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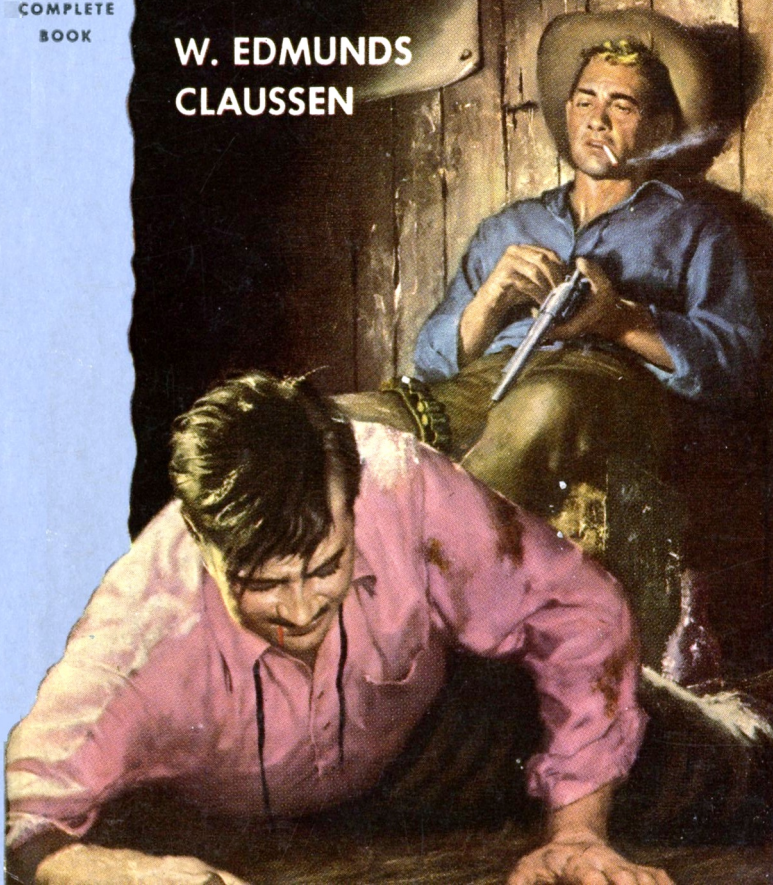
RIDE THE DARK HILLS

A
Western
Novel

W. EDMUNDS
CLAUSSEN



THE
COMPLETE
BOOK



Brandon MacRae started West in the black years following the Civil War. With him he brought a reputation for violence and an insatiable love of gambling. He bought into the greatest gamble of his life when he met Lana Harrel aboard a river packet and followed her to the Arizona Territory. There he was among men cast off by the war—men with no further retreat. It was a land poisoned by unrest and quick-triggered tempers, where the strongest made the law and enforced it with lead. It was a land Brandon MacRae chose for himself . . . to conquer and to rule.

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Also by W. Edmunds Claussen

REBEL'S ROUNDUP

EL PASO

GUN DEVIL

RUSTLERS OF SLABROCK

LAWDOG OF SKELETON CANYON

Ride the Dark Hills



W. EDMUNDS CLAUSSEN



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TO CONNIE BARNETTE

Who has travelled many of the old trails with us

CHAPTER I

The tension was gone from Brandon MacRae. It left his face smooth in an immobile mold which years at cardtables had polished into a mask. Of those who now shared the game none knew the thoughts that stirred behind his cool gaze. When a man flaunted his luck against such opponents as these he normally kept his mind from running to women. Yet Brandon was thinking of her, of Lana Harrel. What a surprise to find a woman without rouge among this crew!

The Mormons were singing lustily in the forward quarter of the packet, where at night they spread bed-coverings and fought for sleep while the desert heated wind tormented them. They were on their way to Callville, the furthest upriver landing a steamboat could reach on the Colorado. Beside Lana Harrel, the passenger list was made up of these Mormons, a few miners bound God-knew-where, and the four who had been playing poker every idle hour since the packet left Yuma.

