number of things, among which were the facts that it was easy to bluff the marshal down, and that Quade hated to lose—hated it with a wicked intensity.

When Coleman or the house man or even Doc Webb took a pot, Quade was quick to produce hot oaths; when Cord won, Quade glared at him. But if Sinclair took a hand, Quade's behavior changed oddly: he turned sarcastic and insulted the marshal with merciless barbs. It made no sense to Cord, for Sinclair never talked back to Quade. Did Quade hold some kind of power over the marshal?

Unanswered questions multiplied in Cord's mind until, two hours after the game had begun, Sinclair stood up abruptly and said, "Sorry, gents, I've got to go."

"What's the matter," Quade said, "don't you want a chance to get even?"

"Some other time," Sinclair said, pocketing the few coins he had left. He did not meet the fat man's eyes; he turned and went quickly from the saloon.

Quade shrugged; the game went on listlessly for ten minutes until the doctor said he, too, had to leave. On that signal Coleman stood up and made a muttered remark about "drifting up the alley a ways" and nodded to Quade, and

cruised to the door. Just before Coleman went out, his glance touched Cord's and his eyebrows went up. Then Coleman disappeared into the night.

Quade frowned at the half deserted table. "Can't win much three-handed," he growled. "Let's call it a night." His clever eyes studied Cord for a moment and then he heaved up out of his chair and waddled to the door.

Cord played a few hands of penny-ante poker with the house man and then stood, finishing his whisky, going to the door and pausing outside to teeter on the balls of his feet, giving the impression of an indecisive man with nothing much on his mind. Presently he turned to his right, going up along the half-block length of the short street.

He hadn't gone far when, across the way in the mouth of an alley, he caught sight of a man standing in the shadows. Only a little light was reflected back here from the lamplit street, and none of it fell into that alley; he could only make out the vague shadow of a figure there.

He turned across the dusty street and approached the man in the alley; that man, once he saw Cord coming forward, turned back into the even deeper darkness between two buildings. Evidently he didn't want to be seen. Confident that it was Sam Coleman, and that Coleman only wanted a quiet place to talk, Cord followed him.

He entered the alley and saw the man's shape halfway down the wall of the building; Cord kept walking until, abruptly, he heard the scratch of movement in a black doorway behind him. He wheeled, and glimpsed a pistol, coming down hard.

He tried to duck away, but it was too late. The pistol smashed his hat, raked his skull open, knocked him down. Consciousness faded quickly as the ground came up to meet his face.

III

GEORGE SINCLAIR was a soft man, going to easy flesh, his shoulders were fattening up and he had the beginnings of a bay window, carefully concealed by the cut of his suit. He prided himself on his charm and good looks, and in fact, in a not rugged way, he was close to being handsome, with large pale blue eyes, a long blade of a nose, a heavy-lipped mouth, and a carefully combed mane of thick yellow hair.

He came into his office from the poker game and sat behind his polished desk after lighting a lamp. He put his spurless clean boots up and crossed them on the desk corner, cleaning his fingernails with a clasp knife. His losses at poker, small as they had been, rankled him.

He folded the knife and stood up, pocketing it; it was almost time to go, he thought; but then he looked at his pocket watch and found he had time to kill yet. He strolled restively to the door and stood within the opening, watching the traffic idle along the dark street.

Next door the sheriff's office was closed; no telling when Sheriff Morgan would be back. Sinclair was the only law in Aztec, for the time being; the thought put a wry smile on his face.

Across the street he saw Ruiz cruising the shaded walk. Where Ruiz was, Saunders could not be far away; but Sinclair had not seen Joel Saunders all afternoon. What was up? A number of cowhands were wandering the street; the two cafés were doing a lively trade; an ancient bearded wolfer from the mountains hobbled into the Gold Star Saloon, from which a bustle of laughter and music and strong easy talk flowed across the darkening town. The old man reminded Sinclair of the dead Overmile, only recently taken from his office.

Lamps bloomed behind windows, splashing swaths of

light across the boardwalks. The light mudwagon stagecoach from Arroyo Seco came clattering into town and hauled up before the Wells, Fargo depot with only one passenger—a drummer. The agent came out for the mail sack and the drummer went up to the hotel, lugging a carpetbag. Two ladies—Mrs. Kent and Judge Schollenberg's wife—came along the walk, their parasols folded, and Sinclair smiled, bowed, and removed his hat as they went by. The two women greeted him in chorus:

"Good evening, Marshal," with just the proper lilt in their voices.

"Ladies," he responded, and only straightened from his gallant bow when they had gone past. Then his eyes narrowed: waddling down the walk across the street was a huge figure, Bill Quade.

Sinclair stared hotly at the fat rancher; he was still seething under the treatment Quade had given him during the poker game. Now Quade seemed to feel the force of Sinclair's glance, for the bloated face turned and grinned across the street at the marshal before Quade turned into the alley that led back to Madam Annie's.

Sinclair pulled the office door shut behind him with undue energy and glanced upward. It was a dark moonless night; the stars made a chipped wash on the deep cobalt sky. He headed toward the livery stable.

There were no lamps burning within the place and when he entered he cursed upon tripping over a bridle-bit. He struck a match, found a lamp on the wall, and after lighting it turned up the wick. He cursed again at the penny-pinching tightness of Phil Landering, the storekeeper who also owned this stable, who hadn't yet found a hostler to replace the last drunken Papago who had disappeared with the contents of the Gold Star's till.

These thoughts produced from Sinclair a vitriolic stream of oaths while he set about the odious chore of capturing his own horse, tying it up, and saddling. It was not a chore he was accustomed to doing himself, and it took some time. Afterward he extinguished the lamp and rode out of the stable, ducking his head to clear the top of the big doorway.

He dusted his suit off as best he could and pointed the

horse out of town northward along the road that ran beside the river. Starlight dappled its shallow-running surface with pinpricks of light. He went up the road at a steady gait for over half an hour, whereupon he turned into a seldom-used side road that wound upward into a chain of hills that eventually gave way to the higher mountain ramparts.

He followed this twisting trace for two or three miles and then once again turned off into a lesser side path, little better than a game trail; it took him by a circuitous route through the hills, across a charred burn, and through thick stands of yucca, creosote, ocotillo, and all manner of spiny brush, until it came to a steep cutbank that represented the beginning of The Breaks, which was a vast patch of useless badlands at the edge of Jim Davenport's ranch. The trail followed the curved course of the cutbank, skirting the badlands, until after threading the rocks of a boulder field it dropped him into a quiet miniature valley golden with shortgrass. At the head of the valley, under a windmill rusty from disuse, stood a small but sturdy cabin, an outpost line-shack of Davenport's Bell ranch.

It had been with some interest, several months ago, that Sinclair had learned of Davenport's abandoning this line camp after losing a steady stream of stock to a bunch of hardscrabble rustlers who camped in the Breaks. Davenport had run the rustlers off, but he had expended so much time and manpower combing the loose cattle out of the tortuous Breaks that he had decided to close down this section; he had more than enough land as it was—unlike Quade, whose ranch was topographically confined and prevented from expanding by the corner of two intersecting mountain ranges, the river, and Martha Justice's Horsehead.

The little cabin stood empty nowadays and, so far as most people knew, unused. The grass, not having been browsed all spring, stood high and rich. Sinclair casually observed that, for a man less ambitious than himself, this little district would make a good range for a lone-wolf rancher.

Near the cabin marched a short line of trees that grew along the path of an underground watercourse. Sinclair put his horse into the near end of that grove and carefully

threaded the trees until he came out of them not far from the cabin. Here, in the heavier mass of tree shadow, he halted to survey the cabin and its surroundings.

The windows were dark, but a single horse stood hipshot, ground-hitched outside the door. It looked familiar but from this distance he could not be certain. A careful sweep of the land in view gave no cause for alarm, and so, presently, he gigged his pony forward and rode up to the cabin.

When he dismounted and dropped the reins near the other horse, he could see that it was indeed the pinto he had expected to see. He smiled confidently and stepped forward.

He had not reached the cabin door when it opened and May Davenport stood before him, her dark hair glistening in the starlight. She smiled, but it was a smile he had seen often and it worried him: it was a smile with reservations, uncertainties, regrets.

He put on a reassuring face and leaned to kiss her. He meant it to be a light kiss, friendly and almost careless, to encourage her to feel that nothing was wrong, that all was easy.

She pushed him gently away and caught her breath. Her eyes shone faintly; her breasts rose and fell quickly with her breathing.

"Am I late?" he said.

"No."

"Sorry I couldn't make it last night," he said.

"I waited half the night."

"Something came up."

"It's all right," she said. "We shouldn't expect too much, should we?" She backed into the darkness of the cabin and Sinclair followed her, nudging the warped door shut with his foot. It was pitch black inside. She said, "I'll light the lamp."

"That could be unhealthy. Suppose somebody comes along?"

"No one will. No one comes here."

There was the crack and flare of a match. She put it to the wick of the lamp, lowered the chimney and turned up the wick. Quiet yellow light illuminated the dusty cabin. She pushed the lamp out to the center of the rough-hewn

table and went back to sit on the straw-tick mattress of the single cot.

The room had a deserted look, cobwebs hung in the ceiling corners, there was the dry smell of abandonment. Her face, framed in long black hair, was strong-boned and oval, pretty without being delicate. The tight blouse and pleated riding-skirt showed off her trim, supple figure.

Sinclair, standing half way across the room from her, said roughly, "I can't keep away from you."

"We're no good for each other, are we?"

"Don't say that," he muttered, fixing her eyes with his stare. He looked at the single oilpaper-covered window, at the bare adobe walls, the hard-packed earth floor. He said, "This has got to stop. We've got to get out in the open with it."

"Let's not ask for too much."

"I wish," he said, and trailed off; and began again: "I wish I had the nerve to put it up to Jim."

"He'd never understand," she said. "He hasn't got a compassionate bone in his body. He doesn't care about me or anyone else."

"I wish you hadn't married him. I wish he was dead. If I had the guts I'd kill him myself."

"I'm glad you don't," she murmured.

He shook his head. "I don't understand you."

"I'm sick of toughs. This country is full of men with nothing but pride and doubled fists. You're the only man I know who's civilized."

"Civilized?" he said, with a short bitter laugh. "I'm just yellow." He was in a dark mood.

"No," she said quietly. "You're considerate, you're gentle. Even your little courtesies mean a lot. Why do you think women like you so much? It's not because you're tough."

He laughed. "Hardly."

"You and I don't belong here, George."

"Just a little while longer," he said. "Then we'll clear out. Together. We'll go back East where we can live like human beings."

"Why must we wait?"

He shook his head. "I've got to get some money to-

gether. I can't take you with me unless we can afford to live as we wish."

"I'm not particular. Not any more."

"I won't live in squalor any more," he said, with sudden vehemence.

"Where will you get the money? Your job doesn't pay that much."

"I've got some irons in the fire," he said vaguely. "It won't be long now." He took off his suit coat and looked at it. "Threadbare," he said, and cursed. He dropped it over the table and went to sit beside her on the cot. He took her hand between his palms and regarded her gently.

He turned around and kissed her on the lips and felt her turn, straining against him.

"This is cozy," a voice said.

Sinclair wheeled, almost losing his balance. Just inside the door stood Joel Saunders, laughing gently. "Real cozy," Saunders said.

"Get out," Sinclair growled. "Get out of here, you fool."

"Why," Saunders said, "I was just beginnin' to enjoy the show."

"You filthy pig," May said. Her voice had the scorch of acid.

Saunders chuckled. "You ain't in much of a position to throw insults around, Mrs. Davenport."

"Get out of here," she shouted. When Saunders stood fast she suddenly swung away to face the wall. Her body began to lurch with sobs. Sinclair gripped her arm and squeezed it, trying to lend her a strength he wasn't sure he had himself. He mustered bravado in his tone when he addressed Saunders: "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Why," Saunders murmured, "I was just ridin' around huntin' up strays."

"At this hour of the night?" May said. "The only men who ride other men's property at night are thieves. What would happen to you if I said I'd found you on our property at midnight?"

Saunders' smile was untroubled. "All right," he said mildly. "That makes us even, don't it? You don't say anything about

seeing me on your husband's grass, and I don't talk about you. Fair enough?"

"You animal," she said, gratingly. She stood, bravely facing him.

Sinclair wanted to pistol whip Saunders, beat him senseless; but he only stood staring at Saunders, not speaking. Saunders watched them with unhurried amusement.

May gave Sinclair a worried look and went to the door. He followed her outside. Saunders came up to the doorway, a chunky block of shadow, watching. May got up on her horse, Sinclair holding her elbow; she looked down and whispered, "Don't worry. Take care."

"I'm the one who should say that to you," he intoned bitterly.

She smiled slightly, a faraway and bittersweet smile. She wheeled her horse and drummed away at a canter.

Enraged, Sinclair wheeled toward the cabin door. "You Goddam fool!"

"Simmer down," Saunders murmured.

Sinclair's voice dropped: "Listen to me, Joel. I don't give a damn how tough you think you are. You ever trouble her and I'll blow you in half with a shotgun."

"I'm scared," Saunders said contemptuously.

"You think I'm fooling?" Sinclair demanded.

"All right—all right. Ease off. I didn't ride all the way out here just to watch you make a pass at Davenport's wife. I got something more important on my mind."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"I got my sources," Saunders said vaguely. "Listen, the widow's due back on Monday."

"What?"

"Yeah." Saunders took a crumpled letter out of his pocket and Sinclair squinted, reading in the poor light.

Finally Sinclair said, "Who's 'Dave'?"

"Cord."

"So," Sinclair said. "She got suspicious. I always said she would." Panic stiffened him. His anger at Saunders was forgotten in the face of this new threat. "She's hired Cord," he muttered, confused.

"So what? Quade's hired Sam Coleman. Coleman can beat

Cord, if it comes to that. Quit frettin' about Cord—it's the time element we've got to worry about."

"Monday?" Sinclair said. He looked at the letter again, frowning. "Where did you get this?"

"A friend," Saunders said drily.

"Monday," Sinclair murmured. "My God—tomorrow's Saturday."

"Do tell," Saunders said drily. Inside the cabin the lamp, flickering on low oil, went out.

"What's Quade got to say about it?"

"I ain't seen him yet, but I can guess. He's tired of all this pussyfootin' we've been doing. He'll say to hell with it, shoot her down."

"He can't do that!"

"Can't he?"

"Even in this country, you don't get away with shooting women."

Saunders shrugged. "He'll hire it done. Give some gents enough money and they'll do anything. Besides, nobody cottons to Martha Justice around these parts. She's too damned high and mighty."

"I won't be a part of it," Sinclair said flatly.

"Most likely you won't have any choice."

Sinclair lifted his hand, loosely balled into an ineffectual fist. "I didn't bargain for anything like this, Joel."

"Who did? But we're in too deep now. We can't quit. Soon as the widow sets foot on Horsehead she'll know what we been up to."

"She won't know I had any part in it," Sinclair said. "There's nothing to connect me with your doings. All I did was get you buyers in Mexico. Nobody will ever trace that far."

"Backin' out, George?" Saunders' voice was low and wicked. "I don't reckon Bill Quade will think much of that idea. Not with you knowing as much as you do."

The marshal bit his lip and turned away; he walked as far as the fringe of cottonwoods, and turned back, trying to think it out. All along, he had had the feeling something was going to go wrong. But greed had propelled him and now it was too late: he had to stick with it and hope it

would work out. He came back to the cabin and picked up the reins of his horse, preparing to mount.

"You leave a horse standing out like that," Saunders said idly, "you ought to loosen the cinches."

Sinclair grunted and grabbed the horn, pulling himself up into the saddle. Saunders walked forward and grasped the bit chains, holding the horse's head. "I wouldn't fret too much, George. You'll get your split."

"I damn well better get my split," Sinclair said. He yanked the reins, jerking the horse's head away from Saunders' grip, and plunged his heels into the horse's flanks, charging away into the night.

Dave Cord drifted into consciousness slowly. The sun was streaming in through the window; the first thing he noticed was that, in this country where dust made a coating on everything, the windowpane was clean. Then he became aware of his surroundings.

He lay, naked but for his drawers, on a bed between clean sheets. It was a strange bed, a strange room. The sun came in at a low angle but, not knowing what time it was, he couldn't tell whether the window faced east or west. He turned his head on the pillow and a sudden wave of pain made him giddy. His fingers explored his face and discovered a bandage wrapped around his head, a thick pad covering one temple under the bandage. His mouth tasted bitter and cottony. He wondered where the devil he was.

The window was open a few inches at the top. Through it came faint sounds of movement: the rattle of a wagon, the muffled tramp of a horse's hoofs in the dust, the jingle of bit chains and creak of saddle leather going by outside. He was still in Aztec, then. The air was hot and acrid.

He turned his head slowly, gingerly, and saw a door on which hung his clothes and gunbelt. In the corner stood a commode with a cracked mirror above it, a washbasin and towel and bar of soap. There were two chairs, a small table with a lamp, another light on the wall near the door. The walls were adobe stucco; there was an oval-topped fireplace built into the far corner, its adobe blending into the walls. It was all totally unfamiliar.

He opened his mouth to speak: "Anybody home?" His voice came out a fuzzy croak and it made his head throb to move his jaw. He cleared his throat and tried again, this time speaking through tight-set teeth without opening his jaw: "Hey!"

Presently he heard footsteps beyond the door. The latch turned downward and the door opened inward, admitting the wiry, gray-haired Doc Webb. He walked forward smiling professionally, leaned over and peered into Cord's face. "About time you came around."

"This your house, Doc?"

"It is." The doctor thumbed back one of Cord's eyelids and pushed his face up close to peer into the eye. "How does your head feel?"

"Like a horse stepped on it."

The doctor straightened up and nodded. "I guess you'll live," he said drily. "Slight concussion, no hemorrhaging."

Cord rubbed his jaw. It was clean-shaven; he looked up in surprise. "You shave all your patients?"

"My wife does. She can't stand disorder."

"I suppose she washed me up too?"

"No, she put me up to that," Doc Webb said. "I never saw a carcass with so many bullet scars. It's a wonder you're still alive. You must have been a hell of a man to scrap with."

"That was a long time ago," Cord murmured. "What time is it?"

"Going on supper time. Sunday."

"Sunday? I was hit Friday night."

"You were delirious for a while." The doctor looked uncomfortable.

"I see," Cord said slowly. "I suppose I did a lot of talking."

"I couldn't make sense out of most of it. I gather you had a brother named Walt. He died."

"You might as well say it," Cord said wearily.

"You killed him." The doctor had no expression on his face.

"Yeah. My own brother." Cord glanced at his gun, hanging on the door.

"We all have our crosses to carry," Doc Webb said gently. He seemed to shake himself. "I guess you're hungry."

Cord hadn't thought about it. The doctor said, "Don't go

anywhere," in a dry tone, and went out of the room. Cord heard him talking to someone, and a woman's voice answering; shortly Doc Webb came back into the room. "She'll bring you something directly." He sat down on the straight chair near the bed. "Somebody laid your temple open with the sight of a sixgun. It was a powerful blow, to cut through your hat. Do you remember it?"

"I didn't get a look at him," Cord said sourly.

"Too bad," the doctor said emotionlessly. "There's a mess of trouble brewing up in this valley. First Overmile, now you. I don't like the smell of it." He got up and stepped out of the room, softly pulling the door to.

In a little while Mrs. Webb came in with a tray of food. Each bite made Cord's temples throb, but he got most of the meal inside him, and drank the coffee hot and black. After the doctor's wife took the tray out, he lay back frowning, trying to force his mind to work. It was hard to do; he had become accustomed to turning all his efforts to forgetting.

The sun fell down and through the window he could see red and yellow reflections of sunset in the clouds. In time it faded to twilight, and that in turn to darkness. Concentration taxed his brain; his head pained him terribly and soon he drifted into restless sleep. . . .

When he next awoke it was pitch dark. He lay staring at the invisible ceiling and felt the wincing needles of pain steady in his skull. He cursed silently and lapsed into a dull semi-wakefulness until the sky by turns became gray, yellow, pink, and blue; until the town came awake with its little sounds of life; until the door opened and Doc Webb fixed him with an irreverent cheerful smile. "Breakfast will be along directly," the doctor said. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Cord lied. "When do I get out of here?"

"As soon as you can walk without falling down, I reckon." Doc Webb held up his hand restrainingly. "Wait till after breakfast, anyway."

Cord complied reluctantly. It was Monday morning and Martha Justice would be arriving to meet him sometime today. He hardly tasted the heaping portions of buckwheat cakes, ham, eggs, and coffee he put down. When Mrs.

Webb took his tray and closed the door, Cord swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up slowly.

The pulsing pain at his temple was less severe than it had been earlier; still, when he stood straight, a wave of dizziness made him momentarily feel faint. He tightened his muscles against it and padded across to the door where his clothes hung. He climbed into them, buttoned his shirt, tugged his boots on, and buckled the gun around him. Mechanically he went through his pockets—and stood bolt still, frowning. The letter was gone.

He pulled the door open and strode down the hallway.

When he came into the front parlor a wave of antiseptic smells met him. The parlor doubled as Doc's surgery; it was crammed with instruments and cases full of bandages, serums, and supplies. Doc looked up from his desk and said, "Any dizziness?"

"No."

The doctor gave him a quizzical, disbelieving look. Cord advanced into the room and said, "There was a letter in my pocket."

"What do you mean?"

"It's gone now."

Doc stiffened. "Are you accusing me of something, friend?"

Cord shook his head. It hurt. "Sorry," he murmured. "Maybe that was what he wanted—the gent who buffaloed me." He looked out across the sun-dried lawn and tiny flowerbeds and white fence at the dusty street. "Doc, tell me what you know about Joel Saunders."

"What about him?"

"Who is he?"

Doc shrugged. "Horsehead foreman. Hugh Justice hired him as bronc-buster, or so he said. Actually I think he hired Saunders to throw a scare into Bill Quade. Justice and Quade never got along—they were always accusing each other of stealing cattle. But Justice got into some trouble that had nothing to do with Quade, and then Justice got in a panic and tried to shoot his way out of the valley. The sheriff had to kill him. That was last winter.

"Justice's widow promoted Saunders to foreman—she's a pretty tough woman and she figured not to back down to

Quade. Personally I don't think she could have made a worse choice than Saunders. He's mean, he's shifty, and I wouldn't be surprised if he had a record behind him. But I'll say this much—Quade hasn't given them much trouble."

"He hired Sam Coleman," Cord pointed out.

Doc Webb shrugged again. "Coleman's been keeping his nose clean. Matter of fact he seems a damn sight more pleasant than his boss or Saunders." He studied Cord attentively. "Why all the questions?"

"I'm trying to figure out what's going on around here," Cord said. "Something doesn't add up."

"You can say that again."

Cord grimaced. "Yeah." He dug into his pocket, heavy with the coin he had won in the Friday night poker game. "I'm obliged for your help, Doc. What do I owe you?"

Doc Webb's shoulders lifted and dropped; it was a frequent gesture of his. "I'm not much used to being paid in cash. Say a couple of dollars."

Cord put five dollars in silver on the desk. "Thank Mrs. Webb for me, will you?"

"Take care of yourself," the doctor said.

Cord put on a dry expression and went out.

Balls of gray cloud hung in the sky, one of them obscuring the sun. The air was damp, hot, depressing. He went down the stone-bordered walk neatly laid between the two strips of lawn, went through the gate in the whitewashed little fence, and turned left to go up toward the center of town. The sun slid out from behind its cloud and blistered the plain. He could hear the slight slap of water in the river and, far off, the clattering run of an approaching wagon or coach, the whoop of the driver and crack of the lash.

He walked slowly to avoid jarring his head. By the time he passed Clark's Hardware Emporium, the stagecoach was visible on the hilltop beyond the far end of town. It came swaying and bucking down the gentle pitch of the road and leaned precariously as it entered the foot of the street. It was, he saw, the night coach probably from Lordsburg, a big Abbott & Downing stage with canvas flaps tied up on either side, pulled by three teams of powerful matched horses. The driver put his lash away in the whip-socket and

braced his foot against the rocking brake handle. A huge pall of dust followed the coach, hanging suspended thickly in its wake.

Cord was half a block away when the coach careened to a halt in front of the Wells, Fargo depot. The station hostler immediately stepped forward to grab the heads of the lead team; the driver threw down his reins and climbed down off the high seat, going along the side of the coach to open the door.

George Sinclair was standing in his office doorway across the street, watching the coach with an unhappy expression. Riding down the street on a big palomino was Jim Davenport, dressed in his Sunday clothes. At an angle across the street in the Gold Star's corner door stood the bartender.

Abruptly an old, almost forgotten instinct raised the little hairs on the back of Dave Cord's neck. It affected him as though a cocked gun had been presented at his face: long unused muscles dropped his body into a familiar crouch and his head swung in a quick arc while his eyes, trained to perceive every smallest detail, took in the whole street inch by inch in the space of a brief second.

The long curve of a woman's leg appeared at the open door of the stagecoach; and up in a second-story window of the hotel, Cord's glance caught a faint glimmer of sunlight reflected on blue gun metal.

IV

ALL THE OLD SKILLS flowed into Cord's arm as it slipped the gun from his holster and cocked it in swift synchronization with the blinding rise of his arm. The sights settled down at arm's length: he pulled the trigger.

The gun bucked and roared. While it heeled back in recoil, his thumb snapped the hammer back, his finger tightened again and the second gunshot followed hard on the heels of the first.

From the hotel's second-story window a carbine dropped away, hitting the ledge underneath and striking the boardwalk. A man pitched out of the window and hung belly-down over the sill for a stretching interval before he flopped outward and hit the sidewalk with a muffled crash.

Every man in the street stood in a trance of mute shock. The stagecoach horses reared, almost pulling the hostler off his feet. A block away Jim Davenport tried to calm his horse down.

Cord dropped off the walk into ankle-deep dust and took long measured strides to the hotel. One look at the ambusher told him the man was dead. He slid his gun into holster.

George Sinclair ran up, breathing fast. "What the hell?"

The woman stepped down from the coach—Martha Justice, tall and unshaken. She pushed two men aside and came up to face Cord across the dead ambusher's body. When Cord looked up he saw her watching him. She had a taut-boned beauty that was sharpened by the glitter of excitement in her eyes; but her face was calm. She was proud and fully round in her dove-gray costume. A little wind roughed up her brown hair and the hazel eyes held Cord directly. She spoke two words: "Thank you."

Marshal Sinclair looked around. "What?" His hand touched his gun and he tried to face Cord's level stare.

"Take your hand off that gun, George," said Martha Justice. She pointed at the dead man. "He had a rifle aimed at me."

Sinclair's mouth was hanging open. Jim Davenport rode his horse right into the edge of the crowd and dismounted, elbowing arrogantly through the growing knot of the curious.

Over the excited murmur of disjointed questions he spoke to the woman: "Are you all right?"

"Yes." When she spoke her eyes did not leave Cord's.

Sinclair said, "Does anybody know this man?" He indicated the dead ambusher.

No one answered. Cord stood with his hand on his gun and his eyes locked with those of the tall woman who stood facing him. A thousand things traveled the path of that glance. Davenport's voice cut roughly across his consciousness: "I thought he'd try something like this."

"Who?" Martha Justice said.

"Joel Saunders," Davenport replied. "I had a man posted as lookout on Horsehead." He paused and his voice dropped. "The man's dead. I found him two hours ago. His foot was stuck in his stirrup. He'd been dragged to death by his own horse—but he was Jeremy MacLeod and there wasn't a better horseman on my crew. He was murdered, to shut his mouth—to keep him from warning me." Davenport was regarding George Sinclair steadily. "George, only one man knew about the threat I'd made to mount my crew against Saunders. Only one man could have warned Saunders."

Sinclair's already shocked face recoiled from the accusation. "You must be crazy," he said. "What the hell?"

Martha Justice said evenly, "Don't be a fool, Jim. If anybody caught Jeremy MacLeod they'd have known he worked for you. The question is, what did he see that was so important he had to be killed?"

Davenport said bluntly, "Saunders has robbed you blind, Martha. You can count all the cows on Horsehead with your fingers."

"I see," she said. There was no emotion in her voice or her face. Cord wondered, as he had wondered at times in the far past, if anything could ever shake her icy calm. She was a beautiful, regal woman—but what could penetrate her armor?

Davenport acted as though he were taking charge. He said to Cord, "We're mighty obliged to you."

"Yeah," Cord said.

He didn't like the crowd or the dead man; he didn't like Davenport or Sinclair. He aimed a meaningful glance at Martha Justice and turned away; he glimpsed Sinclair's half frightened eyes and pushed past the marshal. He went through the crowd as if it wasn't there.

The stagecoach driver, a fat grizzled man smelling of chaw tobacco, hurried to catch up: "I seen the whole thing," he said excitedly. "I want to buy you a drink, friend. That was quick work."

"Some other time," Cord said dismally. He shook the man off and went on alone, crossing the street, pushing into the deserted hotel and climbing the stairs to his room.

He was washing his hands in the basin when knuckles

rapped the door. He toweled his hands dry, carefully dry, before he went back and opened the door.

Martha Justice walked in past him and turned to face him. "I just heard about Overmile," she said without preliminary. "And that crack you got on the head. I think it all adds up."

"Do you," he said, and added, "That's nice." He couldn't help the edge of sarcasm on his voice; it always came when he was with her.

Her eyes, half hooded, studied him. "You got my letter," she said, "and you came."

"Yeah," he murmured. "I came."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you come, Dave?"

He shrugged. "Curiosity, maybe."

"Maybe," she echoed. "And maybe not?"

"What difference does it make?"

"You're not looking at me, Dave."

He turned, stared at her, cursed. He wheeled to the bed and unslung his saddlebags from the bedstead where they hung. "I knew it was a mistake to come down here," he said. "I should have burned your Goddamned letter."

"But you didn't." She came close to him, close enough to press his hand back down to the iron bedstead with the saddlebags. She turned, then, and sat down, and said more quietly, "I need help, Dave."

"That's the first time I've ever heard you ask for help," he observed. "In fact, it may be the first time I've heard you ask for anything at all."

"All right," she said. "I'm asking."

"I'm listening," he said, reluctantly.

"Don't act tough with me," she warned. "Remember I know all about you."

"No, you don't," he said. "If you did you wouldn't be here—you wouldn't have written that letter."

"Sure," she said. "I'd heard you'd turned yellow and hung up your gun. But it didn't look that way to me just now, out in that street." She waved a hand irritably. "Sit down. I don't like having to look up when I talk to you."

"I like it here," he said mildly, standing with his hip cocked against the windowsill.

She sighed. "I wish I could find a few more like you, Dave. Men who wouldn't let me push them around."

"Like Joel Saunders," he suggested drily.

"I made a mistake there," she admitted. "He was all right as long as I was there to keep an eye on him. He kept Quade off my back and kept my own crew in line—they didn't like working for a woman but Joel kept the fear of God in them. All right, it's done. By now Joel will know his scheme to put me out of the way has backfired. He'll be running hell for leather. According to Jim Davenport, he had my herd bunched at the west end of the ranch a few days ago. That means he hasn't had time to move the herd far—nor time to sell them off. He must have them hidden somewhere in the mountains. He's on the run now but he's too greedy to leave them behind."

"And so," Cord finished for her, "you want me to track him down and get your cows back."

"Exactly."

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head. "I've retired. I'm an old man, Martha."

"Old," she said, twisting her mouth. "What, forty?"

"That's old, in my trade. It's ancient. I've given up fighting."

"Take a whiff of your own gun barrel," she retorted.

He grimaced. "All right, then look at it another way. I'm just one man. What good do you think I can do?"

"I think you can stop Joel. I think you can get those cattle back for me."

"A pretty tall order."

"Yes."

"To hell with it," he said. "To hell with you." He went to the door and pulled it open and held it that way.

She said softly, "What do you think Walt would think of you now, Dave?"

Anger boiled in him. "Look," he said. "I just saved you from a bullet in the gut. You owe me a favor. Leave me alone."

"You won't be alone," she said. "You'll have Walt's ghost

for company. And Overmile's. And that Bell rider—what was his name, MacLeod? There'll be more like them, Dave, if you don't stop Joel now."

"That's not my lookout," he said. "Get the hell out of here, Martha."

"I can't afford to," she said. "I need you, Dave. You're the only man who can run Joel down before he gets away."

"I'm not the law. Ask Sinclair."

She laughed hollowly. "He'd jump at his own shadow."

"What about Davenport? He's got a crew."

"Turn him loose to crash around in the mountains, and he'd warn them off before he got within five miles of them. He's an ox."

"Well," he observed, "it's your problem, not mine. You made that decision a long time ago, remember? It was me or Hugh Justice, and you took Justice."

Her expression was compounded of exasperation and anger. "That's not true," she said. "I didn't even know Hugh Justice when I left Trail City. I was tired of wrangling, that's all—tired of fighting with you every day, every hour."

"So you picked some poor little hairpin you could lord it over," he said caustically.

She smiled slightly. "I'd hardly have called Hugh that type. He was as tough as any man I ever met."

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. She said, "But he was a crook. I only found that out afterward—after the sheriff killed him."

He spoke bluntly: "Did you love him?"

She turned palms up. "I respected him, which is more than I can say for anybody else in this valley." Her lip twisted. "Present company excepted, of course."

He was still standing by the door, holding it. She came toward him and stopped, and said in a half-contemptuous tone, "Let's get going, Dave. We're wasting time."

"I don't need a woman's help," he said.

"Then do it alone."

"Go to hell."

"I probably will," she said hollowly. "All right, I'll do it myself." Her shoulders dropped a little and when she turned through the doorway, she looked tired and beaten.

Cord knew she was putting on an act but he found himself moving against his will. He heard a petulant voice: "Wait a minute," and realized it was his own voice.

She turned quickly and was immediately hard again. Her eyes glittered; she said, "Come on. We haven't got time to waste."

"I hate your guts," he told her. He followed her out of the hotel. She stopped on the walk and said, "Saddle two horses for us and meet me at the mercantile." Then she walked away up-street.

Cursing himself for a fool, Cord went down to the stable. He saddled his own dun and selected a long-legged, deep-chested roan for the woman. When both horses were cinched up he mounted the dun and led the roan out of the stable and up the street to the store.

Before he reached it, Martha Justice came out on the walk, dressed in a man's shirt and a pair of butternut trousers that were too big for her. A sixgun was belted around her hips. Her hair flowed lawlessly around her shoulders. She had a sack full of supplies. When Cord came up she threw the sack across her saddle and tied it down.

Phil Landering came out of the store frowning, carrying two heavy round canteens. Cord took one of them. The woman turned and said to Landering, "Put it on Horsehead. If I don't come back, you can add this horse and saddle to the bill." She turned without another word and ignored Cord's offered hand, swinging up into the saddle with the expert grace of a born horsewoman. "Come on," she said impatiently, and broke her horse into an immediate gallop before Cord had a chance to mount.

As he ran out of town trying to catch up with her, he saw George Sinclair standing by the office with a deeply troubled expression, chewing his lower lip. Then the town fell behind and Cord's powerful dun closed the distance between them. He reached over to grab the bridle of the roan and slowed it, along with his own horse, to a trot; he said angrily, "You want to windbreak these horses in the first half mile? We've got a long way to go."

"All right," she said calmly. She made no apology. "We'll go to Horsehead and try to pick up the trail."

"This whole thing is stupid," he said. "It's suicide. You must be out of your mind."

"A thousand dollars if we run him down," was her only reply.

With the sudden wheel of decision, Sinclair turned back into his office and began to rifle the drawers of his desk. When he was through he had a littered pile of belongings and papers stacked on top of the desk. He found himself abstractly surprised by the small amount of property he found that was worth taking. The rest—Wanted posters, office correspondence, a half-empty whisky bottle, odds and ends—he shoveled back into the drawers, not caring when an inkwell broke and soaked a stack of papers with black.

He went back behind the cellblock to the little shack he called home. There he took out an ancient pair of big saddlebags and began to stuff them with clothes and personal belongings. When he was through they bulged full, one side packed with all the canned foods he could fit into it. He filled his canteen at the pump and carried canteen and saddlebags back to the office; he took out his bedroll and poncho, rolled them together, and stood impatiently before the gun rack. Finally he selected a .44 carbine. He filled his pockets with ammunition and carried his armfull of possessions out to the stable. He put them down on a packing case and reached down a coiled rope, and went out back into the corrals.

Half a dozen horses caromed spiritedly around the smaller pen. Sinclair walked into the larger corral, snaking a big loop out. His bay stood in the middle of a knot of horses. Cursing, Sinclair slapped one of them with his lasso. They began to wheel around the pen, raising lung-stifling palls of dust and straw.

Sinclair sneezed. He went after his horse and it retreated into a corner. It dodged him, wheeled back on itself, ran around and seemed to laugh at him. Sinclair uttered a stream of oaths that grew louder and more furious with each toss of the lariat loop.

Finally, almost exhausted and buffeted by spooked horses, Sinclair got his loop over the bay's head. He led the horse

into the stable, cursing. He couldn't find his own bridle; he took another and it was not adjusted for his horse's head size; he threw it down and went back to hunt for his own.

He found it in the dust. The bay practically chopped his hand off when he pried the bit between the horse's teeth. Made skittish by the chase, the bay shook off the saddle-blanket when Sinclair tossed it over the bay's back. Sinclair screamed at the horse and hit it with his fist. The horse dodged away and rolled its eyes at him.

He stepped back and leaned against a stall partition. "I've got to get a grip on myself. God." He spoke soothingly to the horse; he put the blanket on, heaved the saddle up and buckled the double Texas cinches up girth-tight, using his boot against the horse's belly. Then he lashed his belongings down with concho strings on the saddle, rammed the carbine into the leather boot, and led the bay out into the daylight to mount up.

The horse reared, almost pitching him off. He snatched the horn, locked his grip on it and hung precariously until the bay plunged down onto its forefeet. When the horse threatened to bunch and buck, he plunged heels into its flanks and bent forward, urging it into a gallop. If the horse insisted on wasting energy, it might as well be going somewhere.

When the bay calmed down, he steadied it to a canter. There was a faint smell of dust in the air, probably hanging there long after Jim Davenport's passage. The road was bone-dry and loose as powder. Clouds built up on a fringe of the sky and there was a faint promise of rain, there.

Sinclair tried to think logically. First Cord had foiled the ambush attempt on Martha Justice's life. The ambusher had been a nameless two-bit tough, one of a breed who would gladly have slit his mother's throat for a hundred dollars. No one knew the man. At least that was a break, Sinclair thought. But Davenport had put in his two cents' worth, revealing to the widow that most of her cattle were missing.

Davenport had blustered and yelled, with the whole crowd there to hear him. He had made it crystal clear that Joel Saunders had stolen Martha Justice's cattle. Davenport had offered to put his entire crew at the widow's disposal to hunt down Saunders and the stolen herd. The widow had

just looked at Davenport and turned wordlessly away, walking up to the hotel, leaving Davenport standing there, staring at her receding back, forgetting to close his mouth.

Macready the carpenter had knelt by the dead man, like some sort of ghoul; Macready had said, "Some of you boys carry him over to my place."

The widow had disappeared into the hotel. Sinclair had kept his attention on her until then. He had never been able to understand Martha Justice. In a land where femininity was prized, she made a point of not giving an inch to any man. She was as tough as they came—and at the same time she was a graceful, beautiful woman. Sinclair couldn't see why she had turned down Davenport's offer of help.

Was it because she suspected Davenport of being tied up with Joel Saunders? If so, that would be the most ironic touch of all. Of the widow's two neighbors, Davenport was the innocent one. It was Bill Quade, who was as unscrupulous as he was tough, who had seen the opportunity to break Horsehead to its knees and then take it over, annexing it to his own Rocking M ranch.

It might have worked, if the widow hadn't returned early and aborted their plans. With a red wrath Sinclair resented that turn of events. Nothing ever seemed to go right. It should have been easy. The stolen herd, still pastured close by in the mountains, would have been across the border in another week; the widow would have had no way of proving anything against Saunders or Quade. She would have been forced to sell out. As it was, all of them were caught in a bind. Barring a sudden turn of luck—which Sinclair doubted would materialize—the game was all but up.

He cursed Quade's recent discovery of segments of Sinclair's past that Sinclair had assiduously attempted to conceal. Quade had made a weapon of his knowledge that Sinclair had once had dealings with certain shady Mexican cattle buyers. Sinclair had been caught by Quade's web, forced to act as liaison in the business of disposing of the stolen Horsehead cattle. He was to have received a third of the proceeds; now the only reward in sight was a six-by-eight cell.

With things as they now stood, Sinclair stood between

two fires: if either of them were caught, there was no doubt Quade or Saunders would not hesitate to implicate him; and if the promised Horsehead cattle did not appear in Mexico within a reasonable time, the Mexican buyers would blame Sinclair. He had seen the vengeance of the Mexican outlaws, carried out on men who were out of favor.

Sinclair saw his last hopes of fortune fading away. He would be lucky to get out of the country with his skin. He ought to ride straight out of the valley and put miles between himself and the Yankee, between himself and the Mexicans. But there was one other consideration that stayed his spurs: May Davenport.

So thinking, he put his horse off the road as soon as he had passed beyond sight of the town. He threaded a field of brown-eyed yellow daisies, half withered in the sun, and penetrated the cool green shade of the cottonwood groves that lined the banks of the Yankee. He cruised downriver until he found a place that looked firm enough to use as a ford; he put his bay into the water and went across. Spray splashed up by the bay's hoofs soaked him to the hips. He left the trees on the western bank and cut away in a wide circle around the town, so as to avoid being seen; then he turned northwest and rode for Bell ranch.

V

AS THEY DREW NEAR Horsehead headquarters, they saw occasional cattle, browsing singly and by twos. Martha Justice said drily, "It looks as though I didn't give them time to clean up." It made Cord wonder for perhaps the hundredth time if she ever allowed her iron will to bend at all. He had known other hard-bitten women but every one of them had been horse-faced and fat.

His head pulsed with pain; the hat sat high atop the bandage. It occurred to him that he had not replaced the

two cartridges he had spent on the ambusher in Aztec. He drew the gun, punched out the two empties, and reloaded.

When he looked up at the woman riding beside him, he found her eyes on him. They looked hollow. In no more than an instant's time she lifted her guard again and he was unable to penetrate the screen of indifference she showed. He checked to see that all six chambers were loaded; he dropped the firing-pin between two cartridges and holstered the six-gun.

There was a chipped flinty glitter flashed up by mica particles in the ground, making him narrow his lids almost shut. The land swept away in gentle pale undulations in all directions. They approached the Horsehead yard and Martha Justice let her hand fall casually to the gun butt at her hip. The way she touched it reminded Cord that she knew how to use it.

The main house at the head of the yard was a massive adobe structure, high-ceilinged, one story high, built in a U-shape around an interior patio in the Spanish style. The great unshaven logs that formed the rafters protruded high up from the outside walls. Small windows were set into the thick walls. Along the front ran a galleried veranda with a water olla hanging in its net of ropes under the porch roof.

The yard was dusty. A dog sat in the shade underneath the porch, looking out at them, its tongue hanging slack, too parched and hot to move. Scattered around the main house was a litter of outbuildings—cookshack, bunkhouse, stables, smokehouse, tackshed, barn. There was a covered well in the exact center of the yard. Beyond the barn and stables stretched half a dozen pole corrals. There were only two horses in the enclosures and both of them looked spavined. The place had a dismal deserted air.