A man with Brandon MacRae's experience didn't usually let his mind stray when he sat a high stake game. It took skill plus the husky hand of luck to place bets against such fellows as those aboard the *General Heath*. All of them were card sharps who had the one idea of salting their pockets.

But Brandon hadn't been able to tear his thoughts from the friendly way she had reacted to him—and he was winning. By now he considered Lana Harrel his luck. It was impossible to keep her out of mind. Her mouth was open a trifle as she breathed, with a bee-stung lower lip that would come up against a man's mouth and set his whole blood burning. He was thinking now that he might be crushing her close if it weren't for this game.

Before their first meal he had learned her name from the Chinese cook, who also acted as dining room steward. Soon they were talking together of the desert and the Apaches.

For years Cochise had been peaceful, but because of a blundering Army policy he was now throwing raiding parties against the whites, touching off a match under the entire Indian-settler relation. Lana's talk of such matters was only on the surface—underneath was a different message. Something was calling between them that was old, that ran its roots down through the centuries. It had been on her face during the first moment. It turned them both sober. There was something they wanted—they both knew what it was.

Earlier this evening she had spoken from the starboard rail. He still carried the husky, warm welcome of her voice as he walked by.

"Good evening, Mr. MacRae."

A starched dress fitted her closely across her slim hips and revealed deep, high breasts. She had a pair of eyes as dark as Brandon had ever noticed, with all the mystery and lure of Arizona Territory wrapped up inside.

He would have stopped at the rail if the others hadn't arranged the game after the dinner hour. He cursed them beneath his breath as he passed along the creaking, sun-warped deck. Lana Harrel had breeding and manners, and somewhere in the background lay a mother's prayers. She was used to a certain amount of freedom and had the way of a woman at ease with a man.

Francher had brought up the subject of cards, and Van Caslin had murmured, "Tonight"—Van Caslin with his hard, straight mouth and his flinty eyes. An Army officer in disgrace, and a scalp hunter to boot. Someone in Yuma had snickered and whispered, "Travelin' alone, Van Caslin is. He'd better keep his gun near his rump if he heads for Apache country!" And his Army Colt was handy in his tunic pocket. . . .

They played in a stuffy hole beyond the main saloon. There was an odor about it of dried river brine, of tar and cigar and Cocomonga wine and of long neglected mud caked across the planks. The *General Heath* had the reputation of having the wildest games along the river.

Brandon sat with his back to a wall, a trick a man learned readily when his nerves were tightly drawn. He had started his

run into the Territories a few weeks ago with a dead man goading him on. By now most of the reaction had worn away, and yet some of it remained in the way his glance followed the smaller sounds. He had a handsome face, with curly black hair falling across his forehead, skin beginning to take on a desert tan after the pallor of the gambling tables. There was no saintliness about Brandon MacRae; definitely the impression ran altogether the other way.

Bishop had fallen into a position directly opposite. A professional gambler, but of the Western river variety, around forty years old, with a shrewd, black deadliness about him. It was in his frockcoat with its ponderous pockets, the stock at his throat, in his soft hands. . . . On Bishop's right sat Van Caslin. He was five or six years younger than Bishop, with pouches of puffy fat below each eye. He wore parts of a threadbare uniform from which the insignia of rank had been removed. For the past hour these two had run into bad luck. Both Bishop and Van Caslin were finished with the game and were waiting only to see how the hand ended between Brandon MacRae and Francher.

Unfortunately Aaron Francher had held a few cards in his hand—enough to tempt him too far. He called and then raised with everything he had left in his wallet. The pile counted out at \$740 in greenbacks—it made a little over two thousand in all on the table. Brandon held four kings in a row, the draw filling his hand. He matched Francher's bet and caught the flame that touched the older man's look.

He read him carefully, wondering if everything Francher owned showed on the table. He asked abruptly, "Anything else, Mr. Francher? After all—make it interesting!"