Cord said, "Looks like they picked the place clean."

He dismounted by the well and dropped the bucket in to the end of its rope, and cranked it up full of water. After he drank and splashed his face he let the horse have a go at the bucket. He found the horse almost dry of sweat, and nodded with satisfaction. Martha Justice, inspecting the abandoned place, said, "It's like a ghost town.

She led her horse to the water. "I had forty horses in those corrals."

"Saunders didn't miss a trick."

"I was a fool to trust him," she said.

Cord stirred. The dog still squatted under the porch, panting. Martha Justice said, "Joel wouldn't have thought anything up this big, not by himself. Somebody put him up to it. Somebody with big ideas."

"You picking any favorites?"

"I don't know. The world's full of crooks." She turned on him quickly. "How about it, Dave?"

"You pulled a trick on me, tossing Walt back in my face."

"Going back on your word, Dave?"

"I told you not to expect anything. I'm retired, remember?"

"You said that before. You're too much of a man to let one accident ruin the rest of your life, Dave."

He let it ride; he didn't want to argue. He thought the conversation was dead but Martha Justice revived it:

"The man you killed in Antelope was your brother. You killed your brother Walt. It's still got you tied in knots."

"Any idiot can see that," he said softly.

"What happened that night, Dave? What made you shoot him?"

He shot an angry glare at her. She was putting it right up to him: she was forcing him to remember what he had spent a year trying to forget. He said, "You've got no feelings at all."

"I want you to tell me what happened."

"What for?" he demanded. "You find the weak point in a man and you start digging away at it with a needle. You twist and tear and poke. God, I hate you."

She shook her head. "I can't afford to rely on half a man. I need all of you for this job. That's why I've got to needle it out of you. Put it out in the light where you can have a look at it."

"Sure," he said. "It'll make me feel just a whole lot better."

"I don't give a damn how it makes you feel. I just want to get it out of you. You won't have room for it on this job."

His head throbbed. He pulled his hat down and picked up the reins to mount his horse. "You can go plumb to hell," he told her, and put his foot in the stirrup.

"All right. I'll go after them myself."

It stopped him. He looked around from his awkward position, one foot up in the stirrup, and studied her even composure. After a moment he said softly, "You'd do that, too."

"You're damned right. Do you think I intend to let a cheap bunch of crooks make off with my whole herd? Not without a fight."

"Fight—fight. I'm sick of fights. It's not my fight, not this time."

"Then you've turned into a coward."

"All right," he said. "Have it any way you want it." He grabbed the horn and swung up into the saddle and settled his right foot into the stirrup. "I'm yellow and I'm thirsty and I think you're all the way crazy. What do I want to get myself killed for? They're not my cattle."

"Keep it up," she said, with an amused hard smile. "You'll talk yourself into it."

"You're a bitch."

"I guess I am," she agreed. "I have to be. Don't make me mention Walt again. Get down off that horse."

He didn't move. He sat looking down at her and said, "I don't take orders from women."

It made her throw back her head and laugh, exposing the long graceful curve of her neck. She said, "Men are all the same. Too proud to take a woman's orders. What makes you that much better than me? Isn't my money as good as a man's?"

He made no reply. She stepped forward and put a hand on the dun's bridle and looked up into his face. She didn't shade her eyes against the sun. "All right," she said, "I'll play my last card. I'll throw myself into the bargain."

He laughed hollowly. "You've got a hell of a high opinion of yourself, haven't you? What makes you think I'd risk my life for your body when I can go to Madam Annie's for two bucks?"

Her lips flattened against her teeth. Suddenly she was

ugly. "You bastard." Her hand touched her gun butt and he saw the knuckles whiten. He sat still.

"Go on," she said hoarsely. "Get out of here. Otherwise I just might put a bullet in you myself."

He studied her. "Those cows mean a hell of a lot to you, don't they?"

"They're just cows. But without them this ranch goes under."

"What's so important about a goddam piece of land?"

"If you don't know the answer to that, I can't explain it to you." Her face was straight and structured, all hard lines; but they were beautiful lines. The wind roughed up her hair and her firm, proud breasts stretched the fabric of the plaid shirt.

He hooked a leg over the horn and reached into his pocket for the makin's. When he was halfway done rolling the cigarette he remembered with a shock that these were Overmile's makin's. He almost spilled the cigarette; uttering a mild oath he licked it together and ignited it. When he looked up, squinting through the smoke, his eyes had a hard shine. "I'm forty-odd kinds of damn fool," he said, "but I'm in."

"For how long?"

He looked at her. "Pushing your luck, aren't you?"

"I've got to be sure," she said. "There's a whisky cabinet in the house. You can go in there or you can ride after Saunders. Make your choice."

"I've just made it."

"Then tell me about Walt."

"Never give an inch," he murmured.

"Would you, in my shoes?"

"I wouldn't have started this hunt. It's suicide."

"About Walt," she prompted.

He stared at her. Her deep hazel eyes met his and their glances clashed in midair. It became a contest of will and soon it was evident that neither of them would break. When Martha Justice looked away it was plain she was not conceding a thing. "We're wasting time."

"I just wanted to let you know you haven't got me buffaloed."

"Good for you," she said, and got up on her horse. "How about it, Dave?"

"What do you want to know?"

"I want to know about Walt."

He made it short and terse. "The Jimson gang tried to hold up the freight company safe in Antelope. Someone spotted them going in and told me. I waited outside for them, sent Walt around behind to cover the back door. It was night, pretty late, there weren't many lights on. One of the gang busted through the front door. I called him down but he kept going. I fired over his head, he shot back, and I had to kill him.

"There was some shooting going on behind the place and I went over to the alley beside the building. A man was backing across the far end of the alley, shooting back toward the building. I couldn't see his face, only his shadow and the light from his gunfire. I yelled at him. I guess he didn't hear me. I shot him. When the dust cleared I found out he was Walt."

"What about the rest of the gang?"

"Walt had killed one of them. Two others got away. The county sheriff organized a posse and tracked them down. They're in the Yuma pen. I was acquitted of manslaughter."

"But you weren't as easy on yourself as the court was," she said.

"That's right."

"Hell," she said, "it was an accident. How could you have known he wasn't one of the gang?"

"I shouldn't have fired until I'd made sure."

"What if you'd waited this morning to make sure? That ambusher would have killed me."

He had to think about that. It had been instinct, not thought, that had brought his gun to bear on the ambusher. When you saw a threat you reacted against it; that was the way the human animal worked.

She said, "It's a hell of a thin excuse for destroying yourself."

"Look," he said, "you got it out of me. That's what you wanted. Now let's drop it."

"All right." She turned to look around the yard. "I doubt we'll find anything here. We'd better get after them."

"Sure," he said drily. "But before we go galloping off we'd better decide which way to head." He considered the mountains: the Arrowheads to the east, the Ocotillos to the west, the Lomas to the south. "If I'd rustled a big herd of cattle, I'd move them toward Mexico. Plenty of places down there you can sell big herds with no questions asked."

"South," she said, "across the badlands and through the Lomas."

"Yeah," he murmured. "That's what I'd expect anybody to think. So I wouldn't go that way. I'd cut east or west."

"Which?"

He considered the Arrowheads. To get there, a man would have to drive his herd across the Yankee and through a rich valley pocked with small ranches. He couldn't avoid being seen. Not that way. He looked west, to the Ocotillos. It would be a straight easy trail through hills, but it crossed a wide section of Quade's Rocking M grass. Northward, if the rustlers had swung around that way, would send them across Davenport's ranch. Either way they would stand a strong chance of being spotted by night-herding cowboys. Unless Quade or Davenport were in on the theft. He recalled Martha Justice's observation that there must have been a set of brains behind Saunders' move.

"West," he said, "or north. No telling which way, except it's a lot longer way around if you head north."

"He might have gone that way, just to throw us off."

"Maybe," Cord said, "but he didn't have all the time in the world. I'd guess they cut west, across Quade's grass, and drove the herd up through one of those passes in the middle of the Ocotillos."

"Let's go then," she said. Suiting her actions to the words, she pointed her horse west and gigged it to a lope. Cord stayed right beside her. The middle-high sun burned their shoulders and made golden ripples in the windswept grass.

The valley was wide; they would not get far into the mountains before dark, especially since they had to hunt for sign. It should not be difficult to find the track of three

thousand cattle; but most likely they had been sifted off in small bunches at a time.

Still, Cord was annoyed when, approaching the fence between Horsehead and Rocking M, they found no particular indications of activity in the grass-covered ground. "They didn't cross around here," he said.

"We'll split up," Martha Justice said. "You ride south, I'll go north along the fence. We'll find it soon enough."

"No," he said. "We stick together."

He saw her lips tightening and he said, "It's my game now. I'm dealing the cards. You just play what you get in your hand. We'll both head south. I doubt they'd have cut north of here."

He turned left and rode along the fence. When he looked back he saw her following him. Her face was not angry but it was plain she had felt the sting of his authority. He suppressed a smile and untied his canteen to take a drink. The water tasted flat and warm; he wished he had a canteen full of whisky.

As he rode he tried to sort out the feelings in his head and make sense out of events. It was a stupid thing to do, backing this fool woman's pair of trays against a full house. Saunders must have a sizable crew to move that many cattle. Probably he had discharged all the Horsehead hands who remained loyal to the widow, and had replaced them with toughs of his own choosing.

What could one headachy man and a woman do against those odds? The whole thing was hopeless. It was tilting at windmills. It was moronic. Why was he here? It wasn't pity; he could never pity Martha, he knew her too well—she was too self-sufficient. Was it out of pride, or to atone for his own guilt? Was it to prove something, to himself or to her? Or was it a remnant spark of what had once bound them together?

They followed the barbed wire across a hilltop and had to cut back around an arroyo at the foot of the rise. Going down the farther slope Cord found what he had hoped to see: the grass was broken down in a wide swath and there were several splices in the wire fence. He could tell the splices were fresh by the clean, unrusted tips of the cut ends.

He got back on his horse after inspecting the fence and opening up one splice. They rode through and considered the land ahead.

Cord looked at her iron-hard façade and said, "Why don't you break down and bawl, just once?"

"I can't afford to. Not yet."

"You don't have to pretend with me," he said, almost gently.

Her smile steadied. "Trying to soften me up, Dave?"

"No," he said quietly. "I'm just trying to find out if there's anything left between us."

"Forget that," she said harshly. "I wrote that letter to you because I needed a tough man, for a tough job. That's all."

"All right," he said, his face blank. He turned his horse uphill to the west, not waiting for her.

When she caught up he was looking westward across five miles of grass hills to the abrupt jagged lift of the mountains. On a flat hilltop halfway between sat the squat buildings of Quade's Rocking M headquarters. Gray clouds hung clumped in the sky but the sun blasted the land unmercifully; over the westward peaks was a more solid bank of cloud, obscuring the serrated summits. The black shadows of individual clouds swept across the yellow hills, moving east at a steady rate, and the west wind seared Cord's cheeks with a fierce dry heat.

The trail of the stolen cattle turned slightly southward, breaking away from the course that would have taken it close by the Rocking M buildings. Here and there the sign split up into several parallel trails, showing that the cattle had been moved in separate bunches at different times; in places the trail was older, in places fresher. The grass had sprung back from their passage, but in certain areas of heavier traffic it had been smashed and broken down, so that the wide swath of the trail was so obvious a child could have followed it.

Martha Justice frowned at the blatancy of the evidence and said, "They didn't even bother covering the trail."

"Sure," Cord said. "They expected to be long gone by the time you got back."

"But what if one of Quade's riders came across this mess? That would have caused a lot of questions."

The same thing had occurred to Cord. He said, "The only answer I can think of is that Quade knew what was going on. He's got a tough crew, I hear. They know how to keep their mouths shut when they're told."

"The bastard," she said, through clenched teeth.

It made him smile. "You hate the world, don't you?"

"Not the world," she said. "Just some of the animals that live in it."

He shrugged. "You ought to learn to take things as they come."

"You're in no position to give me advice."

"All right," he said mildly. "There's one thing I'm curious about, though."

"Go on."

"Why didn't you get a posse together to go after Saunders? Why just the two of us?"

"Because," she said hollowly, "I didn't want to be beholden to anybody."

"How about me?"

"You're just one man. I can take care of you."

"I'll bet," he murmured. "I think you're out of your mind."

"Probably," she agreed; she did not elaborate. But after a while she spoke again: "Maybe you can't understand what it is to be a woman in country like this. If I'd accepted Davenport's offer, I'd be in his debt. By leaning on him I'd be admitting I'm not strong enough to handle my own affairs."

"Why the devil is it so important to be top dog? You're taking a chance of losing everything you've got. With Davenport's help you might have gotten it back."

"I'll get it back," she said, very calmly.

"What makes you so damned sure of that?"

"It's easy," she said. "I have more confidence in you than you do."

"It's nice to know somebody thinks I'm useful," he said drily. "And if you're interested, I still think we're both crazy." He lapsed into silence and they rode on into the west.

In little over an hour, they rode past the Rocking M

buildings, not more than two miles away from them. That was when Cord spotted a tight-packed knot of horsemen advancing from the headquarters of the ranch. "Maybe half a dozen," he said aloud. "Your friend Quade. Do we wait for them or run for it?"

She gave him a hooded glance. "You're running things, remember?"

"All right," he said calmly. "We wait."

As the riders came within half a mile, Cord recognized two of them: massive Bill Quade, in the lead on a black-and-white paint; and Sam Coleman, all dandied up in fine clothes. It was Coleman who had wanted to talk to Cord the other night—going out to meet the sharp-nosed little gunfighter, Cord had been knocked out. He wondered what part Coleman had had in that incident.

"The thin one with Quade," Martha Justice said softly, "is Nat Desmond. Quade's foreman. He's honest but he's fast and loyal. Watch him."

They advanced at a drumming gallop, six grim-faced riders. Quade, squat and lumpy, overflowed his stock saddle. He wore no hat and his big round head bobbed as he rode. He was so massive that he looked deceptively short; in fact he was of at least average height. Beside him, Nat Desmond looked like a cornstalk, yellow-skinned and gaunt, spindle-legged. Behind them rode Sam Coleman, and behind him three denim-clad cowboys. One was short, two were tall; one was gray-haired, one brown, one black; two were gringos, one Mexican; but all three were marked with the brand of the tough.

The six riders swirled to a halt twenty feet away and Cord saw a smile playing at the loose fat folds of Quade's lip corners. It was the smile of a greedy cat that has cornered a prey and contemplates toying with it unhurriedly. Sardonically Quade touched a stubby forefinger to his forehead, in lieu of tipping the hat he didn't wear. "Afternoon, folks," he said, in an elaborate tone of hospitality. "Just out for an afternoon ride?"

Martha Justice said coolly, "You know damned well where we're going."

"Do I now?" Quade's vast expression of surprise might have been comical under circumstances less tense.

Cord kept the greater part of his attention on the rail-thin Desmond and the foppish Coleman. Coleman tipped a brief nod toward Cord, and something in the direct lift of Coleman's eyes made Cord feel that Coleman had had no part in the ambush against him the other night. Coleman was not that kind of fighter.

Cord spoke to Quade without losing Desmond from the corner of his vision: "A blind man couldn't miss these tracks, Quade. And nobody could trail cattle this close to your house without being noticed."

"Is that so?" Quade murmured. "What are you getting at, Cord?"

"You and Saunders are in this together," Cord said flatly.

Quade shrugged unconcernedly. "You'll have to prove that. I'm afraid you're too upset right now to think straight. Why don't you come on up to the house with me and have some coffee?"

Cord said, "Is that a threat or an invitation?"

Quade smiled gently. "Suit yourself," he murmured.

Martha Justice said contemptuously, "We haven't got time to fool with you now, Bill. But I'll be back."

"I'm sure you will, my dear," Quade said smoothly. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

"You might try hanging yourselves," she said, with an edge on her voice.

Quade cocked his head on one side. "Tell me something. I'm interested to know how the two of you propose to accomplish anything. I take it you believe your foreman made off with all your cattle while you were away. Now you intend to get them back. Do you think you can just ride up to him, the way you rode here, and talk him into giving them up?"

Cord's glance shuttled from one to another of the six men. It was evident Quade hadn't ridden over here with so many men just to banter. He must have had something on his mind.

"We'll take care of Joel," Martha Justice said, answering Quade. "Don't lose any sleep worrying about it, Bill."

"No," Quade agreed, "I guess not. Just the same, you'd

be smart to make sure you know what you're doing before you bust into something. For all you know, somebody else stole your cows and Saunders went to get them back."

She laughed drily. "You've got enough gall for five men," she told him. "But I can tell you this much. After I bring my cattle back I intend to see you run out of this country or jailed. I won't stop until I do."

"Talk's cheap," Quade said, without anger. "You'll have to prove something first. You can't arrest me just because I neglected to stop a man trespassing on my land."

"But he couldn't have crossed it without your knowledge and consent," she pointed out.

"So what? I don't wear a badge. What happens to Horsehead cows is your problem, not mine." He wasn't smiling but his face looked smug. He sat with his big hands folded over the saddlehorn and after another interval he said drily, "Good luck on your witch-hunt, Martha—I hope you don't walk into a bullet," and reined his horse around, nodding to his companions, who swung into place behind him.

Cord kept his gun hand ready until they had gone out of range. None of them looked back. Dust stung Cord's nostrils and he was frowning. He said, "I don't think he came out here just to look us over and gloat."

"Forget it," Martha Justice said brusquely. "He's shrewd enough to know when to play safe. He'll stay out of it until he finds out how the wind blows. If he didn't, he'd be in trouble if we won out over Saunders."

"Not much chance of that, I reckon," Cord said drily. He had an empty, dismal feeling. It was a black day; they were all black days.

"Daylight won't last forever," he said finally. "Let's go."

He was still nagged by the troubling image of Sam Coleman. Had Quade brought the hatchet-faced gunman along just as a warning? It hardly seemed likely. Something was wrong in the way things were stacking up. Cord didn't like going into a fight where the odds were possibly ten to one against him; but he liked it even less when he wasn't sure whom he was going to have to fight.

Quade was the kind of scoundrel who would use all roundabout means before he dirtied his own hands; perhaps

he had only hired Sam Coleman as a last resort, and had trotted him out this afternoon as a method of informing Martha Justice that no matter what happened between her and Saunders, Quade did not intend to lose by it.

It was a disquieting possibility, and it led to another thought which boosted Cord to say: "Before we get too close to Saunders I want to know just how far you want me to go."

"What do you mean?"

Cord wrapped the reins around his saddlehorn, and while the horse kept jogging forward he used both hands to roll a cigarette—again reminded that these were Overmile's makin's. He said, "I've worked for and against the law. There are some things you might choose to do, by way of stopping Saunders. If they happen to be illegal, would you hesitate?"

"That's up to you," she said. "You said it yourself—you want to call the turns. All right. Go ahead and call them."

He squinted forward against the mountains while he lit his cigarette, cupping the match in his hands. He shook it out and broke it and tossed the two halves away, and said, "All right. My first order is for you to turn around and go home."

"That's the one turn you can't call."

"Either you go home, or I do."

"No," she said, "it's too late for that, Dave. You had your chance to back out and you didn't take it. I've got your word on it now and I'll hold you to it."

"I can't work properly when I'm hamstrung," he said. "How the hell do you expect me to concentrate on licking ten or twenty men when I've got to look out for you all the time?"

"I'll look out for myself."

"That's easy for you to say," he pointed out.

"Do you think I can't carry my own weight? Is that what you think?"

A humorless smile lengthened his lips. "I reckon you can," he said. "If any woman can, it's you. But that wouldn't make my job any easier. It goes against the grain. I couldn't help but waste half my time watching out for you."

She uttered a disgusted, unladylike grunt. "When you come right down to it," she said, "men are ridiculous."

"Maybe so," he said. He tapped ashes off his cigarette and reined in. "Now be a good girl and turn that horse around, and go back to Horsehead. I'll bring your cows back."

She considered him soberly. "That's the first time you've come right out and said that." Her face, distracted in thought, struck him as a beautiful object, all its planes clear-cut, sharply yet exquisitely defined.

Abruptly she smiled. It was the first open smile, free of sarcasm, that she had given him: it changed her face, brightened it, softened it. She said, "For a man who hates my guts you show a lot of concern for my health."

"I'm just trying to make this job as easy as I can," he said gruffly.

She looked quizzically toward the dark mass of the mountains, made even more threatening and mysterious by the dark wall of cloud that shadowed them; she said, "That's tough country up there."

"Yeah."

"I wish I could figure you out, Dave. Five hours ago all you wanted was to be left alone."

"That's right," he said evenly.

"How do I know you won't ride straight up to the saloon at Summit and drink yourself blind?"

"You don't know it," he said, keeping his face straight; but her statement was the first indication she had given that she might be willing to change her mind and let him handle it on his own. He pressed his advantage quickly: "We're wasting time. By now Saunders has probably got that herd rounded up. Whether he's good enough to drive them at night I don't know, but he'll be on the move pretty soon."

"He's good enough," she said. "Don't underestimate Joel. He knows cattle and he knows a lot of tricks." Across the six feet that separated them she studied him with calm care; she said, "You give me the feeling you've already got a plan worked out."

"Just the outline," he admitted. "I haven't filled in all the pieces. That will depend on a lot of things."

"And you think you can handle it better without me."

"That's right," he said gently.

When she made up her mind, she didn't shilly-shally. He liked her for that. She said abruptly, "All right. You've got a free hand. Do it any way you want—but do it."

"I will."

"God," she said with passion, "it's good to find a man you can depend on."

"How do you know you can depend on me?"