Francher was thin, with a wolf's lean hardness; his bitter lips pulled in at their edges, cheeks dried from wind and burned in the sun. The angle of his ancient beaver felt allowed a beam of lamplight to brush his white hair. A man on the Yuma landing had said he used a Roman Two as his brand; that the numeral had significance. Before the war, in '59, Francher had tried to drive a few hundred head of longhorns to the gold coast and had arrived in the Territories with less

than six head. Mojaves and Tonto Apaches accounted for the rest. His second attempt at trail herding had been better, though he brought them no further than the Colorado river. A stout, rough-shod product of the frontier; a man could tell that from Francher's way.

The cattleman hesitated before drawing a soiled paper from his wallet. He flattened it on the table, his fingers shaking very little as he spread the creases.

"Have you ever heard of Roman Two?"

Brandon nodded, feeling a chilling sensation sweep his backbone. Francher went on: "I'm holding a chunk of country that'll graze a good many thousand cattle. It's a place called the Jasmines. I've got a log house and barn. It's only fair to tell you there's no count on the cattle. A good many have been butchered."

Brandon lifted a brow, the gleam in Van Caslin's eye reaching him. Francher said, "We've got to fight to hold what we've got. Butchering reds—and white men just as bad." His glance roved around the table and Brandon saw the momentary pause as he reached Van Caslin. Stories had come up from Durango of white men who took bounty from the Mexican government on scalps they collected. Tales of American fortune hunters, and of Van Caslin. . . . There was strain in the moment and then Francher went on. "Mr. MacRae, here is my bill of sale for breeder stock. It's worth a good deal more than two thousand dollars."

There was a faint hammering of blood against Van Caslin's temples telling Brandon all he needed to know. He said to Francher softly, "You're putting your paper up for two thousand?"

"If you'll accept."

A gambler doesn't accept Francher's type of collateral to be met by solid cash. But Brandon was thinking of Lana Harrel. The look of her lush mouth was in his blood and his temples were flushed by slight excitement. He glanced at the bill of sale casually, saw it had been dated in Texas where Francher had bought his second herd after the war. He wondered

how many head were left in this bunch. He counted out his bankbills and slid them beside the rancher's paper.

Lana Harrel was still bringing him luck and he won the pot, breaking Aaron Francher. This was the beginning of a chain of events that was to alter his life, even as it was to change the future of every man at this table.

Chagrin can break through a man's shell in various small ways. It was there in their faces for one who knew how to take its measure. Bishop sat staring blandly: he was wondering what in God's name MacRae wanted with cattle. The last few moments had struck Van Caslin hard. His lips were compressed by anger. Francher—Brandon wasn't certain at all how Francher was taking it. The ravages of a hard life were plain in his features and Brandon thought he had suffered, and was still suffering, and only the grave at the end of his trail would bring him peace.

He smiled, inviting them quickly, "A drink, gentlemen? The pleasure is mine!"

They finished the night with a glass of Cocomonga wine and then separated. Bishop left the room unemotionally, a block of ice that had neither expression nor soul to his features. Van Caslin stalked off with anger still smouldering in his eyes. Brandon thought he was taking it in bad grace, considering he had lost only a few hundred in the last hour. Francher remained seated alone at the table, his brow thin and parched beneath his battered beaver felt.

For Brandon MacRae there was little lift in taking the pot. Most of his life he had played in the best houses of New Orleans. His father had paved the way at the gaming tables before him with his cool nerve, his smooth manner, and a MacRae could sit with the best people anywhere in the city. He wasn't like Bishop in this respect, for Bishop cheapened the profession and made it a deadly, dangerous thing. . . . Before New Orleans fell he had spent a great deal of time in service at Fort Jackson and Fort St. Phillip, at the invitation of the Confederate officers who were tired of waiting for Farragut's fleet to shell them. Devol had been there, too, the noted New Orleans gambler. After Farragut silenced the para-

pet guns for the Federals, and towed his big frigates to the levies, Brandon had helped Devol strip a Union paymaster down to his underwear. Union General Butler had gone into a wild rage over that, but the Yankee officers were as fond of gambling as their Southern cousins, and Brandon had been reprieved.

In his time he had seen all the fine women New Orleans could offer. Scantly-clad beauties of French and English and Spanish descent, in some of them flowed the smouldering strains of Moorish blood. All of them had been bred to take life gamely, and to love satisfyingly. But Lana Harrel was something else again. She was of the frontier, with some steely and unyielding fiber about her manner.

Lana was standing with her slim back toward him, looking off into the desert. Brandon caught the full impact of her against the moonlit river. She was deftly curved, the moist strands of her hair blowing gently about her face. Captain Crotch had made his boat fast to the bank below Ehrenberg for the night, and the Arizona shore was a low rampart topped by sage, by stunted brush, and a few Spanish daggers standing like the headdress of Indian chieftains.

Lana turned as he neared. He looked for a message behind her smile and read her loneliness, her urge to fulfil a demanding want. Her words were husky with warmth against the lapping river. "Your game is over, Mr. MacRae?"

Brandon smiled and reached the rail beside her. He thought, had she done this before? And then he hated the thought. What difference did it make when a woman was willing? The touch of his arms sent faint nervousness through her; he felt the strength of her eyes lifting to his face and she eased against him with a sigh.

"You were lucky, Mr. MacRae?"

"Lana, you are my luck."

"Careful! You had better not make a mistake!"

He laughed, slipping his arm under her silk cape and drawing her closer. There was nothing between his hand but her thin night dress, and he judged from this she had prepared for

sleep but her airless stateroom had driven her to the deck for a breeze.

She said testily, "You have a dashing way. Did you have all this planned?"

"I'll not deny I looked forward to you."

"Perhaps, then, you'll be disappointed?"

He turned her about to face him squarely and her hands came up to his chest, holding him off. She was dazzling, with the moonlight picking out glints in her black hair. He saw at once he had made a mistake, that she was not to be taken this cheaply. The sweet scent of lilac was in his nostrils, her throbbing warmth creeping through his bones. "Tell me," she whispered, "how was New Orleans?"

He let his grip loosen. All at once the black mood of the Delta country drifted over him strong. The haunting, half sad mystery of the Creole world with its magnolia scents that had been his home. His voice thickened in spite of his control.

"You've been to New Orleans?"

"My mother was a Memphis woman," she murmured. "Father brought her West."

"Ah!" he said, and returned her smile thinly. "New Orleans will never be the way it was before the Yankees."

"For you, it couldn't be the same. After you shoot a man and run, how could it be?"

How fast stories traveled! Already his past was closing up and the desert with all its wastes was not large enough. Her lips had parted in a tantalizing way and he suspected challenge behind her eyes.

She murmured quietly. "We hear things in the Territory. He was a carpetbagger, of course, and doesn't deserve sympathy. But Northern men have friends everywhere. Van Caslin knew about it."

How could Van Caslin have got that story from New Orleans? The conviction grew in him that Van Caslin's interest ran deeper than their poker games. Certain instances came back when he recalled his look during unguarded moments. He tried to put it aside for the time being, was unable. "I don't understand how Van Caslin found out."

She lifted a shoulder beneath its frail dress. "I don't think there's shame to your running. New Orleans has become an unfriendly city—you had to get out." And with that she dismissed the incident. Her words went on, softly:

"Mesilla—Soldier's Farewell—that is a rough road you traveled through Tucson and Yuma. There's nothing of the soft South there." Her words trailed away regretfully. "I remember the trail as though I went through only yesterday. In those days the Apaches were considered friendly and Overland ran coaches twice a week. I came through with my mother—I recall one of Cochise's warriors leaning from his pony and touching my arm. I was a young girl and mother knocked his hand out of the coach while some of their squaws giggled. They were only fascinated by my white skin, but mother and I were frightened."

"Overland will never run through that country again."