"I'm sure enough to stake everything I own on you."

"I hope you don't regret it," he murmured.

"I won't." Her voice was positive without being cocksure. She regarded him with steady eyes until, suddenly, he reined his horse close to her and leaned out of the saddle, pulling her toward him; she didn't blink and she didn't pull back, and so he dropped his mouth on her lips and held her kiss until the horse moved and forced them apart. She said to him, "Come back in one piece, Dave."

"Yeah," he muttered hoarsely. He was about to rein his horse around when one other thing occurred to him, and he said, "I may need to offer a little money to certain people. How high can I go?"

"If you get the herd back, the sky's the limit. If not, I won't have any money to offer anybody."

He nodded. Without saying more he spurred the dun toward the mountains.

When he looked back she was still sitting her horse where they had parted, a solitary shape on the plain, her back straight and her head thrown back proudly. Then he passed around the side of a hill and lost sight of her. And he suddenly thought, *What the hell have I bought into?* The future looked bleak and deadly.

VI

As Cord rode west, the land began to buckle up into foothills, and the trail of the stolen Horsehead cattle suddenly broke apart into six or eight smaller signs, each of which turned up a different canyon toward the mountains. That did not particularly worry him; it was, plainly, only a ruse that Saunders had adopted in order to slow down pursuit.

Cord was all but certain that Saunders had probably bedded the cattle in one of the green-grass meadows on the western slope, and would now be driving the herd down through the canyons to the far side of the range; once on the desert beyond, Saunders would have little choice but to turn south and make his drive along the western flank of the Ocotillos, until presently he would pick up the course of the desert flats and follow them toward Mexico.

It was either that or double back through the mountains, which was difficult and slow with a big herd, or cut across the waterless badlands, which would be impossible; Saunders was no more interested in killing the cattle of thirst than was Martha Justice. You didn't get any money out of dead steers.

There were a good many ramifications that Cord didn't altogether understand—for example, Bill Quade's exact place in it; but Cord was not of a bent to occupy his mind with secondary considerations, and he didn't worry too much about Quade. There would be time enough for that later on. Right now his main problems were the cattle, Joel Saunders, and Saunders' crew.

With a plan taking firmer shape in his mind, he cut away altogether from the trail of the stolen cattle and rode north along the foothills until his chosen path intersected a road that came rutting down out of the mountains. Here he turned left, heading upward.

Ahead of him the clouds were a scudding darkness, promising rain. In fact he could already see the shadowed streaks of rainfall over the farther peaks, whenever the road humped over a high spot from which he could see ahead. The road was an ancient trace, now overgrown with brush; the deep ruts had been pummeled into shape by the massive wheels of heavy ore-wagons coming down from the silver mines on the high slopes of Scott Peak.

The lodes had played out several years ago; all that remained was the decaying road and, at its head, the ramshackle abandoned buildings of Summit, which had once been a thriving town of two thousand inhabitants. The mine shafts themselves had become lairs for mountain lions and rattlesnakes and occasional *javelina*, the wild boars of the desert.

As the road climbed, the heat dissipated rapidly; the sun was cut off by the advancing darkness of thunderheads. Vegetation changed by intervals: the foothills, too steep and rocky to hold water, left the plains' grass behind and supported only yucca stalks, catclaw, spindly ocotillo; presently this in turn gave way to scrub brush—manzanita and occasional ball-shaped piñon pines. The road crossed a charred burn and climbed through a boulder field, and turned south along the upward-winding wall of a canyon.

A shallow creek made a racket going down the floor of the canyon and on either side stood a thickness of trees and almost tropical growth. At the head of the canyon Cord stopped to water his horse and drink. He took the bandage off his head and looked at his reflection in the calm surface of a stagnate pool, and found with satisfaction that the cut on his temple had scabbed over firmly. He did not replace the bandage; he put his hat on and was about to remount when a voice stopped him:

"Stay put, Dave."

He stood fast, his hands in sight, and looked around slowly, toward the source of the talk. Presently he picked up, in the corner of his vision, Sam Coleman sitting his horse calmly not twenty yards up the trail. The sound of the creek had blotted out his approach. Coleman's hands were empty but one of them hung only an inch from a gun. The little

gunman urged his horse forward and stopped ten feet away.

Cord said, "You should have shaken out your iron before you called me, Sam."

"Oh, I reckon I could beat you, if I had to," Coleman said off-handedly. "I want to talk."

"What about?"

"Quade told me to keep an eye on you. I'm supposed to stop you if you get in Saunders' way."

"Why tell me this?"

"You did me a good turn once," Coleman said. "You knew I was cold-decking that dude in Leadville. You kept your mouth shut, and I took a small fortune away from the fool. If you'd opened your mouth I'd have had to shoot my way out of there."

"It wasn't any of my business," Cord said. "When a man sits into a game for big stakes he ought to be able to take care of himself." It was a hard, ungiving philosophy, but it was the code of the Circuit.

"Just the same," Coleman said, "I figured I owed you at least this much—to let you know what you're gettin' into. You're biting off a good deal more than any one man can chew. You know how many men Saunders has got?"

"No."

"Eleven," Coleman said. "That includes half a dozen boys who cut their teeth in the Pleasant Valley War."

"I figured as much."

Coleman's eyebrows went up. "Then what the hell do you think you're proving by battin' around up here all alone?"

"I think I'm minding my own business," Cord said gently.

The hatchet-faced gunman frowned and looked up the road, toward where it disappeared over a hogback. He said thoughtfully, "This road leads to Summit, don't it?"

"Follow it and find out," Cord suggested.

Coleman went right on: "You don't expect to find Saunders or them cows at Summit, so you've got another reason to be headed this way. It begins to make sense."

"Does it?" Cord said.

"Sure. You figure to fight fire with fire. Ain't that it?"

"You're doing the talking," Cord told him.

Coleman grinned. "Afraid I can't let you go up to Summit, Dave."

"You're welcome to try stopping me."

"I look on it in a humanitarian way," Coleman said. "If I don't stop you now, a lot of people will get hurt. If I do stop you, then nobody gets hurt but you."

"Admirable sentiments," Cord said drily. His body was tense and there was a pinpoint of light behind each eye. "Let's get it done with, Sam."

"Kind of a shame," Coleman said abstractedly. "I got nothing against you personal. In fact, I kind of like your style. But then, it'll be a feather in my cap when I down you. Wages will go right up for the man who beat Dave Cord to the draw. And I got to look out for my business prospects." Coleman's thin face cracked into a humorless smile. "You see the way it is, Dave," he said; and his hand clawed upward at the gun.

Cord's vision closed down so that he saw nothing but the body of the gunman. Long years of training went into the practiced upsweep of Cord's hand, the hooking of his thumb over the hammer, the leveling of the gun.

When he pulled the trigger the gun rocked in his hand and the boom of the shot echoed back from the canyon slopes; and before those echoes died, Coleman was lurching in his saddle. He had not fired his gun. He swayed and almost dropped from the impact of the bullet against the front of his right shoulder; he reached around with his left hand, gamely trying to take the gun from his numbed gun hand. Cord recocked his gun.

It all took place in a quick instant of time and then Cord spoke sharply: "Don't try it, Sam."

Coleman looked down the muzzle of Cord's cocked revolver and nodded slowly with resignation; he let his gun drop and said in a low voice, "It was a good try, anyway." He looked down at his shattered shoulder. "Why didn't you kill me?"

"You came at me like a man," Cord answered. "Climb down and let's have a look at that."

Coleman swung awkwardly off the saddle, using his left hand only. He glanced at his gun, lying on the rocks, and

stood relaxed while Cord peeled the shirt back from his shoulder. Cord said, "It went clear through. You ought to cauterize it."

"Go ahead." Coleman spoke without tone.

"It'll hurt like hell."

"I'd rather hurt than die of poison. I've seen infected wounds."

"All right," Cord said. He went to his saddlebags and took out the rifle-cleaning ramrod. It was made in three sections, meant to fit together. He joined two of them and said, "We'll have to build a fire."

Coleman was swaying a little, more from shock than from injury; the wound was clean and he was holding a handkerchief around it to keep from losing too much blood. He cracked a smile and said, "When you think about it this is pretty funny."

Cord gathered together enough twigs to make a small fire; he got it going and poked the ramrod into the flames until it was beginning to glow red. Then he said, "Sit down with your back to that rock and close your eyes."

Coleman obeyed. He looked at Cord and said quietly, "You're losin' time here. I'm obliged."

Cord lifted the hot ramrod from the fire and did not hesitate: he pushed it straight into the bullet hole.

"God!" Coleman cried hoarsely; then he slumped, passed out.

Cord deliberately thrust the red-hot iron all the way through the wound. Flesh sizzled and made a terrible stench. He withdrew it as gently as he could and tossed it aside. On a rock sat the bandage he had removed from his own head only minutes before. He soaked it in the crystal creek water and bound it around Coleman's shoulder. Then he took Coleman's oilskin poncho off the wounded man's saddle and used his knife to cut it into a long strip, which he fashioned into a sling for the man's arm. By the time he had it ready, Coleman was showing signs of coming around.

Cord lifted the man's torso away from the rock and tied the sling around him. Coleman stirred; his eyelids fluttered; he looked up. "I guess I dropped off."

"A good thing you did," Cord said.

"I can still smell it."

"While you can still ride you'd better get on your horse and head for Doc Webb's."

"I will," Coleman said. But when he tried to get to his feet he swayed and almost fell. Cord grabbed him and half supported him, boosting him into the saddle. "Want me to tie your feet down?"

"No, I'll make it all right." Coleman shook his head as if to clear it. "Listen, Dave, I appreciate this. You could have killed me. I didn't know you were that fast. They told me you'd gone rusty. I figured I could take you easy. Well, I owe you one. It might help if you knew Quade's in this just as deep as Saunders. Quade wants to bust the widow so he can take over Horsehead."

"I knew it had to be something like that," Cord said.

"Quade's got a pretty big crew," Coleman said. "He might send some of 'em over to give Saunders a hand movin' that herd. You look out for that."

"Thanks. I will."

Coleman nodded and lifted his reins. He pointed the horse downhill and rode away, slumping in the saddle.

Cord watched him until the wounded gunman rode out of sight. Then, his face expressionless, Cord mounted the dun and pointed it toward Summit.

George Sinclair sat the saddle loosely, looking down on Bell Ranch. It lay nestled in sycamores and cottonwoods at the head of a shallow draw below the hill where Sinclair sat. He had come up from behind the ranch, reluctant to use the road.

The yard looked quiet; there was no sign of activity except for a rise of smoke from the blacksmith lean-to. Sinclair looked down at his vest. After a moment he unpinned his badge and dropped it out of sight in his pocket. Then he gigged the bay downslope.

He came around behind the main barn and tethered his horse there, out of sight of the yard; he slipped into the barn through a small side door and paused to accustom his eyes to the gloom. After a moment he was able to pick out May's pinto in its stall. He found her saddle and adjusted

an iron-buckle bridle to fit the pinto; and when he had it saddled and ready, he led the pinto toward the front of the barn and hitched it to a post near the wide main door.

That preparation made, he stepped to the side of the door and peered out into the yard. He could see the broad dark shirtless back of the man pounding horseshoes on the anvil in the smithy shed; otherwise the yard seemed deserted. The hammer rang crisply in the silence. The shadow of a cloud swept across the yard.

He had to risk it. Sinclair stepped out of the barn and walked unhurriedly toward the big house, keeping his wary glance on the man in the smithy shed. That man did not turn around; Sinclair reached the porch without having been seen. He went in without knocking and softly closed the door behind him.

Was Davenport in the house? He couldn't tell; he hadn't seen Davenport's horse in the barn, but that was no conclusive proof the man wasn't here. Sinclair shucked his gun out and stood frowning just inside the door.

The room, like the house, was a reflection of Davenport: massive, proud, arrogant, ungiving. The furniture was handhewn out of heavy dark wood with leather upholstery. The fireplace was huge, made of gray stone, dominating the big parlor. The ceiling was high. The walls and floor were made of dark heavy lumber, unrelieved by carpets or decoration of any kind, save the great staring buffalo head mounted over the fireplace. Thick log rafters supported the dark ceiling. For all its spaciousness it was a dark, depressing room. A shotgun hung on wooden hooks over the front door, where only a tall man could reach it.

Sinclair held the gun balanced, his thumb hooked over the hammer. With long silent strides he crossed the room and softly pulled open the door that led back into the house. The corridor was dim, silent, empty. May's door, he knew, was the second one on the right. He went to it, moving as quietly as he could, and depressed the latch with his thumb. When he pushed the door open it squeaked slightly.

The room was vacant and he stood a moment staring into it with a puzzled frown. The single bed was narrow, covered by a soft quilt. Print curtains hung on the windows; a lace

fringe hung over the edge of the dressing table. He had the feeling it was a room Davenport seldom entered; it reflected only one personality, May's.

But where was she?

Still frowning, he stepped back and closed the door and looked both ways along the corridor. No clue offered itself to help him. He went back toward the parlor and into it, and after a moment moved on the balls of his feet across to the dining-room door. He opened it and looked in. No one was in the room but he heard faint sounds from the kitchen beyond. He went through to the kitchen door and listened against it.

The voices of two women came through to him. He went to the window and looked out into the yard. The cowboy in the smithy shed was working the bellows. The yard was quiet. Sinclair put his gun away in its holster and stepped once more to the kitchen door, and knocked.

He heard May's voice: "See who that is, Consuela."

Consuela opened the door. She was short, heavy-bodied, round-faced; her arms were thick and her expression noncommittal. Past her shoulder, Sinclair could see May, looking up from the stove expectantly. When she recognized him she gave a little start. Her hand went to her mouth and her eyes widened; she spoke his name. He said, "I want to talk to you."

Frowning, May came forward, coming past Consuela. "I'll be back shortly," she said, and closed the door behind her. She looked anxiously up into his face. "What is it?"

He jerked his head in a gesture, and went back into the parlor. When she came through, he closed the dining-room door and said, "I'm clearing out, May. I want you to come with me."

"So suddenly?"

"Things have gone wrong," he said. "I've got some crooks after me. I want to get away before they nail my hide to a tree."

It was plain she didn't understand. She said, "But you're a law officer, George. Why can't you arrest them?"

"God knows how many there are," he said. "I can't fight them all. Leave it for the sheriff. I want to get away from here before it's too late. Where's your husband?"

"I don't know," she said. "He never tells me where he's going." She bit her lip, looking around. "I can't just leave, not just like that."

"Afraid that's the way it's got to be," he said. "I've saddled your horse. Pack a few things. When we get away you can write to Consuela and tell her where to send your things."

She sat down in one of the great armchairs. She looked out of place, a delicate woman in a massive wood-leather chair. It seemed to engulf her. Her head was in her hands and she was shaking her head back and forth; she said, "I can't just walk out, George. The least I can do is tell him, face to face."

"There isn't time for that."

She looked up. "What have you done, George? Why are you so afraid?"

The accusation in her eyes made him miserable. He went to the window and looked out. The cowboy had brought around a horse and was fixing a shoe on its hoof, bending over the horse's leg, which was balanced across his knee. The sky was cloudy. A little wisp of dust blew across the yard and past the barn a tumbleweed rolled by. Sinclair said, "I've never been a strong man. You know that."

"Yes."

"I saw a chance for some quick money," he said. "It looked easy and there didn't seem to be much risk. I took it. It backfired. Now I've got every tough in the district after me, or I will have soon when they discover I've pulled out. I've got to put a lot of miles between this valley and me. And I haven't got time to waste. Will you come?"

All the while, talking, he had kept his back to her, looking out; now he turned to face her. Her face was a study in confusion.

She said: "Do you mean you involved yourself in something crooked, George?"

"Don't be naive," he said crossly. "Of course that's what I mean."

"I see," she said numbly.

He reddened. "What did you think I was? A gallant knight? Have I ever pretended to be any better than I am?"

"No," she said softly. "You've always been honest about yourself."

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Come with me," he said. "I need you."

She looked away. "I have to have time—to think."

"Time," he said tightly, "is exactly what I haven't got."

She slid away from his hands and walked restlessly across the floor; she faced the fireplace, she turned and looked out the window, she crossed her arms and uncrossed them; she said, "I can't do it, George."

"Why?" he demanded.

"Not just like that. It—it's not fair to Jim."

He muttered an oath. "What's so sudden about it? Haven't we talked about it for months?"

Her only reply was an unhappy shake of her head. Sinclair felt a tautness in his loins, the approach of fear and the threat of a loneliness that promised to trap him. In that stretching interval of uncertain silence he saw her withdraw from him and his fear became a cage, against the bars of which he threw himself with resentment and terror. He fought to keep his fear from breaking out on the surface; he fought to remain calm.

He crossed the room and gripped her arms and spoke with urgency: "You've got to come with me."

She met his glance. "You're hurting my arms."

He let his hands drop, empty. "I'm sorry," he said dismally. "I didn't mean to. I've never meant to hurt you—it's the last thing I want."

It was plain she had not heard his cry for help. And it came to him in a flash of insight that she had never really known him or understood him; to her he had been merely a soft and courteous figure.

He turned away and said in a low voice, "It doesn't matter, does it?"

"I'm sorry, George." Her voice was tender.

"I'll go now," he muttered.

She came to him and put her arms around him and gently pulled his head down; her kiss had all the bittersweet taste of irrevocable loss. He pressed his body against her and held

the moist warmth of the kiss, almost as if he meant to rekindle the fire that had never really been lighted.

That was when the door was flung open. It crashed back on its hinges and before he could swing around he heard the full-throated roar of Jim Davenport's angry voice: "What the hell is this?"

Sinclair had presence of mind enough to push the woman away from him and to make use of Davenport's momentary shock by palming his gun and pointing it at Davenport. He said, "Settle down, Jim. I'm going—you'll never see me again. I don't want to use this thing."

"You son of a bitch," Davenport said, pronouncing each syllable with wicked intensity.

Sinclair gestured with the gun. "Stand aside, Jim." He wondered if his trembling was visible; he was sure it was. He flashed a single glance at the woman. She was watching him with eyes gone wide; he said, "I'm going. I won't be back," in the dim hope that she might answer him: *I'll come with you.* But she didn't, she kept silent and stood still, and when he walked forward he walked alone.

He turned slowly, keeping his face toward Davenport, and backed into the doorway. A quick glance over his shoulder showed him that the shirtless cowboy was down by the far corral, leading the shod horse into it. No one else was in sight. The housekeeper, Consuela, appeared in the dining-room door with her enigmatic expression, saying nothing.

Davenport's glance was fixed on Sinclair, bright with rage; his fingers were moving restlessly and Sinclair said, "Take your gun out with your left hand and drop it."

Davenport obeyed, never taking his eyes from Sinclair's. The gun clattered on the floor and Sinclair said, "Kick it over here."

The gun spun toward him and he stooped to pick it up. He rammed it into his waistband and backed onto the porch. Davenport walked forward to stand in the door, facing him, not speaking, his lips pinched thin and white. Beyond the rancher Sinclair could just make out May's figure. He said, "It would have been better if you hadn't seen this, Jim. It's all over anyway."

He backed carefully off the porch and all the way across

the yard past the side of the barn, keeping his gun up all the time. Then, abruptly, Davenport wheeled inside the door, out of sight; Sinclair knew he was going after the shotgun hung above the entrance.

Sinclair ran around the barn, holstering his gun; he climbed awkwardly into the saddle of his waiting horse and lashed it away.

He drummed forward at a dead run, bent low over the horse's withers, keeping the barn's bulk between himself and the house. When he reached the hilltop he looked back and saw Davenport standing in the yard with the shotgun. His face taut with strain and fear, Sinclair whipped up the horse and ran on.

In the house May stood with her hand over her mouth. The sound of hoofbeats died away and then her husband came back into the room and reached up deliberately to put the shotgun back on its rack over the door. He pushed the door shut and looked toward the dining-room door, where the housekeeper stood; obeying his wordless command Consuela backed up and shut the door.

With her gone, Davenport swung his grim attention to his wife; he seemed to see the wordless question in her eyes and in answer he laughed mirthlessly, and said, "No, I'm not going after him. He'll never come back. I know his kind. He won't stop running for weeks."

She dropped her hand to her side and realized dimly that she had bitten the flesh of her wrist.

He stood there, under the shotgun, watching her. He said, "I don't like being made a fool of."

"I know."

"Who knows about this?"

"Nobody." She thought of Joel Saunders, who knew; but she said again, "Nobody."

"Keep it that way," he said. He touched his empty holster and walked across the room to his big desk. Opening the second drawer he took out a revolver and checked its load, and slid it into his holster. When he straightened he said, "He wanted you to go away with him. You refused. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you go with him?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Was it pride? Or was it that you still have some feeling for me? Or maybe you're afraid of me?"

"I don't know."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "It won't happen again, will it?"

"No," she said; and, facing him across the length of the room, she knew it would never change between them. She wanted to cry out but she didn't.

VII

SUMMIT LAY just beyond the pass ahead of him. Cord pulled down his horse and took out his sixgun. He took the bloody ramrod that he had used to cauterize Sam Coleman's wound, pinched a torn piece of handkerchief around the tip, and ran it through the bore of the weapon. Then he put the cylinder back in place, locked the centerpin, and worked the action around several times.

He was riding into uncertain territory and it had always been his habit to make sure his equipment was in proper condition. For a good many years he had lived by the gun; and in spite of the idle months that lay immediately behind him, the old habits were still part of him. He tested the revolver's smooth seat in its holster before he lifted the reins and gigged the horse forward, over the pass.

The air at this seven-thousand-foot level was thin and bracing. Overhead the sky was hung with a thickness of cloud; the sun was going down behind the cloud wall, and in the dim twilight the pines which enclosed the road became a solid dark mass, shutting him in.