"No. The Chiricahuas aren't intended for white men. They are Cochise's final stronghold." Something about her mouth hardened. "We should let them alone—but white men aren't that way."

He looked at her more closely and saw greater depth that he had overlooked. She was no woman of the boats; she was an individual with unyielding convictions about life, and a way of expressing herself. He said thoughtfully, "You're not being very true to your race."

"No, I guess not. But can you blame the Indians? We've been like wolves on the prowl, driving them back every time we want their land. We place a bounty on their scalp, as we would on an animal."

Her gaze struck him harder and her voice lowered. "I'll tell you something of Van Caslin. While he still wore the uniform a massacre took place near the border. A freight outfit had camped for the night when Apaches appeared on the ridges—a friendly party on their way to the reservation. The Indians were invited into camp by the freighters and while they sat around eating venison a cannon was fired into them from the wagons. Before the slaughter was finished every redskin had been accounted for. I've heard it mentioned that Van Caslin

recommended this little byplay to the freighters. I mention it because there appears to be something between you two men—and you may not know Van Caslin.”

He dismissed the warning, more startled by the deep current that ran through her. The conviction grew in him that this past hour, the final hand at the poker table, had decided his whole future life. He said, “You’re right in supporting the Indians. But there’s a natural law that keeps things reverting to the strong. The redman has had his day. Now the whites are here, and to stay!”

“It will always be like that. It is life—let the strong take from the weak.” She said it with surprising bitterness and let her dark eyes search his face. “Did you break your friends in your friendly little game?”

“I took some money. And a deed to Francher’s ranch.”

“No! Francher wouldn’t do it!”

“So you also know Francher?”

“I never expected he’d gamble his cattle. No, never!”

“I think he was happy to unload his troubles. Do you know what his business was in Yuma?”

“He was there hunting for help.” Her eyes drifted to the shoreline. “They dragged the man he was looking for out of the river. He’d been dead several days—a horrible sight. It was his brother.”

He wanted to ask what she had been doing in Yuma, why she was on the packet. But something held him back. She had let her gaze run beyond him, evading his searching eyes. “You mustn’t think of taking over Francher’s responsibilities. You don’t know the Jasmines—and Whiskey Pass! If it’s money you need—if you’re thinking of selling out Francher’s place, perhaps I might be interested in buying.”

“*You!*” He smiled. “I’m not thinking tonight. Nor selling!”

Then she saw him watching the white curve of her throat and her cheeks flushed. The sureness of him got across to her. Here was a man who seldom missed on the things he played for, the things that made life worth a gamble. She said softly, “I was afraid of that. Brandon, let’s walk to my stateroom. Or would it bore you?”

They crossed the narrow space to her cabin, his arm still about her. A strong desire was building up inside him now. It was something that would give him no peace until she satisfied him in surrender. She was stirring him more than he expected. She was stronger than any woman he had known, and at the same time more compelling.

The river wind breaking against the *Heath's* single stack was making the only sound. In a quick movement she thrust open her narrow door. The warm quiver of her flesh beneath his arm drove through him, stirring him deeper. Unexpectedly she came up against him, thigh and breast tighter. He found her face lifted to him and he bent hungrily after her mouth.

Streaming black hair was in his eyes, the sweet, warm scent of her breath filling his lungs. The will he had sensed in her was all here in her embrace. She went through him like hot iron, branding him inside. No other woman would ever do this to him again.

Her lips searched him anew and her arms slid across his back until they paused against his money belt. A sharp warning instantly laced his brain. He thought: watch out! Woman could be more dangerous than man; she might get him inside her cabin to wake up penniless in the morning.

All the while he stood with her body pressed against him until someone walked along the deck. There was no pause in the footsteps and from this Brandon doubted whether the man had noticed them in the cabin's shadows. But the scuff of boots had broken Lana's mood. He felt her stiffen, then she murmured:

"It was Francher. Something evil is waiting for him. Brandon, don't be a fool and take over his place yourself. You should go to the mines, or stay with the river. You'll find your fortune more naturally that way."