Just ahead lay the town of Summit, its ramshackle buildings littering the sides of the pass without pattern. They had

a musty look, forlorn and decrepit in the bad light. The roof of the big dance hall had caved in; the old mercantile, its windows boarded up, stood sagging, threatening to collapse. Up on the hillside was a group of raw blackened heaps where several ancient buildings had been gutted by fire.

Once thousands of hearty miners had thronged these slopes, the road had been cut deep by the wheels of heavily laden ore-wagons coming down from the big mine behind their twelve or sixteen ox teams, the gaunt abandoned house at the head of the pass had been the superintendent's porticoed mansion; millions of easy dollars had passed across the tables of the camp's score of gambling parlors. Vigilantes had hanged half a dozen men from the protruding central rafter of the livery barn, which now stood precariously with its walls half-rotted and its door bent out of shape.

In the central part of the town, just beyond a small clapboard stable, stood a two-story structure with a high false-front, across which a faded legend was just visible, painted in a crescent shape: *Saloon*—SUMMIT DANCE PALACE—*Rooms*. Outside this building were tethered half a dozen hipshot horses, their saddle girths loosened; in the gloom of the shaded veranda a man's cigarette alternately glowed and dimmed.

As Cord entered the head of the town, the man on the saloon porch stood up. The red button of his cigarette arced outward and landed in the road with a spash of sparks. The saloon door slammed, echoing through the silent pass; and by the time Cord had ridden half the distance to the saloon, three men had come out onto the porch and now stood, spread apart along the length of it, their faces in deep shadow and their hands resting on their gun butts. Summit was not a town without fear.

Making no motions that might be subject to misinterpretation, Cord rode up to the saloon and sat in front of it with his hands folded over the saddlehorn.

In the fast-fading light he was just able to make out the brands of the horses tied up at the rail. He recognized a few of them—Chainlink, from the Spanish Flat Country; Hashknife, the symbol of the great sprawling Aztec Land and Cattle Company up in the northern part of the Territory; he

recognized a Texas brand and a Wyoming brand. The riders who congregated in Summit were men who rode the long dusty trails of outlawry.

He saw Mexican saddles, Texas double-rigged saddles, and single-cinch outfits from the northwest. They had little in common except for one thing: every horse was an animal that had been carefully chosen for speed and stamina. A man who came to Summit would be a man who had need of a fast horse, a smooth-acting gun, and quick reflexes.

Only after he had completed his leisurely inspection of the horses did he lift his attention to the men on the porch. The man at the right was the one who had spotted Cord riding in, and had gone inside to warn the others. He had lighted another cigarette and now stood with it dangling from the corner of his lip. His thumbs were hooked in his gunbelt and, although his face was hidden, it was evident that he, like the other two, was watching Cord.

The man on the left, at the far end of the porch, had his hands curled over the handles of two cross-belted sixguns. The one in the center, just in front of the door, stood outlined in the lamplight that fell through the open top-half of the door. He was excessively tall and thin to the point of gauntness; his chest was hollow, his back a little bent. He wore no hat and his hair, blond enough to appear white, glowed from the light behind him. The hilt of a knife protruded from the top of that man's boot, and a pair of guns were belted backhand, high at his waist. He was watching Cord motionlessly. From within the saloon came slight sounds: the scrape of a chair, the clink of bottle against glass; but there was no talk inside; they were waiting.

Cord said, "I'm looking for Will Longbaugh."

The gaunt blond man answered him: "What do you want with him?"

"Talk."

"What about?"

"That's between me and him," Cord said.

The gaunt man stirred. Aware that he was silhouetted, but not deeply worried, he moved unhurriedly aside, out of the light. He said, "Do I know you?"

The man with the cigarette, on Cord's right, said, "That's Dave Cord."

The gaunt man's head rocked back. "Think of that."

Cord looked them over. They had him more or less bracketed. He said mildly, "I didn't come here to start a fight, but I'm willing to accommodate."

"That's fine," the gaunt man drawled. "What's on your mind, Cord?"

"Are you Longbaugh?"

"No. I'm Ben Cantrell."

"I see," Cord said. Cantrell's was a name he had heard many a time. He said, "Where's Longbaugh?"

"He'll be back sometime tonight, maybe in the morning," Cantrell said. "I'm running the outfit while he's gone."

"My business is with Longbaugh," Cord said. "I'll wait."

"Suit yourself," said Ben Cantrell. His blond head turned, first one way, then the other. He said, "Come on inside. Leave your gunbelt on the saddle."

"No," Cord said easily, "nobody takes my gun."

Cantrell nodded. He spoke two words to the two men flanking him: "Watch him." And turned inside. The batwing doors slammed together behind him and flapped squeaking on unoiled hinges.

Cord dismounted and walked up on the porch. He walked between the two toughs and stopped just outside the door to look at the one on his right, the one with the cigarette in his mouth. Cord said, "I don't think I want my back to you, Pardeen."

Pardeen spat the cigarette out. His eyes glittered in the darkness and he said, "You're draggin' your picket, Cord," but he went around in front of Cord and entered the saloon. Cord glanced at the other men and pushed inside.

He felt the presence of Pardeen beside him; he smelled smoke. The room spread out before him, wide and low-ceilinged. What had once been a bandstand stood in the far corner. Half the floor was empty; the other half was dotted with unsteady splintering wooden tables. Along the far wall ran a long bar of ornate mahogany that had lost its polish.

Two men wearing guns stood with their backs to the bar, a bootheel hooked into the stained brass rail, elbows on the

bar, wrists hanging loose, facing Cord expressionlessly. Another man, a huge brute, sat at a table eating a chicken leg with his fingers. The gaunt man called Cantrell moved his exaggerated length as far as the end of the bar and leaned against it on one arm, tilted that way, facing Cord.

Cord looked over his shoulder at the second man who had followed him in from the porch. He was a squat man with brown-stubbled cheeks and a cast in one eye, a run of the mill gunman from Tubac who had gone by the name of Arkansas Tom when Cord had last seen him. Arkansas Tom wore his two guns on separate gunbelts, crossed over.

Now, in response to some quiet signal from Cantrell, Arkansas Tom turned and went back out to the porch to stand watch. At the same time Pardeen, who had lit still another cigarette, was moving sideways along the wall.

Cord's eyes brightened and he said, "Move out in front of me, Pardeen."

Not meeting his eyes, Pardeen crossed the room to the bar. Ben Cantrell grinned and said, "Make yourself at home."

Cord was watching Pardeen. He had once arrested Pardeen, as a result of which the chain-smoking gunman had been sentenced to a five-year term for robbery. Pardeen had made his escape while in process of transfer from jail to prison; there was no doubt he was on the wanted list. The same was probably true of all of them. It was a ticklish situation for a man who had worn a star.

Cord's eyes were drawn to the amber bottles racked behind the bar. He wanted a drink, but he knew how dangerous thirst could be. He said, "Nice friendly little outfit you've got here."

"Let's not play games," Cantrell said mildly. "What do you want?"

"I don't talk to second fiddles."

Cantrell's glance hardened. "Watch yourself," he murmured.

Cord smiled grimly. "Introduce me to your friends," he said.

Cantrell's eyebrows went up. His face was long and came to a point at the chin; two deep creases ran down from his nostrils to his lip corners. He looked as if all his bones were

too long. Abruptly he smiled drily and pointed down the bar at the two toughs standing there: "San Saba," he said, "and Smith. The ox here is Leroy Mack. Right behind you, that's Jones on the porch. You seem to know Pardeen."

Without looking around, Cord said, "Funny thing. I always thought Jones went by the name of Arkansas Tom."

"All right," Cantrell said. "It doesn't matter much what a man calls himself." He bent his knee to lift the knife from his boot-top. Light raced fragmentarily along the blade. He began to clean his fingernails with the point; without looking up he said, "Now we're all friends. Have a drink."

"No, thanks. I'll just have a bite to eat and bed down upstairs till Longbaugh shows up."

Cantrell nodded. He spoke to the huge man at the table: "Leroy, go get the man some grub."

Leroy Mack looked up with sluggish resentment; he dropped his gnawed chicken-leg on the table and went down to the end of the room, wiping his hands on his greasy pants, and disappeared through a side door. After a moment he reappeared with a plate of chicken and potatoes, which he unceremoniously dropped on a table beside Cord. Cord said, "I could use some coffee, too."

"Hell," said Leroy Mack, "get it yourself. I ain't no errand boy."

Cord smiled grimly. From experience, he knew well that if his plan to make use of this motley outlaw crew was to have a chance of working out, the first thing he had to do was gain the respect of every one of them. And with this breed of men the only kind of respect that counted was the respect that grew out of fear, fear of a man tougher than themselves.

Cord saw the challenge in Leroy Mack's little eyes and he also saw, in the corner of his vision, the beginning of a dry amusement stretching Ben Cantrell's mouth. Cantrell was nobody's fool; he was shrewd enough; but evidently he had a sadistic streak in him.

Thus it was far more than mere bravado that made Cord say, "Get me some coffee, Leroy."

That made it definite; Leroy Mack grinned. "Maybe you didn't hear me the first time," he said.

The ancient game was all set up. They all knew the rules; it was not necessary to speak again. With a bitter regret, that life had to be like this, Cord watched the big lumpy man coil into a fighter's crouch. A great weariness settled in Cord's brain; he had no liking for any of this and none of it was calculated to make him feel that life was very worthwhile. Nonetheless he had made a bargain with Martha Justice. That was the only thing that kept him from turning his back on Leroy Mack and walking over to the liquor shelves behind the bar.

He knew without ever having seen the man before what kind of a fighter Leroy Mack would turn out to be: merciless, ruthless, and without scruple. The Marquis of Queensbury rules would mean nothing to Mack. Therefore Cord had no interest in making a sporting contest of it, or in dragging it out to please the onlookers. He had only one objective, and that was to whip Leroy Mack.

It would not be easy. Slowly circling the giant, Cord looked for openings and found them lacking. In his way Leroy Mack was wily enough; his guard was all but impregnable. Cord was not in the best of condition; his muscles were still hard but they had been long out of use, except for the powerful arm and shoulder muscles that had hardened from pitching hay in a livery stable. A man could only punish his body with idleness for so long before he began to suffer for it; and Cord felt, now for the first time, the results of his inactivity: a small sluggishness, a slight uncertainty of balance.

Along the bar the man called Smith said, softly and wickedly, "Take him apart, Leroy."

Leroy Mack grinned and his face became ugly. He rolled forward and one of his long heavy arms licked out tentatively. Cord let it ride over his shoulder and hooked a short blow toward Mack's midriff, but Mack blocked it and moved adroitly away without suffering damage.

These preliminary movements merely served to let each man size up the other and seek out his weaknesses. And it came to Cord after a moment that Mack's greatest fear seemed to be for his belly: Mack's guard hung lower than one might have expected. His fists opened and closed and

his hands were like great mittens; Cord knew better than to allow himself inside their grip.

As he moved warily around the other, Cord allowed himself occasional moments to sweep the room with the corners of his vision. During the silent circling, the others stood in mute motionlessness, their attention avid. Cantrell was smiling crookedly; Smith was grinding fist into palm and his expression was bright and anxious; San Saba's lean features were as enigmatic as his lips were taciturn; Pardeen's eyes were narrowed, his arms were folded across his chest, he had a gleam of bloodthirsty attentiveness.

Leroy Mack plunged forward with a wide sweep of his arms. Cord slipped under them, dodged past, and rammed a short piston jab into Mack's kidneys as he wheeled by. Mack grunted softly and pivoted his great weight nimbly so that he never faced away from Cord. Mack was holding his elbow in close against his side; Cord knew he had guessed the man's weak point correctly.

There came the sounds of feet shuffling on the dry splintered floor and the quickened in-and-out rasp of Mack's breathing, more from anger than from exertion; Mack resented the fact that Cord had delivered the first blow.

Smith murmured, "Smash him in pieces, Leroy."

Smith was a charitable soul—Cord had time for that dry thought before Mack charged again, head tucked in, left hand jabbing, right fist cocked.

Cord squared off to meet the attack. Mack feinted with his left fist and then, totally unexpected, shot out his right foot, trying to tangle up Cord's legs and spill him down. Cord saved himself a fall only by jumping awkwardly in the air. He came down to one side and almost lost his balance; he wheeled and managed to get one good blow against Mack's cheek, because Mack hadn't expected it, before Mack closed up his guard and went back to circling.

Cord had no option but to find a way of finishing this quickly; otherwise Mack's superior weight and strength would wear him down. He saw the big man advancing and he threw a quick hook high toward Mack's face. It lifted Mack's guard and Cord was able to slam his right fist with all his weight behind it into Mack's unprotected belly.

His fist sank inches into flesh. Mack howled and bent over his belly; his elbows slid down to protect it. Cord turned away from him, as if in disdain. That gesture confused Mack and for a moment he stood still, frowning intently. Cord, once he started turning, accelerated the spin of his body until, like a discus thrower, he was wheeling with his arm coming up hooked. And Mack was still standing in muddled confusion when Cord's wheeling arm soared around and the knife-edge of Cord's flattened hand caught him at the side of the neck.

It was a blow calculated to chop a man's head off. It knocked Mack to his knees, tilted his head over, and put a glaze on his eyes. Grimly Cord stepped forward and battered his left fist into Mack's face. Mack tipped over backward and sprawled.

He had not hit the floor before Cord had wheeled to face the bar; and in the wake of astonishment among those men at the bar he saw Smith, his eyes ignited in rage, reaching for his gun.

Cord's hand dropped. Aching knuckles coiled around the gun butt and dragged it loose. His movements felt intolerably slow but, just the same, the gun was up and cocked before Smith's was half-drawn; and Cord said sharply: "Hold it."

His eyes widened and Smith let the Colt slide back into its receptacle.

Cantrell drawled, "Smith and Leroy, they're partners." There was a new respect in his eyes; perhaps it was due as much to Cord's quick presence of mind in heading Smith off as it was to Cord's knocking Leroy Mack out.

Cord fixed his gaze on Smith. "All right, *you* get me the coffee."

It made Cantrell laugh. Smith looked around hesitantly and Cantrell said, "Sure. Get him his coffee."

Smith edged out of the room, looking back several times. The dark-faced man, San Saba, drew a wicked looking black Mexican cigar from his vest pocket and occupied himself biting off the end, spitting it out, finding a match, and getting the cigar going. If he had any interest in the fight that had just ended, he did not display it. Pardeen was regarding Cord guilelessly; Pardeen was the kind who was always

quick to ally himself with the toughest man present. Up front, in the doorway, Arkansas Tom was peering in over the batwings.

Cantrell said mildly, "Get back to your post, Tom," and turned to the bar to fill his glass with whisky.

Cord waited until Smith came back with a steaming mug of coffee, and then said, "Put it on the bar;" he didn't want to give Smith the chance to fling it in his face.

Smith put the coffee down and rolled on down the bar to stand by San Saba. He didn't bother going over to help Leroy Mack, who was slowly rolling back and forth, moaning, hands at his throat. Smith's allegiance had died with Leroy Mack's failure.

Cantrell looked lazily at Cord and said, "That was a nice job. I've seen Leroy break men twice your size, just for the fun of it."

"He's gone soft in the belly," Cord said. He walked to the bar, conscious of a slight unsteadiness in his legs; he picked up the coffee and found it hard to hold the mug in his punished hands. He drank it scalding hot and put the mug down empty. "Where will I find a bunk?"

"Upstairs," Cantrell said. "Nobody's using the last room on the left."

Cord headed for the stairs at the back of the room. "Take care of my horse," he said over his shoulder, and went up the steps.

Halfway up the stair he looked around and caught San Saba staring unwinkingly at him. He went on up into the dim corridor, lit by one lantern flickering on low oil; he went down to the last room and found it as musty and bare as he had expected it to be.

There was a wood-frame cot and a straight chair, and that was all. Somehow the glass in the windowpane had not broken. He lay down on the uncovered mattress, and then got up again; he lodged the back of the chair under the door latch and walked to the window, through which spilled a very faint light that was reflected upward from the lamp-lit windows below.

Testing the sash, he found that the window lifted easily. There was no way to lock it. He took half a dozen cartridges

out of the loops in his shellbelt and scattered them on the windowsill, so that any attempt at intrusion would rattle them to the floor; then he prized off his boots, tossed his hat on the seat of the chair, and lay back on the cot.

It took time for his tense muscles to unwind. He was glad none of Leroy Mack's wicked blows had connected with his head; the cut on his temple was still scabbed over and it would not have taken much to put him out. His hands were sore and, even now, his breathing was unsteady; he was half afraid to consider the shape he was in. It made him recall days when he had gone several times the clock around without sleep; when he had kept the lid on an entire surging town by the sheer force of his will and the threat of his physical presence; when he had ridden a hundred miles in the space of twenty-four hours and fought a pitched battle at the end of the ride.

All that had come to an end the night he had shot his own brother—an event he had thought about constantly, but only obliquely, for a full year. This afternoon Martha Justice had badgered him into bringing it out into the open where he could look at it in the sunlight. She had made him realize what he should have known himself: that he had solved nothing by giving up.

In her own iron-willed way, and out of her own arrogant motives, the beautiful widow had given him back his self-respect. Today for the first time in months he had felt like a man, he had been unashamed to show his face in the world. It put him in her debt; he owed it to her, and to Overmile's memory, to go after Joel Saunders and the stolen Horsehead herd. It was a job no lone man could hope to do. That was why he had come here: to fight fire with fire, to pit toughs against toughs.

Bootheels clumped up the stairs and came forward along the hallway. There was nothing surreptitious about them, but just the same Cord palmed his gun and rolled off the bed, crouching by the foot of it. The footsteps stopped just outside and he heard Ben Cantrell's voice: "Cord?"

"What?"

"You forgot to eat your grub. I brought it up."

Cord went to the door and lifted the chair away, and

pulled the door open. Cantrell had the tin plate of food in both hands. He looked bemusedly at Cord's gun and handed the plate forward. Cord took it in his left hand. "Obliged," he said.

"Mind if I come in for a minute? I want to talk."

Cord stepped back, holstering his gun. He shut the door behind Cantrell; the room was plunged into deep gloom. Cantrell said, "Wait a minute, I'll go get a lamp."

"Thanks just the same," Cord said, "but we can do without it."

He didn't want to be visible from outside. He sat down on the end of the cot and began to eat, only then realizing the force of his hunger.

Cantrell pulled up the straight chair, took Cord's hat from it and tossed the hat on the bed. Then the gaunt man sat down backwards on the chair with his arms folded over the top of it. The dim light glowed in his blond hair and the knife-hilt at his boot-top made a hard lump of shadow along his leg. He said, "Longbaugh won't be coming back. Whatever talking you've got to do, you'll have to do to me."

"What happened to Longbaugh?"

"He had an argument."

"With you?"

"That's right," Cantrell murmured. "He wasn't quite fast enough."

"I see," Cord said, adjusting his thoughts to this new situation.

"What did you come here for?"

"To offer you boys a job."

Cantrell's grin glistened faintly. "That's a new switch," he observed. He took out a packet of tailormade cigarettes and proffered it; Cord shook his head, eating. Cantrell struck a match; it reflected frostily on his eyes; he lighted his smoke and said, "What kind of work you have in mind?"

"You know Joel Saunders?"

"Horsehead ramrod. Sure, I've seen him once or twice. He tried to make a deal of some kind with Longbaugh, but Longbaugh figured it was too raw. Stealing cows from the widow, something like that."

It amused Cord, the strange codes by which these outlaws

justified their lives. They didn't mind breaking every law on the books but they wouldn't have anything to do with victimizing a woman. But he said nothing of this observation; what he said was, "He's taken the cattle. I want to take them back."

"You working for Mrs. Justice?"

"That's right."

Cantrell nodded; his cigarette tip made a red streak up and down in the air. He said, "What's the play?"

"Saunders has the herd somewhere over on the western slope. Most likely he's started to move them toward the Border by now. I figure to set a trap and let him drive right into it."

"What's in it for us?"

"Gun wages. A month's fighting pay for a couple of days' work."

"Chicken feed," Cantrell said imperturbably.

Cord laughed shortly. "Don't fool me. If you boys are so wealthy you wouldn't be holed up in this dump. Don't pretend you're too good to draw wages."

Cantrell moved uncomfortably. "You play hell with a man's illusions," he said good-humoredly. It was a surprising comment, coming from him; it gave Cord a new respect for the towheaded man's intelligence. "But," Cantrell added, "you're right. Pickings have been pretty lean."

"How many men have you got?"

"Pardeen, Leroy, San Saba, Smith, Arkansas Tom, and me. Counting you that's seven. There are one or two others down at the far end of town but they're just hardscrabble drifters. You might take them along to hold the horses, but that's about all they'd be good for."

"Forget them," Cord said. "I don't know how many men Saunders has but it's likely to be no less than a dozen."

"Long odds," Cantrell observed.

"We'll have the advantage of surprise."

"Not unless we're good and quiet about it. He won't be stupid enough to believe he's got away scot free, not until he crosses the Border. He'll have his eyes open."

"All right," Cord said. "I'll go two hundred and fifty dollars a man, and five hundred for you—but only if we get

the cows back to Horsehead. Otherwise the widow won't have any money to pay out."

Cantrell stood up. His cigarette had become a stub. He crushed it out underfoot and went to the door. "I'll have to talk it over with the boys," he said. "We'll let you know in the morning."

"All right," Cord said. Evidently it wouldn't do any good to hurry the man.

"Hasta luego," Cantrell murmured, and slipped out into the corridor.

Cord got up to replace the chair under the latch, put his hat and the empty supper plate on the chair, and lay back. The mattress was short and his sock feet hung over the end.

Outside a trickle of raindrops began to strike the window. The light reflected from below began to shimmer on the glass. Cord laced his fingers under the back of his head and stared at the blankness of the dim low ceiling. He wondered what he would do if Cantrell's gang turned down the job. What then? . . . He drifted off to sleep and his dreams were fitful. Once he awoke with a start. It was still dark; the rainfall was heavy and he heard the roll of thunder. He drifted back to sleep with the image of Martha Justice in his head.

VIII

GEORGE SINCLAIR was in the foothills of the Arrowhead range when the rain began. At first a pinpoint drizzle, it quickened to a heavy fall, so that even under his poncho he gradually became soaked. The discomfort of the night added to the darkness of his mood and when, near midnight, he off-horsed to take shelter under a cliff overhang, he was feeling as dismal as he had ever felt.

There was no dry wood with which to build a fire. He squatted in the cold and shivered in lonely misery, unable

to see his hand before his face. The rain did not reach him here, except for wind-driven spurts, and once he stood up to remove his poncho, hitting his head sharply on the overhang as he did so. He cursed and hunkered down again, rubbing his hands together for warmth. He wrapped the ends of the reins around his wrist so that the horse wouldn't drift away in the storm, and sat in acute discomfort.

Up to now he had had the physical movement of flight to occupy him; now there was nothing to stand between him and the betrayal of his own thoughts. He had an image of May Davenport, small and gentle; he was too clear-headed to blame her for the choice she had made, but that didn't lessen his gnawing knowledge of loss. He had lost everything.

Somewhere within him was a mocking evil thing that nudged him all the time, not hard, just enough of a boost to push him off on the wrong path. It had always been that way, and now, with a hollow bleakness inside him that matched the dripping night, he saw how far he had sunk: he had lost everything, even to the little remnant of self-respect he had owned until May had turned away from him.

He touched the soft, boyish smoothness of his face. That too was a lie; if his features could reveal the life he had led, they would have been too ugly for description. He felt on the edge of tears.

His legs grew painful and stiff under him; he sat down on the damp ground and stretched his feet out. That was when he began to think of the great herd, the Horsehead cattle. By now Saunders would have them halfway to Mexico. But Saunders didn't know the buyers, nor where to meet them; that was Sinclair's part, and he wasn't there. He was here, on the run.

He shifted position uncomfortably. Probably Saunders would never make it to the Border. Probably a posse from Aztec would catch up to him and wipe him out, him and his crew. Saunders would be dead, the whole plan gone up in trail dust.

But what if they didn't? What if Saunders made it? This was the thought that preyed on Sinclair's mind into the small hours of the drowned morning. He had lost everything else.

Must he also lose the small fortune that would be his if those cattle reached their destination in Mexico?

There was nothing else left. He had betrayed his badge, he had lost May; he could never go back nor begin again, he knew himself too well to hope for that. What was left? He had little to lose.

So deciding, he stepped out of his shelter with feverish disregard for the rain, mounted the wet saddle, and pointed the horse downhill the way he had come. He could not see the trail; he relied on the horse to pick its way; and in that painfully slow manner he rode through the storm, soaked to the skin.

The sun, making a pale gray glow in the clouded eastern sky, caught him at the edge of the valley. With light to see by, he urged the horse to a faster gait, heading down the road toward Aztec. Once he glimpsed an approaching buckboard, and pulled fearfully off the road into the cover of a boulder field, concealing himself behind a tall rock until the wagon passed.

When it was out of sight behind him he got back on the road and trotted along until he was within a mile of town, whereupon he turned across a ford in the river and out straight overland toward Bill Quade's headquarters.

It was an hour short of noon when, soaked and dead tired, he arrived at the Rocking M yard and found it all but deserted. A single horse stood outside the main house, a few more were grouped waiting outside the corral; no one was in sight. Sinclair dismounted wearily and climbed the porch steps with a great stiffness of joints. The rain had diminished to a listless dripping.

Stopping just outside the door, he felt a premonition and a sudden fearful uncertainty. It was so strong that he was about to turn and walk back to his horse, but at that moment the door creaked open and Quade's fat shape filled the opening.

"Well," Quade said. "Look what we've got here. Where the hell have you been? I've had men all over the countryside, looking for you."

"I'm here now," Sinclair said irritably.

Quade stepped back with a sarcastic flourish, ushering

him into the room; and when Sinclair walked past the fat man, he heard the door close with a solid finality.

The gray light filtered weakly through the windows, blanketing the plush heavy furnishings of the room. Quade was a man who liked his comforts. Some of this furniture—the carved cherrywood sofa, the mahogany love seat, several overstuffed chairs and a few small tables—had been shipped all the way from Boston.

Across the room, tilted hipshot against a massive table, stood Nat Desmond, Quade's yellow-skinned lanky foreman. Desmond angled a lopsided grin at Sinclair; it was utterly without friendliness.

Quade said, "You're just in time. We're pulling out."

"Where to?" Sinclair asked.

"We're going to meet Joel's bunch before he crosses the Border. I don't want any stupid mistakes at this stage."

Sinclair had to smile. It was a great world, where nobody trusted anybody. Quade was grumbling on while he packed his saddlebags: "If I had just one man I could depend on. . . ." He turned his contemptuous glance on Sinclair; he said to Desmond, "See if you can rustle him up some dry clothes. I don't want him coming down with pneumonia on us."

Desmond slid out of the room. Quade buckled his saddlebags shut and slung them over his meaty shoulder; he jammed a hat on his big head and waddled across the room to the glassed-in rifle cabinet, from which he took a heavy Winchester .38-56 and a box of shells, which he distributed in his pockets.

He filled the rifle's magazine, plugging shells into the sidegate one by one, and spoke while he worked: "The damn fool widow turned down Davenport's offer. He wanted to give her his crew. She went up in the hills with nobody but that worthless drifter."

"Cord?" Sinclair said in surprise.

"Yeah. I sent Sam Coleman and Santos after them. The widow turned back after a while, and Santos trailed her back to Horsehead. Then he reported to me. Coleman went on after Cord. I haven't seen either of them since." He rammed a final shell into the Winchester and jacked a load into its

chamber, let the hammer down on safety-cock and cradled the rifle in the bend of his elbow. Coming forward, he made a small shrug. "Doesn't make much difference what happened. All by himself, Cord can't make much of a ruckus. Probably he's holed up in a cave somewhere with a bottle. I don't know what the hell got into the widow's head."

"Well," Sinclair said softly, "what do you know."

It looked as though everything hadn't fallen apart, after all. There was still a chance. Maybe, after he got his split of the loot, he'd come back and show it to May Davenport. That might change her mind.

His thoughts were still occupied with such ideas when Nat Desmond came back with an armful of shabby range clothing. "Belongs to Paul Berry," he said. "I guess he can live without it for a spell." Desmond tossed the clothes forward and Sinclair had to reach out and catch them.

Quade looked up at Desmond and said petulantly, "Get on over and snake out a fresh horse for the marshal." He leaned on the last word with heavy sarcasm.

Sinclair flushed and went back into a bedroom to change. Sinclair put the dry clothes on—they fit better than he had expected—and transferred the contents of his pockets.

It was difficult to get his swollen feet back into the soaked boots, but there was no other choice. Grunting with effort, he yanked the boots on and dumped his old clothes on the bed, and went back out to the parlor with his slicker tossed over his shoulder, buckling on his gunbelt.

Quade was shouldering into a denim windbreaker; he looked bleakly at Sinclair and said, "You'll find a towel in the kitchen. Dry off your head."

Sinclair colored. "You don't have to treat me like a ten-year-old."

Quade smiled thinly. "Don't I?" And went outside.

Frowning, Sinclair turned into the kitchen, full of the stink of stale coffee; he doffed his hat and massaged his face and head with a towel, and grimaced when he seated the wet hat on his head again. He went back through the parlor and out onto the porch. Quade was already mounted up and Desmond stood holding the heads of two horses, one of which was rigged with Sinclair's saddle.

Sinclair said, "Where's the rest of your outfit?"

"Out working," Quade said. "They don't know anything about this play."

"You're a great believer in covering your tracks, aren't you?"

"That's right," Quade murmured. "Come on—let's go."

Still smarting under the sting of Quade's contempt, Sinclair mounted up and followed the two men out of the yard. They took up a westward path and swung slightly south, to cut across one of the southerly passes through the mountains and intercept the herd on its route. Dark spots on distant hillsides were Quade's cattle browsing.

Shortly the rain let up but the sky remained gray with cloud, and gloomy. Thankful for the change of clothing, Sinclair folded his poncho and strapped it across his saddle cantle. All he really wanted was a hot meal and a soft bed to sleep in; but he had to stay asaddle. The thought of the money that lay at the end of the trail kept him awake. He had to concentrate on keeping his heavy eyelids lifted.

It wasn't long before a horseman appeared behind them, coming forward at the gallop. Nat Desmond, keen-eyed and attentive, said presently, "That looks like Sam Coleman's horse."

It was, indeed, Coleman. The dandy little gunman with the pointed face rode up with his right shoulder heavily bandaged and the arm slung in a white triangle of cloth. His gun, Sinclair noted, had been shifted around to the left side and protruded awkwardly, backwards, in its holster.

Quade laid a sarcastic glance on him and said, "Well, well. Fall off your horse?"

Coleman answered imperturbably: "He was faster, that's all."

"You mean you let him get loose?"

"I didn't have much choice," Coleman said. "I just came along to tell you I quit."

"You can't quit," Quade said shortly. "You're fired."

Coleman grinned. "It's all the same to me," he said, and lifted his reins.

"Just a minute," Quade said. His eyes narrowed down.

"Keep riding straight out of the country, Coleman. Understand?"

"Well," Coleman said, as if he were thinking about it, "if I'm not working for you any more, I don't have to take orders from you, now, do I?"

Nat Desmond shouldered his horse forward. He said grimly, "I don't reckon you're any too fast with your left hand, tinhorn. You'd be smart to take Mr. Quade's advice—in the interests of your own health."

"Sure," Coleman murmured. He smiled mockingly and made a slight bow in the saddle. "Good luck, gentlemen," he said, and gigged his horse away, heading north.

When the gunman had gone out of sight, Quade said, "I wonder what's got into him?" But after a moment he shrugged it off. "Come on—we're losing time."

Sinclair followed the two riders into the foothills. He was troubled; something in Sam Coleman's attitude had shaken his confidence. He had the feeling everything was not going to turn out as smoothly as he had been anticipating. . . .

Sinclair was half asleep in the saddle when they dropped down out of the short-cut through the tortuous Rifle Gap and lined out southwestward across the desert flats. The sky was still overhung with cloud and now, in the late afternoon gloom, rain began to fall again in small droplets, enough to settle the dust but not enough to wash out tracks.

That fact worried Sinclair but he did not speak. He put on his poncho and watched little rivulets of water drain from the trough of his hatbrim every time his weary head nodded. An hour short of nightfall they cut the tracks of the herd, a great swath of hoofprints in the desert hardpan.

"Pretty fresh," Nat Desmond observed. "We ought to pick them up in a couple hours."

But all the time he spoke, Desmond was frowning at the ground. "Something funny here," he said, and after a further moment's observation of the ground he halted his horse, dismounted, and hunkered down to inspect the earth at close range. When he stood up, gathering the reins to mount, he said, "One rider, pretty far behind the herd—half an hour ahead of us, maybe."

Quade squinted forward. No moving figure was in sight on the tan-gray surface of the desert. Far ahead, faintly visible under the clouds, stood the serrated teeth of the mountain range that marked their destination. Those mountains were just over the Border, in Mexico. Quade said, "One rider, too far behind to be a rear guard. Cord, maybe."

"If it is, he's a Goddamn fool," Desmond observed.

They pressed on, following the unmistakable track of the big herd. The swath of cattle had knocked down greasewood and pulverized cholla skeletons, and matted the dirt. Once in the ensuing half-hour they passed a dead Horsehead steer, its leg broken—apparently in a prairie-dog hole—and a bullet in its head.

Just before dark the small group of riders broke out of the foothills and drummed onto the desert. Dave Cord rode in the lead, with the gaunt Ben Cantrell at his side.

Cantrell said, in his irreverent tone, "Looks like a good night for a massacre." And added, a little while later, "Hell, a blind man could follow these tracks. Who's he think he's foolin'?"

"I guess he expected Quade to cover his backtrail for him," Cord said.

He looked around at the other riders, following in a ragged double file. There was Leroy Mack, his neck bruised and ugly-colored; when Leroy's glance came around to meet Cord's there was faint anger in it, but also a healthy respect. For Leroy, fighting was fun; he was not smart enough, nor sad enough, to harbor strong grudges for long.

But one man had a grudge to settle, and that was Pardeen, who remembered that Cord had once sent him to prison. Pardeen sat his saddle, a cigarette sagging from his mouth corner, and the glance that came from him to Cord was wicked and narrow. Behind Pardeen, riding beside Leroy Mack, was the man who called himself Smith—the one who had egged Leroy on last night, and who had half-drawn his gun on Cord after Cord had knocked Leroy down. It was hard to tell where Smith stood.

As for Cantrell himself and the rest—San Saba, Arkansas Tom, and Leroy—Cord felt he could rely on them, at

least up to a point. If the going got too rough, most likely all of them would cut and run; but if the situation got that bad, nothing would help much anyway. As things stood, they had agreed to attack Saunders' crew and, if successful, drive the stolen herd back to Horsehead—for handsome wages.

Cord had stretched his authority by offering the widow's money around that way, but it had been the only means he had found. In a way it was a good thing that the payment of the wages to these outlaws depended entirely on the success of the mission; that contingency would tend to encourage them to fight harder and stick with it longer.

It had also occurred to him that, if they succeeded in driving Saunders away from the herd, Cantrell and his motley gang might take it into their heads to cross Cord and run off with the herd themselves. But that was a problem he would have to worry about if and when it came up. Right now the main issue was out ahead of them, driving toward Mexico.

They crowded through the descending night, seven riders armed and primed. Even in the poor light it was possible to follow the track of the herd at a canter. Cord spoke across the distance to Cantrell, lifting his voice above the thunder of hoofs:

"Let's take care we don't ram right into them. I want to get around in front of them and set up an ambush. They've got us outnumbered—we've got to surprise them."

"Sure," Cantrell said, and looked back, calling: "San Saba!"

The dark-skinned taciturn rider cut out of the party and loped forward, a cigar jutting from his mouth, unlit. Cantrell said, "You're the best tracker in the bunch. Go on out ahead and find out where they are. Then come back and let us know."

San Saba wheeled his horse forward and lifted it to a gallop. His horse's hoofs threw up clots of dirt and then he was gone into the night.

"Might as well take it easy," Cantrell said. "Saunders will bed down for the night, most likely, and we've got no call to windbreak these horses."

They reined down to an alternate trot and walk, and in

that manner covered the desert passage for the better part of three hours, during which an occasional drizzle dampened the riders. Toward midnight the sky began to break up and patches of stars became visible. The moon sent pale rays through a dissipating bank of cloud and the desert glimmered a pale distant silver.

"A good night for coon hunting," Cantrell drawled. "Pick 'em right out of trees on a night like this. I used to bring 'em down with a .25 caliber muzzle-loader when I was a kid." He tipped his hat back, exposing a shock of blond hair, and grinned. "Reckon I've graduated to bigger game," he observed.

That was when two riders became visible ahead of them. Cantrell and Cord reined in, Cord holding up his hand in the cavalry signal to halt the others. Cord said quietly, "Spread out," and heard the shuffling of horses fanning out behind him. He lifted his rifle out of his scabbard and turned it into his grip, hooking his fingers into the loading lever's loop.

The two riders didn't act surreptitious. They came forward at an unhurried gait, one slightly behind the other, and when they drew near Cord recognized San Saba, the man behind, and—with some surprise—the man in the lead: Sam Coleman.

Coleman looked unruffled and as dandy as usual; he gave the impression that he might have groomed himself just five minutes before—an impression that was only partly belied by his bandaged shoulder. San Saba rode behind Coleman, rifle in hand, and then Cord saw that there was no gun in Coleman's holster. Cord's eyebrows lifted: Sam Coleman was not the kind of man to give up his gun off-handedly.

San Saba moved his pony close in beside Coleman and said, "This gent came to me with his hands empty. Said he wants to talk to Cord."

Cantrell squinted forward through the gloom. "Sam Coleman?" he asked.

"It's me."

"Well," Cantrell said. "Been a long time, Sam. I almost didn't recognize you. What happened to your wing?"

"A hunting accident," Coleman said drily.

"Yeah," Cantrell said. His expression made it plain that he knew Coleman wasn't the type to have an accident with a gun. His crooked smile met Coleman's and the two men chuckled.

Cord watched all this with a suspension of judgment; he had no way of telling what was on Coleman's mind, or where Coleman stood. Last time Cord had seen the thin-faced gunman, Coleman had been working for Bill Quade—and gunning for Cord.

Coleman looked at San Saba, whose rifle was cocked, and back to Cantrell, and said, "Tell your friend I'd like my gun back now."

Cantrell nodded idly to San Saba, and San Saba sheathed his own rifle and kneed his horse forward to hand Coleman's pistol back to its owner. Coleman smiled amiably at Cord, who felt his back stiffening and his hand crawling up his holster; but Coleman only kept smiling and dropped his gun into the back-turned holster at his left hip. He said quietly, "I'm on your side now, Dave."

"Since when?"

"Since I had this little accident," Coleman said, indicating his injured shoulder.

"All right," Cord said; but his belief remained in suspension. He watched Coleman with care.

San Saba, to whom each word seemed dear, spoke in his clipped way: "The cows are bedded down. About three miles due south."

"Sure," Cantrell said. "Saunders is too smart to run all the fat off them."

"I counted fourteen, fifteen riders," San Saba said.

Sam Coleman said, "Saunders only has ten men of his own. I know the whole setup. Let's step down and powwow."

San Saba's hooded glance passed across Coleman to Cantrell: "You trust this hairpin?"

"I'm willing to listen," Cantrell said cautiously, and added, to Coleman, "No offense, Sam."

"Sure," Coleman said off-handedly. He dismounted and stood waiting until Cord and Cantrell got off their horses; then the three men squatted down, ringed by Cantrell's

riders. Cord noticed that San Saba's unwinking attention remained steadily on Coleman; San Saba's hand was hooked idly over his gunbutt.

If Coleman resented the evident distrust of his companions, he did not show it. He talked smoothly:

"I met Quade this afternoon. He was on his way out here. I quit him, or he fired me, however you want it." He grinned sideways at Cord, who watched expressionlessly. "Anyway," Coleman went on, "I trailed Quade over the mountains and down here. He had Nat Desmond with him, and George Sinclair."

Cantrell's head rocked back. "The marshal?"

"Yeah. I figure he's thrown in with them."

Cord said, "Go on."

"Just before sundown I found where the three of them had come across the tracks of a single rider. At the time I figured it was Dave, here, and I guess Quade probably figured the same thing. He knew Dave had come after Saunders, alone."

Cord said, "But the rider wasn't me. Who was it?"

"Your boss," Coleman drawled mildly. Amusement danced in his eyes when he saw the surprise register on Cord's face. "I'm afraid," Coleman added soberly, "the widow rode right into a trap. She got caught between Quade and Saunders. They've got her with them now. I don't know for sure, but I expect they figure to hold her hostage until they dispose of the herd. After that . . ."

Coleman didn't go on, but Cord knew what he meant. Quade and Saunders couldn't afford to free Martha Justice, not with the evidence she had against them. A hard anger knotted in Cord's stomach and he heard Cantrell echoing his own feelings: "It takes a special breed of bastard to make war on women."

Coleman shrugged. "They're in too deep to back out now. What else could they do? Put yourself in Quade's shoes."

"No, thanks," Cantrell said curtly. "I wouldn't have been fool enough to start this play."

"Maybe," Coleman said skeptically. "Quade's got a lot of nerve—I'll give him that."

A bitter life had made Coleman tolerant; but Cord, whose life had run through similar channels of violence and in-

trigue, found himself too closely involved to be so cynically objective about Quade.

The news that Martha Justice was Quade's prisoner had hit him a hard, sudden blow from an unexpected quarter. He had not realized, until just now, how much his thoughts had been dwelling on her image. He had thought all that lay behind him. Now, with all the force of sudden discovery, red rage welled in him; but his anger was quickly tempered by caution.

He spoke across the dark silence: "This puts a crimp in our plans."

"That it does," Cantrell said. The mild ease of his talk irritated Cord; but Cantrell, he realized, was only along for wages. Cantrell could afford to regard the affair from a distance.

"We've got to get her out of there," Cord intoned grimly.

"Sure," Cantrell said, amused. "We just ride in and tell Quade to hand her over. Then we go ahead and ambush him." He chuckled.

"Shut up," Cord said irritably.

He got up and rammed his hands in his pockets and shouldered past the nearby outlaws, walking out onto the empty dark plain with his head down, frowning deeply, alone with his thoughts. Behind him he heard the wary murmur of men talking. The word had spread among the outlaws; already they were beginning to fidget restlessly. To them it looked as though the show was over; they had had a long tiresome ride for nothing. Angry and frustrated, he rammed back into the circle of men.

Cantrell looked up at him and said smoothly, "Maybe you better forget the whole idea. We can't start a fight when they're holding a gun at the widow's head."

Cord ignored him; he squatted down beside Coleman and said, "Give us the setup."

Coleman gave him a bemused look. "Maybe Ben's right," he said. "You can't go into a fight now."

Cord just put the hard edge of his glance against Coleman. Coleman shrugged his good shoulder and put his finger to the ground, drawing lines:

"The herd's bedded on a slope above Apache Springs.

Three men riding nighthawk in shifts. This is the Springs—Saunders has his camp there. I guess they didn't expect much opposition—they're camped out in the open with a fire. The horses are here, tied on a rope between a couple of cottonwoods." His finger sketched a vague map. He went on: "One man on guard with the horses. Last I saw, they had the woman roped to a tree. Far as I could tell, nobody'd molested her." He looked up, as if to reassure Cord. "A few of those boys—Desmond and Ruiz and one or two others—wouldn't put up with anything that raw. I don't reckon they'll harm her."

Not until they sell the herd, anyway, Cord thought. After that, Quade and Saunders wouldn't need a crew. His thoughts were dark and bleak.

Cord said, "One man, coming belly-down through the trees from the blind side. Could he reach the woman without being spotted?"

"Maybe," Coleman said. "But there's a man watching her. Same gent who's watching the horses. You couldn't cut her loose without being seen."

Cord considered it. "That looks like our only chance," he said. "It will have to be timed perfectly. We'll have to silence the nighthawks and the horse guard all at once, and then surprise the camp. If anybody makes a mistake, we're finished."

Cantrell was watching him with heightened respect; but Cantrell said cautiously, "It's a hell of a long chance."

"It's the only one we've got," Cord said. "Let's settle on a plan."

IX

GEORGE SINCLAIR lay on the hard ground, covered by a blanket, his head pillowed on his saddle, eyes wide open, unable to sleep in spite of his fatigue. Now and then his

head turned across the dying coals of the campfire and he looked at the shadow-figure of Martha Justice, her back against the bole of a heavy cottonwood tree. Her hands were tied and the rope was looped around the tree, and the stocky shape of Ruiz moved back and forth between her and the tethered horses, a rifle crooked in Ruiz' arms. The woman sat with her back ramrod straight and her contemptuous glance traveled the camp without hurry.

Near Sinclair, the great mound of Bill Quade's sleeping body rose and fell with his hoarse breathing. By the fire Joel Saunders sat, his eyes red-rimmed; ever since Sinclair had arrived tonight with Quade and Desmond, Saunders had been irritable and jumpy. Now, though, Saunders turned away from the red eyes of the fire with an angry grunt and rolled into his blankets, scraping depressions in the earth for hips and shoulder, lying down on his side with his face turned away from Sinclair.

On the dark surface of the sky the clouds were breaking up, the moon hafting down from an eastward quarter; beyond the camp the hillside was dappled pale and Sinclair could hear the occasional lowing of cattle, the soft songs of the nighthawk riders.

With the passage of time, Sinclair's nerves tightened. Unable to relax, he threw off his blankets and sat up. He went to the fire and poured lukewarm stale coffee into a dirty cup and drank it without tasting it; he got up and walked restlessly back to his blankets.

No sooner had he sat down than he was up again, driven to motion by the jumpy state of his nerves. He looked at the lumpy mound that was Quade, at the broad back of Saunders; he turned restively past the campfire and walked down toward the horses. Ruiz watched him come up and Sinclair thought he saw a quiet contempt in Ruiz's eyes.

Ruiz was a quiet man, honorable enough after his own fashion, but Sinclair had never broken through the man's shell of unfriendliness. Now, though, for the sake of company he tried: "I guess the rain's all gone for a while."

"I guess," Ruiz agreed, and did not seem inclined to continue the conversation.

His rifle pointed skyward and his eyes never stopped

moving across the darkness of the woods that surrounded the spring, the tethered horses, the woman at the foot of the tree. Moonlight made a pale wash of her face, subduing its clear-lined angles; she looked very young and very proud.

Sinclair turned from the taciturn Ruiz and strolled toward Martha Justice. She looked up at him with blank eyes, fearless, not even angry. Sinclair squatted down on his haunches and saw Ruiz watching him from a distance.

Sinclair grimaced and said, "I didn't have any part in this. I want you to know that."

"You mean the rustling, or kidnaping me?" murmured Martha Justice.

He flushed. "Kidnaping—if that's what you want to call it."

"Well," she said, "suppose you think of another name for it."

He didn't meet her eyes. He said, "I tried to talk him out of it."

"Sure," she said, and uttered a brittle hollow laugh. "Sure you did. How long do you think you'd last if they let me go?"

He shrugged. "Mexico's big enough to hide a lot of men."

"And a lot of dead widows," she said.

It made him look at her. "Nobody's going to hurt you."

"No?" she asked. Her tone was mock-polite, but it didn't take more than that single word to get his mind going. And after a while he knew she was right. He turned his morose face downward. "I wish I'd never got tangled up in this mess," he said softly. "Once you start in something like this, you can't back out."

"You've got a way out," she said.

"Have I?"

"Cut me loose and we'll both get out of here," the widow said.

When Sinclair looked up at her he saw that one corner of her pretty mouth was lifted in a mocking smile. He looked over at Ruiz, and Ruiz's rifle, and shook his head. "I haven't got the guts," he said frankly.

"I know," she replied.

He became angry with her: "How can you sit there so calm?"

"What do you want me to do?" she asked. "Scream?"

He shook his head, not understanding; he had never been able to understand courage; in a woman he found it especially baffling. It made him remember the weakness in May that had made her go back to her husband—out of fear, not love. He wished fervently for strength. His life would have been different if he had not been such a coward; he saw that clearly. But what was there to do?

Ruiz came by, making his rounds, bestowing his enigmatic glance on them, and swung back along the edge of the trees toward the horses. It wouldn't be hard. Just slip out a knife. . . .

He looked back at the camp. The coals had gone out, all but a few. Quade was gently snoring. Saunders had rolled over, his face pillowed on his thick arm, and seemed asleep. The others were scattered around in their blankets; no one moved except Ruiz, who reached the far end of his post and turned to come forward again. Sinclair tipped back and mopped his forehead with his sleeve.

"What's wrong?" the widow asked, "are you hot?"

"No," he said, "I'm scared, if you want to know."

"Scared of what?"

He had no answer for her; to answer, he would have had to admit his daring thoughts, and he was not yet prepared to commit himself. He watched Ruiz come up, turn, and go away. He said in a taut whisper, "If I got you out of this, would you drop charges against me?"

"Sure," she said, "why not? You're small potatoes, George."

"Yeah," he muttered, "I guess I always have been." He watched Ruiz's back as the squat man ambled along the tie-rope that held the horses.

"In fact," the widow murmured, "it might be worth some money to you, George."

"How much?"

She smiled briefly. "I'm in no position to haggle," she pointed out.

He bit his knuckle. His glance traveled the camp again; no one seemed to be awake. Up above on the slope stood two saddled, ground-hitched horses—Quade's and Saunders'. He didn't know why the two men hadn't hitched their

horses with the others, down in the trees where Ruiz was just now making his turn to come back along his line of march. He could make out one of the nighthawks, circling the near end of the herd, but that rider was several hundred yards away, too far to make out anything that might happen within the shadow of the trees. Moonlight bathed the slumbering camp and Sinclair's throat tightened when Bill Quade's massive shape moved, but the man was only stirring in his sleep and soon settled down.

The woman's voice came into his consciousness, soft so as not to carry beyond his ears: "You'd better make up your mind, George. If you sit there too long Ruiz will get suspicious."

I'll let him make one more swing, he decided. *Just one more swing.* But Ruiz came up, looked blankly at them, turned away; and Sinclair did not move.

Martha Justice chuckled low in her throat. It was a bitter laugh. After a moment she said, "Well, it was a nice thought, anyway. Thanks for that."

"Don't push me," Sinclair complained. "I need a little time."

"I don't think you've got much time," she told him; and when Ruiz came up again, Sinclair felt the man's eyes lying on him. Ruiz seemed to hesitate, but then his blocky shape turned around and strolled down toward the horses again. The widow hissed: "This is your last chance, George."

He felt moisture rising in his eyes; he shook his head dismally. "I can't do it," he said bleakly; and quickly he got up and went back toward his blankets.

When he lay down he had a glimpse of Saunders, lying on one shoulder. Saunders' eyes were wide open. And though he couldn't be sure, Sinclair thought he saw a faint wicked smile on Saunders' cruel face.

At the head of the tight-packed group of silent riders, Cord rode at a steady singlefooted gait along the surface of the desert, flanked by Sam Coleman and Ben Cantrell. Whatever their allegiances, they were two men with whom it was easy to ride in confidence when a fight was in the mak-

ing. Neither of them was the kind to back down from a challenge.

They rode without talk; all the discussion that had been necessary had been finished before they had mounted up, half a mile back. Now they advanced slowly toward the Horsehead herd, gathered at Apache Springs. Moonlight flooded the undulating desert with a pale cream glow.

Then Cord heard a flurry of hoofbeats and turned to see San Saba trotting forward alongside the column. San Saba reached the head of the group and Cord saw that the man's face was troubled. San Saba spoke one word, "Company," and jerked his thumb backward over his shoulder.

Frowning, Cord held up his hand in a signal to halt. When the horses settled down he was able to hear what had warned San Saba's perceptive senses: the approaching drum of hoofs.

"Sounds like quite a crowd," said Cantrell, softly lifting his rifle out of leather.

"This desert's getting mighty popular," Coleman observed, reining his horse unhurriedly away from the bunch.

Men spread out without needing orders, forming a loose line that turned to face the rear. An advancing knot of heavier shadow in the northeastern darkness soon became identifiable as a concentration of horsemen, eight or ten strong. Cord rested a hand on his rifle and sat waiting until they came up.

It was Jim Davenport, at the head of his own crew. Davenport was as surprised as Cord; he rode up with a swirl of earth and said, "What the hell?" Horses milled together and Cord cursed inwardly; he grabbed the strap of the bridle on Davenport's horse and said tautly, "You damned fool. You want to wake up the dead?"

Davenport glared at him across the night. "Who the hell do you think you are to talk to me like that, Cord? And what are you doing with these outlaws?"

"I'm trying to get Martha Justice out of a scrape," Cord said, through thin lips.

"What's that?"

"Quade's got her prisoner."

"Quade?" Davenport said. "I don't get it. What's Quade got to do with this?"

Cord shook his head. "We haven't got time for talk. Just for God's sake keep your men quiet. Stay behind Coleman here, and do what you can to handle the herd once the shooting starts."

"What shooting?" Davenport demanded.

"You'll see when the time comes," Cord said shortly, and reined forward.

But Davenport was not willing to fall into line that easily. "Just a minute," he said stoutly, following Cord ahead. "What the hell is going on here?"

Cord put a steel glare on the man and spoke thinly: "Look, I haven't got time to fool with you. Either stay here or go home, or ride with us. But if you come along, you'll have to do as you're told. Otherwise you'll be as good as putting a bullet in Martha's head. Is that clear enough?"

Without waiting for a reply, he turned to speak to Sam Coleman: "Keep these people with you, Sam. If they get in the way turn them back."

Then, nodding to Cantrell and San Saba, he cut away from the main body of horsemen and rode toward the lip of a narrow draw. Cantrell and San Saba followed, and soon the three of them dropped over the cutbank onto the soft-sand floor of the winding arroyo. Cord looked back and saw the rest of the group, swelled by Davenport's crew, swinging wide to the east to get around the Springs and come up from the far side of the herd.

He chafed with worry; he had not counted on Davenport blundering along at this crucial time when silence was so precious. It was only good fortune that Davenport hadn't come crashing right into the Springs half an hour later, in time to warn Saunders and the rustlers. Cord hoped now that Davenport would have the sense to keep a rein of silence on his men.

Flanked by Cantrell and San Saba, Cord wound along the floor of the dry arroyo. Its loose sandy bottom, while it made hard going for the horses, served to muffle the sound of their approach. They covered the better part of two miles along the dry bed and then Cord held up a hand.

"This is close enough, I think," he whispered.

He got down and hooked the reins in an outthrusting root high in the crumbling cut wall of the arroyo. Then, afoot, the three men moved forward through the deep soft sand, their boots sinking inches into it with each step. It was worse than wading through mud, Cord thought, and felt the rising well of impatience.

Ahead, over the wall of the draw, he could see the thick clump of big trees that surrounded the Springs. Within fifty yards of it they stopped to remove their spurs and hats. Cord nodded to San Saba, who slipped up out of the arroyo and almost instantly disappeared, fading silently into the brush shadows like an Indian. Then, touching Cantrell's bony arm, Cord led the way forward along the arroyo. It led them right into the trees. Moving as fast as caution permitted, they sloughed through the sucking sand until they were halfway through the trees to the Spring.

Shadows deepened and the night was fully black within the woods. Cord could hear the faint gurgle of the Springs and, beyond, the sounds of the gently milling herd and the singing nighthawks. Recalling the map that Coleman had sketched in the dirt, Cord climbed softly out of the arroyo and went into the trees to the left. Cantrell stayed right by his shoulder.

Moving very softly, testing each step for twigs, they crept through the fringe of timber, covering the last twenty yards on their bellies. Cord stopped ten feet back from the edge to look at the camp. A squat figure was tramping back and forth, going up from the tethered horses to a big cottonwood, and turning back there. At the base of that tree Cord thought he saw a leg and boot—that must be where they had tied Martha Justice.

Beyond, he saw the ash-circle of the fire, the big black coffeepot, the mounds of sleeping men. Or at least he hoped they were sleeping. He looked at Cantrell, beside him. The outlaw's glance was unreadable in the gloom.

Cord reached down and slipped the revolver into his hand, and with his left hand drew out his clasp knife. Cantrell, according to prearranged plan, began to move off to the left. Cord gave him five minutes, during which he restrained his

impatience with effort. Then he began to snake forward on his belly, all the while watching the silent prone figures of the men rolled up in their blankets beyond the campfire's ashes.

It seemed to take a long time to reach the big tree. He moved only an inch at a time, slipping around the base of the tree with his head close to the ground. And finally he was able to see, not two feet from him, the woman's shape, sitting straight against the tree, her hands bound behind her and roped in turn to the tree. The curve of her breast, lifted proudly, was silhouetted against the night.

Cord uttered a soft, sibilant word. Slowly Martha Justice's head came around and looked down. She displayed no surprise. Cord reached forward, seeing Ruiz reach the far end of his swing, and sawed with energy against the ropes that bound her hands.

The clasp-knife blade was short and it took some time; Ruiz was halfway back to him by the time he slithered behind the shadow-bulk of the tree. The woman sat motionless. Ruiz came up and stopped before her. Cord, lying in the darkness, could see Ruiz beyond the far end of the tree, only eight feet away.

Ruiz looked at the woman and said, "You shouldn't be here, Mrs. Justice. It ain't going to do any of us any good."

Cord relaxed slightly. For a moment he thought Ruiz had seen the cut rope behind her.

Martha Justice said caustically, "Sorry I complicated your plans, Ruiz."

"This is bad business," Ruiz said. "I don't like it much better'n you." He shook his head and added softly, *"Que làstima"*—"What a pity"—and turned away to walk his beat.

He had gone perhaps thirty feet, melting half into the darkness of the trees beside which he walked, when the woman moved. Cord saw her leg stretch out and then, abruptly, she rolled around the tree, startling him, coming right into his arms. "I knew you'd come," she murmured, and before he had time to answer her mouth was locked against his in a hot, strong kiss.

For a moment he answered her passion, then she drew back and Cord chuckled in spite of himself. "You've got nerve enough for both of us," he said. "Now get on back

through the trees. When you reach the arroyo, turn right. You'll find a couple of horses. Go home on one of them."

"And miss the fun?" She laughed softly and shook her head. "I'll stay here. You haven't got an extra gun, have you?"

He had no time to answer or argue. Ruiz had reached the far end of his route, turned, and evidently had just seen that the prisoner was missing: he stiffened visibly, the rifle dropped into his hands at the ready position, and then a silent figure stepped out of the woods—Ben Cantrell.

Cantrell's revolver was up and, although Cord couldn't hear him, it was plain he had uttered a warning. Cantrell stood only ten or twelve feet from Ruiz's side. Ruiz nodded slowly, knelt to put the rifle down, dropped his pistol beside it, and disappeared into the woods at the point of Cantrell's gun.

"So far so good," Cord muttered. "Now if nobody wakes up for just a few more minutes. . . ."

"About that extra gun," Martha whispered.

"I haven't got one," he said tersely, and flicked a glance at her. "Damn it, I told you what would happen if you came out here. This proves I was right. Will you get the devil out of here before somebody starts shooting?"

"Thanks just the same," she said, shaking her head. "I'll see it through."

Cord muttered a curse. "I should have let them get away with your Goddamn cattle. It wouldn't hurt you to learn a little humility."

She only smiled grimly; and then the night broke apart. Up the hill, Joel Saunders was rearing out of his blankets. "Ruiz? Where the hell's Ruiz? I don't see him—hey! Everybody up!"

Cord swore. He damned all light sleepers and Saunders in particular; roughly he flung Martha Justice back onto the forest floor and advanced to stand by the cottonwood just as Saunders shouted: "The widow's gone!"

Men were rolling to their feet, Quade's massive shape lumbering upright, and Saunders was rushing around kicking men up.

That was when a short volley of shots sounded from the

direction of the bedded herd. Someone shouted in the distance. Near and far were bedlams of confusion, occasional gunshots from the herd punctuating the livid stream of hoarse oaths that Saunders was pouring on his men.

Someone turned toward the tethered horses and just then San Saba's ghostly shape faded back into the trees. San Saba was firing his gun in the air and the horses, which he had cut loose, wheeled galloping away, almost trampling one man in their path. Men rushed back and forth, their guns up, seeking targets but finding none.

Quade's bull-throated voice was overcoming the other shouts, trying to establish order, but the damage was done. Seeing that confusion had the reins, Quade swung toward the two horses ground-hitched up the hill with Saunders right behind him.

Cord saw the two men clamber into saddles and cut away. He was unable to get a clear shot at either of them; too many shapes milled between. Cord stepped out of the trees, seeing Cantrell and San Saba follow suit down below, and along the far slope appeared the huge mounted shape of Leroy Mack, with Pardeen right behind him.

Cord called out to Saunders' outlaws: "All right—the game's over. Throw up your hands."

No one heard him in the bedlam. He fired three times in the air and repeated his call, and this time the nearer men began to hear him. One or two elevated their hands, unable to see their adversaries in the tree shadows; several others dived to the ground, guns coming up. Cord faded behind the cottonwood and waited until the fruitless fusillade had died down.

There was a ragged after volley and then he called out again: "That's no good. Toss your guns away—we've got you ringed. Ten seconds and we start shooting."

The men around the campfire fired one or two more shots and then subsided into confused silence, unable to see their ambushers, leaderless and undecided. "I'm counting," Cord shouted— "Five seconds. Do you want a blood bath? Desmond—toss down your guns!"

The thin Rocking M foreman, more level-headed than the others, saw the uselessness of resistance. He dropped his re-

volvers with a grimace and a curse and stood still, lifting his empty hands above his shoulders. Others, seeing his action, followed suit.

Silence descended upon the camp as quickly as had the brief scurry. No one seemed to have been hit, and that, Cord thought, was a piece of luck almost akin to a miracle. But he had not forgotten that Quade and Saunders, the leaders, had made their escape. They must have half-expected such an ambush; otherwise, why would they have posted their horses away from the others?

A cluster of riders approached from the direction of the herd. Cord swung his gun that way, but then he heard a voice sing out from the horsemen: "Don't shoot, Cord. It's me—Davenport. I'm coming in."

The half-dozen riders cantered right into the camp. Davenport swung toward the trees where Cord was stepping forward into the moonlight; the rest of Davenport's men dismounted to corral the disarmed rustlers.

Martha Justice came out to stand at Cord's shoulder just as Davenport dismounted beside them. Martha said to Cord, "A nice piece of work—but how did this big lummox get in on the act?"

Davenport smiled at her. "I think you underestimate your friends, Martha," he said, and turned to Cord: "Sorry I misjudged you back there, Cord."

"That's all right," Cord drawled. He was about to add something when Davenport stiffened.

Davenport was looking past Cord's shoulder, toward a point farther down along the grove, and Davenport's gun came up abruptly. "You, there—stop!"

Cord wheeled in time to see a crouching figure making desperately for the trees. One of the rustlers, trying to get away.

Davenport shouted again: "Stop, man, or I'll shoot!"

The man kept running and Davenport's gun discharged with a loud report. The running man stumbled, rolled, fell, and lay motionless.

"God," Davenport said. "I aimed for his legs. You don't suppose . . . ?"

Cord was already headed toward the gunshot rustler.

When he reached the man he made two discoveries. The man was not dead, but was approaching death quickly; and it was George Sinclair. Davenport came up and hovered over Cord's shoulder. Sinclair looked up bleakly with eyes that were beginning to glaze.

Davenport said weakly, "Good God."

Sinclair mustered a crooked smile. "I guess I had this coming," he said. Blood bubbled at his mouth corner, dark and moist.

Davenport shook his head. "I didn't know it was you, George."

"Well," Sinclair said, "at least now you don't have to worry about May. Listen—" His voice caught in his throat and he had to clear it to go on—"Listen, treat her gently, will you?" And he died that way, as if he had expected it all along and, now that it had come, welcomed it.

Davenport shook his head, holstering his gun. "I didn't mean to kill him," he murmured. "Honest to God, I never killed a man."

"I guess he knew that," Cord said, turning away. Martha was still back by Davenport's horse.

Davenport caught up with Cord and said, "Coleman and some of my boys have got the herd circling. We had a ruckus with a nighthawk—Coleman had to wing him. The other two nighthawks cut out hell for leather."

Cord nodded. "They won't be back. We won't have to worry about them." But, he was thinking, they would have to worry about Saunders and Bill Quade. He thought of Overmile, who had been a good man, and of George Sinclair, who had died more honorably than he had lived; their deaths must ultimately be placed at Quade's and Saunders' feet. Nothing was finished until those two men were captured.

So thinking, he said to Davenport, "I'm taking your horse. Take charge here." And, without waiting for a reply, he walked up to Davenport's rangy gelding and prepared to mount.

Martha Justice stepped forward and touched his arm. "Was that George Sinclair?"

"Yes."

"He's dead?"

"Yes," he said again.

"Poor man," she said; and when he looked into her eyes he saw sincerity.

He said softly, "You've got a lot of guts, Martha, but you're warmer than you let on." He mounted the gelding and lifted the reins. "I'll be back," he told her, and rode away.

X

THE TWO FUGITIVES had headed west out of the camp, and that was the direction Cord took. A long span of desert lay out that way, bounded on its farther side by the Smoke River, which wound south into Mexico, and the mountains beyond the banks of the Smoke. But Cord had not traveled far when he saw a single man, dismounted and standing by the head of his horse.

Cord approached that man warily until the man lifted his hat in one hand, and then by the gleam of moonlight on the white arm-sling Cord saw that the man was Sam Coleman. Cord rode up to him.

Coleman mounted and said, "I figured you'd be along this way. Quade and Saunders cut down to the south from here. I saw them go."

"What were you doing here?"

"Why," Coleman said, "I was with Ben Cantrell and his boys. Sloping out."

"I see," Cord said. He hadn't noticed it consciously, but now that it came to mind he remembered that, almost as soon as Davenport's men had taken over the prisoners at the campsite, Cantrell's outlaws had faded from sight. "You boys seem a little shy of daylight," Cord said.

Coleman shrugged. "We might have fought on the same side tonight, but tomorrow mornin' your friend Davenport would have taken a few second thoughts about us."

"We?" Cord said. "You weren't one of Cantrell's men."

"No, but I'm branded with the same maverick stripe." Coleman grinned. "Davenport and his kind don't cotton to our kind much, I reckon."

Cord nodded. "But Cantrell didn't even wait for his pay."

"He figures you'll bring it to him," Coleman said. "At Summit, when you've got the time." He added the last phrase with amused dryness.

"Well," Cord said, "then tell me this. Why did you stay behind?"

"I figured I still owed you a good turn," Coleman said, indicating his wounded shoulder. "Most gents would have left me to rot or bleed to death."

"All right," Cord said. "Come on, then."

He turned his horse south, toward the Mexican Border, and lifted it to a gallop. The horse, Davenport's, was heavy-chested and long of leg, a fast horse with plenty of endurance. Cord was thankful for Davenport's shrewd judgment of horseflesh.

The moon was heeling over on its westward course, and ahead the mountains loomed, miles distant. It was not far to the Border—just beyond a middle-distant range of hills. Near the rise of that range, Cord's ever vigilant glance picked up, off to the right, an unnatural lump against the desert. On a hunch he turned that way, Coleman following, and they came upon the struggling of a downed horse.

"Leg sprained," Coleman said. "They didn't shoot it, for fear the shot would carry. That's Quade's horse, sure enough. Takes a big horse to carry his weight." And then his gun went off, ending the horse's suffering.

Cord squinted toward the rocky hills. "A piece of luck," he said. "This will shorten the hunt, I think. They can't get far riding double."

He frowned over the ground, thankful for the moonlight, picking up the line of deeply imbedded tracks of the single, over-loaded horse that had carried both men away from here. It led straight south into a groin between two of the boulder-strewn hills. Yucca stalks and century plants made a spindle tracery along the silhouetted hilltops.

Once inside the trough of the canyon, Cord lifted his

horse to a gallop, no longer studying the tracks. The fugitives would, plainly, stay inside this canyon until they reached the head of it. Its walls were loose and too steep for easy exit, and an overly burdened horse would never be able to climb them. Coleman's shot, killing the downed horse, would have warned them of pursuit, but they would have had to expect that anyway. Cord headed for the top of the canyon, all his wary senses alert.

They had almost reached it when a shot rang out, not far away. Cord reined in.

Coleman was looking at him, puzzled. "That wasn't aimed at us," Coleman said.

"I think I know what it must have been," Cord said wearily. "Come on."

He put his horse over the hilltop, threading the yucca blades. After crossing a brief level stretch they came to the head of a brush-choked draw that wound gently down, making a slice in the center of the hill, to the flats beyond.

Out on the flats, ghostly in the moonlight, a single rider was rushing away. Cord urged his horse downslope, ignoring the fingers of spiny brush that tore at his clothes. At a reckless pace he plunged forward, suspicion growing into certainty, until abruptly a rifle began banging away wildly not fifty feet ahead of him, its muzzle lancing out orange tongues of flame.

Cord whipped his horse aside and dived into the bushes. Branches softened his fall and, unlimbering his sixgun, he had time to see Coleman rolling to his feet nearby. Coleman's gun opened up, answering the rifle, and the rifle immediately changed aim to fire on Coleman's gunflame.

Suddenly Coleman uttered a sharp brief cry and fell head-first into a greasewood bush. Enraged, Cord emptied his gun toward the rifle's position, but the rifle had quit firing and he could not tell whether he had hit it.

A moment of silence stretched into a full minute. After reloading his gun, Cord crawled across the slope to Coleman.

Coleman grinned weakly up at him. "I never could shoot worth a damn left-handed," Coleman said.

"Where is it?"

"Chewed some beef out of my hip," Coleman said. "Noth-

ing serious, but I don't guess I can walk. What happened to that rifle?"

"I don't know," Cord said. He had his eyes and gun trained on the brush downslope, but there was no sign of movement down there. "Stay put," he murmured, and moved away. Coleman's chuckle followed him softly: "I wasn't thinking of running anywhere."

Cord angled along the slope, keeping to the brush, zigzagging toward the ambusher's position. Light from the descending moon bathed the canyon with pools of pale earth dotted by the shadows of cactus and bushes. It took Cord a quarter of an hour to circle the rifleman's position and crawl up on it. When he did, what he found was a dead man—Bill Quade.

The fat man lay with his face in the earth, his empty rifle half under his body. The bullet that had killed him had gone into his heart—from the back. Cord touched Quade's massive body, testing the pulse; there was none.

It was testimony to the man's huge energies that he had lived as long as he had; for the placement of the wound in his back left no doubt that it had been Joel Saunders who had treacherously shot Quade in the back, dumped him from the saddle and left him for dead, so that Saunders would have a chance of escaping on the horse. But Quade had lived long enough to ambush his pursuers—thereby, ironically, giving the chance of escape to the man who had killed him.

Cord stood up, holstering his revolver. His horse and Coleman's stood not far away, cropping brush. He gathered both sets of reins and led the horses back to where Coleman lay in the bushes, doing his best to bandage his shot leg. Coleman had removed the sling from his arm and was using it for a bandage.

When Cord came up, Coleman grinned wryly and said, "You're bad luck, Dave. Every time I get near you I get shot."

"Anything broken?"

"I don't think so. It doesn't hurt much. I can move the leg all right."

"Quade's dead," Cord said. "Backshot."

"Saunders," Coleman said. He finished tying the bandage

with a grimace. "And here I am, slowing you down again. Get on after him—I'll make it back all right."

"You sure of that?"

"I'm sure," Coleman said. "I haven't lost much blood. It's a flesh wound, that's all." Cord was watching him suspiciously and Coleman waved a hand. "Go on—go on. I'll be all right." As if to prove it, he struggled to his feet and limped to his horse, and mounted with Cord's help. "Afraid I won't be much more help to you," Coleman said apologetically. "I hope you get him."

"I will," Cord answered grimly. He looked up at the twice-wounded man. "Sorry I got you into this, Sam. You're a good man."

"Penance for my sins," Coleman said with a small grin. Saying no more, he turned his horse back to the north and moved away at a slow gait.

Cord mounted his horse and rode away in the opposite direction, pausing once to look down at the massive inert shape of Quade. There was no time now to bury the man; that would have to come later. Cord shook his head, made miserable by death and treachery. He looked away from the dead man and rode south, toward the Border.

Sunrise brightened a nearly cloudless sky, promising a stifling heat to come. The Border lay behind Cord, the mountain slopes just ahead, a rugged wilderness of rock and timber. His eyes were dark with sleeplessness and the horse plodded slowly, jaded; but the tracks he followed so relentlessly grew fresher with each minute's travel, for Saunders' horse was in even worse condition than Cord's, having been weakened by its double burden and the exhausting early dash of escape.

He had the feeling that Saunders would stop and make a stand soon. So thinking, he kept his attention riveted to the land ahead, its little shadows and points of possible concealment. Saunders, from his superior height in the foothills ahead, must have spotted Cord by now, and must know that his pursuit consisted of only one man. With the odds thus evened, Saunders would not hesitate to pause in flight long enough to set up an ambuscade.

The healing cut on Cord's temple had begun to throb again; weariness and hunger threatened to overcome his overused body. He took a drink of tepid water from his canteen and raked the slopes with his raw squinted eyes.

Yesterday's rain had evaporated from the dehydrated land and the ever-present dust made flurries in his wake. The sun climbed, slapping his left shoulder and his hatless head with a steadily increasing violence of heat. He hoped Coleman had made it back to the others; he felt a gnawing guilt at having left Coleman unattended in the cruel desert; perhaps he should have abandoned the chase to escort Coleman back to safety. But Coleman had appeared capable of making it on his own, and Cord had trusted his judgment. Now he wondered if he had been right.

He rode with the rifle in his hand, its metal lockplate making his hand sweat. The fresh tracks climbed through the hills, leading him through a torture of heaving country, all brutal wind-cut rock and sharply eroded cuts. A red slash of sandstone made a tall cliff cutting across ahead, with a steep canyon slicing up through it to the caprock and timber country above.

Steady climbing made the horse unsteady in its fatigue; Cord had to halt several times to breathe the animal. All the while his narrowed attention studied the talus-slide walls of the canyon, but no threat presented itself and presently, still on top of the tracks, he broke out of the head of the canyon onto a plateau dotted with scrub timber, none of it more than head-high, but each scrub tree capable of concealing an ambusher.

The little hairs on the nape of his neck crawled erect and he saw a grinning skull in every bush, a hollow rifle muzzle in every branch. The tracks retreated ahead of him, but that meant nothing; Saunders could have doubled back on his trail. The tracks seemed no more than a few minutes old. . . .

And so it was that, when it came, he was ready for it—the little signal that could alert a fighting man in time to save his life. It was no more than a small thump—the hind hoof of a horse kicking at a fly on its belly. But if the sound was in earshot, then the horse's rider was within gunshot;

and Cord wheeled close against a thick-ball piñon bush, slipping from the saddle with his thumb curling over the rifle hammer. He slapped the horse's flank to drive it on up the trail, and almost as soon as it went out of sight into a hollow, he heard faintly the sound of a man cursing.

With a grim smile, Cord moved forward, slipping from tree to tree until he reached the lip of the hollow. Down below, his horse had stopped to crop in a patch of dry grass. His eyes made a slow survey of the hollow until finally he picked out a stroke of color: a horse behind a bush. He lifted his voice: "I've got you spotted, Joel. Come out without your guns."

There was no answer. He aimed at the base of the bush behind which the hidden horse stood, and put a bullet into the earth there. The half-concealed horse jumped back but did not leave the cover of the bush. Cord frowned. Crouching low, he made for a walrus-backed boulder twenty feet ahead.

He was almost up to it when, from a wholly unexpected quarter off to his left, a rifle went off.

The bullet whipped air against his cheeks, passing within a foot of his running body. He dived past the right-hand side of the rock and drew his legs up after him just as a second bullet whined screaming off the boulder, cutting a wicked white streak just above where his boots had been.

Cord jacked a fresh shell into the rifle's chamber and sat silent for a stretching interval. He turned his head, to catch small sounds on the flats of his eardrums, but all he could hear was the occasional stirring of the two horses farther down in the hollow. Saunders was waiting him out, and Saunders had the advantage of knowing exactly where Cord was.

Cord looked around behind him. Fifteen or twenty feet back was a line of brush. If he could make it that far, keeping this boulder between him and Saunders, he might be able to even up the odds. With that in mind, he started to move, crawling backwards, trying to establish his direction by an estimate of the angle from which Saunders had fired.

Rifle cocked, he made slow progress, but finally reached the brush unchallenged, and crawled through to the con-

cealment on the farther side. Then he began moving to the right until shortly he came to a clear patch of earth. To cross it, he would have to expose himself to Saunders' view; but it was one way, he decided, to find out where Saunders was.

He darted out from the brush, headed for a little clump of trees not far away to the right. As he ran he kept his face turned toward Saunders' position and his rifle up, and just before he reached the trees Saunders fired, splitting a twig away from the bush. The twig flew back and stung Cord's face, but when he rolled behind the piñons he had a clear picture of Saunders' position, up in a cluster of rock across the hollow, perhaps seventy-five yards distant.

Cord lay down belly flat, placing the length of his body into a shallow depression that had been scooped by runoff water. His head lay just behind the trunk of the piñon, and from underneath its thick ball of dark green foliage he was able to take aim on yonder boulder field.

He heard the tread of a horse moving somewhere nearby, but ignored it while he steadied his aim and waited for a target. And presently, seeing a round dark movement, he squeezed off his shot. The rifle bucked against his shoulder and, in reply, he heard laughter from across the hollow. There was a sting of confidence in Saunders' laughter.

Saunders called out: "You fell for the old hat trick, Cord. Try again."

"Give it up, Joel." Cord shouted.

There was no answer. He heard a horse moving again. The sun, not high, was already beginning to heat up his back. He fired a quick four shots toward Saunders' position, hoping to shake the man into retaliating, but all he got by way of reply was Saunders' laughter. After it died away there was no sound but the slow movement of horse hoofs—and, abruptly, that sound became a threat: a riderless horse didn't move that steadily.

Cord twisted his head to sweep the hollow. It didn't take him long to see what was happening. There was a rider up there on the rim, not a quarter mile away—and Cord was pretty certain he knew who it was: Ruiz, Saunders' old sidekick.

Somehow, Ruiz must have got away from Cantrell and managed to escape on a horse. Now, sight of that squat rider, dismounting in the brush, made a new threat and changed the situation from a standoff to a trap. Cord was, already, all but caught in a murderous crossfire. He had to act swiftly, or he was done.

Rolling out of the depression, he made a crouched dash for the thicker interior of the piñon grove. Immediately Saunders' gun opened up, talking in harsh signals across the hollow, its bullets singing wickedly through the branches. Cord flattened himself once more and looked through the foliage.

Saunders hadn't moved; his laughter rang hollow in the clear air. Saunders was probably reloading. But back in the brush, cruising around to get a shot, was Ruiz. Cord couldn't see him but he knew he had to find the man.

Belly-flat to the earth, Cord crawled back to the far end of the piñons, putting the mass of the grove between him and Saunders. Then, knowing he had to place Ruiz, he stepped boldly out in the open and ran twenty feet into another bunch of bushes. *That ought to flush him out,* he thought as he ran, but Ruiz did not shoot.

Cord backed deeper into the brush and moved upslope, carrying the attack toward Ruiz, forgetting Saunders for the moment because there was too much brush between them to give Saunders a clear shot at him.

Behind him, Saunders' rifle began firing steadily, insistently; its bullets were searching the piñon grove where he had been when Ruiz had appeared behind him.

Now Ruiz's voice cut forward sharply, from a point not far up the slope: "Cut it out, Joel! He's not in there."

Saunders' rifle quit. Placing his movement by the sound of Ruiz's voice, Cord moved cautiously upward through the bushes, crouched low with his rifle ready. Rocks clattered loosely far behind him, across the hollow where Saunders must have been coming down after him, hoping to smoke him out in a crossfire.

Cord reached the edge of the grove and searched for Ruiz, but found nothing. He turned to his right to make a

slow circle within the shadows of the brush, crowding through branches thickly intertwined.

His descending heel crushed a twig on the ground; it broke with a sharp crack. Instantly Cord dropped flat. A spray of sudden bullets flew around through the bushes overhead, raining leaves and twigs down on him. But it gave him a glimpse of rising gunsmoke over the top of a nearby rock, and seeing then an exposed boot, he aimed at it, fired, and scrambled away into the deeper timber. Behind him he heard a little cry—he must have hit Ruiz's foot.

Ruiz cursed loudly and shouted: "Come on up here, Joel. We've got him pinned down."

Cord slid under a low bush, crawled through restraining low-hanging branches, and bellied along, going back the way he had come to the far fringe of the grove. He was just in time to spot Joel Saunders coming out of the rocks below and angling up along the slope. Cord lifted his rifle but then Saunders was behind a bush; Cord put a savage hail of bullets through that bush and rolled back into cover. He heard Saunders laughing.

"No luck, Cord!" the ramrod taunted.

Cord's nerves were taut, there was an itch at the small of his back, sweat stood out on his forehead. He plunged recklessly to his right through the piñons to get out of the direct crossfire, then abruptly dropped flat and began to crawl silently back the way he had come, hoping to fool them into believing he was heading toward the farther rocks.

Though it only took a few moments, time seemed to fight him. Near the edge of the brush he halted prone on the warm ground, bringing his rifle forward and laying his eyes on the rocks where he had seen Ruiz. He lay silent for a long time, with the itch becoming intolerable at his back. Presently Ruiz came limping cautiously around the side of the rock.

Cord took aim, held his breath half-drawn, and fired. Unable to bring himself to kill a man this way, he aimed for the shoulder. The bullet rammed Ruiz back against the rock, but he wasn't finished; his hand lifted with the gun and Cord saw that Ruiz had him spotted. There was no choice. Cord shot him in the head.

Ruiz slid to the ground, loosely dead. There was no particular expression on his face. The lifelessness in his frame, which had been taut with energy a moment before, sickened Cord. Ruiz's weakness had been loyalty, not treachery: loyalty to the wrong man, to Joel Saunders. Cord remembered the words Ruiz had spoken last night to the imprisoned Martha Justice: *"Que làstima."* It was, truly, a pity—a heart-chilling pity that men had to die violently.

Saunders' hard shouting voice crashed into his consciousness: "Ruiz—Ruiz? What the hell's going on?"

Cord turned away from the open-eyed dead man. He walked out of the brush and began to circle the clump of piñons, cocking his rifle. He stopped before making the last turn and peered through the edge of the bushes. Nothing stirred for a moment, but then, not very far away, Saunders appeared, moving cautiously, his attention roving the bushes far to Cord's right. Saunders made a plain target, his lips working together worriedly, his rifle half-lifted. Sick of death, Cord clamped his mouth tight. His long jaw crept forward into a hard flat line and he aimed down the barrel of the rifle with unhurried care, squeezing off his shot.

At close range he couldn't miss. His bullet smashed into the lockplate of Saunders' rifle, ramming the rifle itself into Saunders' side, numbing the man's hand and bending him double. The rifle dropped to earth. Cord stepped into sight and said quietly, "Ruiz is dead. It's all over, Joel."

Saunders just looked at him. Cord moved his rifle in a gesture and nodded toward Saunders' holstered belt-gun. Saunders reached around left-handed, looking very tired, and let his gun drop. Then he nodded soberly. "Ruiz was a good man," he said.

"I guess he was," Cord agreed tonelessly.

"I've been pretty stupid," Saunders said.

"Yeah." Cord felt very tired. "Let's go, Joel."

Saunders looked up, as though half-drugged. "One thing first. I want to bury Ruiz. A man has damn few friends."

"He have any family?"

"No."

"We can take him back with us."

"I think," Saunders said, "he'd just as soon be buried here.

He was born in Mexico. How about it, Cord?"

"All right," Cord said. He walked forward to pick up Saunders' pistol. The rifle, its action smashed, was useless. Cord hooked his own rifle over his arm and held Saunders' pistol. "Let's get at it."

Sheriff Morgan, with part of Davenport's crew serving as a posse, rode away down the road toward Aztec with Saunders and his other prisoners. Cord stood by the head of his horse, bone-tired even after a night's sleep, and watched Martha Justice come down from the big Horsehead house to stand facing him in the yard.

She still wore the cheap range clothes she had picked up in Landering's store; her body was tall and straight and for a while she just stood facing him. Out on the flats, some of Davenport's cowboys were drifting the herd back onto its bed grounds. The yard was dusty, hot and dry; and across Cord's vision marched the ghosts of gunshot men: Utah Overmile, the gunman in Aztec, George Sinclair, Ruiz, and Quade. It had been a bloody time.

Martha Justice broke into his thoughts: "What now, Dave?"

He elevated his shoulders and let them drop. "I've got to pay off Cantrell and his boys. It's going to cost you a pretty penny. I'll take the money up to Summit for them."

"And then slope?"

"There's always the far side of the mountains."

Up at the house, Sam Coleman hobbled out onto the porch and sat down in a wicker chair, trussed in bandages. He grinned across the length of the yard at them.

Cord said, "One thing. Sam did us a lot of good. Let him stay here until he can ride."

"He can stay as long as he likes," she said. "So can you. Horsehead needs a foreman."

"Me? I'm a no-good drifter, remember?"

"Are you?" she said levelly.

He thought of his brother Walt. She said, "It'll be a thorny job, Dave. You'll have to find me a crew."

He gave it a thought. "I know some good men."

"Up at Summit? Cantrell's bunch?"

"They're pretty tired of running, that crowd. Give them a fresh chance and they might turn out pretty well. Of course, most of them are on the wanted list, one place or another."

"You can handle them," she said to him.

"Sure," he said. "Question is, can I handle you? I won't play second fiddle to you, Martha."

She was smiling in a way he had remembered, a way that softened her face with beauty. She said, "You think you're tough, don't you?"

He made no answer. She said, "I'm willing to find out how tough you think you are, Dave." She turned away and walked into the house.

Cord looked at the door. After a while he dropped the reins and walked up onto the porch.

Sam Coleman looked up at him, grinned, and said, "Before you walk in that door, you'd better be sure what you want."

"I know what I want," Cord said. He put his hand on the latch: he opened the door and walked inside.

She stood facing the door, waiting for him. He watched the smile stir her lips.