"I still want a look at what I've won."

She asked, "What do you want with cattle? You're a gambler."

"Life's a gamble." His mouth was set in a grin more stubborn than she had seen.

"I thought you had never lived a rough, hard life, but maybe

I've been mistaken. You're going on into the Jasmines regardless of anything—you're that kind."

There was more in the appraisal she gave him than Brandon could account for; a quiet prayer that had come to an end, a dread insight into the future. Her handclasp fell away and she slipped into the room closing her door after her. He turned up the deck, smarting under the dismissal, not quite sure how close he had come to being a fool. He remembered her fingers pausing against the swollen outlines of his belt. She might have been toying with the idea of gaining Francher's paper this way, since he wouldn't sell.

Again, it could have been accidental or done in complete innocence. For a very brief moment Lana had been one with him and she might not have noticed his money belt. He decided upon this. Lana Harrel was no loose woman, certainly she was no common thief. Hers was simply a rugged will that matched the country, and the rest had been a product of the night.

CHAPTER 2

The packet lay dark as Brandon turned the prow and came down the still port deck hunting the man who had passed while he held Lana in his arms. Stillness held the night, a stillness in which the fingers of treachery stirred with the wind. There was no doubt in him he would find Francher prowling the deck, watching him. There was still something Francher wanted, something that gave him no peace.

He stepped carefully over the darkened deck. The *General Heath* was a shallow-draft puddle skimmer heaped high with mine supplies. The overland trails, the great wagon roads west, had gone to seed during the war, leaving the river to carry a steady stream of commerce. All the world was headed West since the gold strike in the Harqua Hala and the Vulture hills. The mines lay well inland but their rich bullion was

freighted to the river and in turn mine machinery and food must be sent in. Business had boomed in these twenty years since the beginning of river transportation.

Captain Crotch had more ladings than he could accommodate and cared nothing what happened to his passengers. Boxes of equipment that should have been stowed below on the cargo deck stood blocking the passageway. Brandon caught movement among the shadows as he neared the cases. He went forward with his senses alert and then he made out a slouch hat against the skylight and knew he had found his man.

Francher stood nearly concealed by shadow, his thin profile turned toward the river bank. He turned as Brandon came up, and barely nodded. Brandon said swiftly,

"You had something you wanted to say about the Jasmynes?"

"What is there to say?" There was very little friendliness about him, simply a tiredness in his glance. Brandon thought he had been dogged by his troubles; now that the weight had shifted he had no desire to take it back. Still, something remained to be lifted from his conscience. His slow words drifted to Brandon.

"You'll try to take it over and buck your way through. I read that much about you. I wish you luck. I'd like to see the hand play out. But I'm not going back to Whiskey Pass. I got a feeling—that death is tallying me now."

"Surely you don't mean that!"

"I guess. Sometimes it comes to a man. I felt it first when I looked at my brother flat on a slab in the morgue. MacRae, there are some might want to buy you out. If you got guts you'll see it through. I was too old."

Brandon frowned. "I've had the offer already."

A thin, frail smile touched Francher's mouth. "Saw you talking to her. Her father won't like you a damn bit. But it's Madrid you'll watch, and Chris Lake. And Madrid means to—" Oddly, he stopped. "Maybe you can win Rusty John to your side. Hope you can."

"Friend, go on."

But Francher merely shrugged. "Why am I worrying? I sold out—lost out, and now you face the wolves!"

He turned from the rail heading for the shadows and Brandon called sharply without response. He'd seen a good many men lose their fortunes at the gaming tables and they either took it well or they didn't. A few days might make Francher feel different. On the other hand he might brood and wreck the remainder of his life. Something was getting into him already, breaking his nerve and making him think of death.

Francher reached the end of the cases by the time the shot came. Brandon had sensed something like this. There had been a tingling along his spine, a nervous waiting. Now he watched a gunflame stabbing from beneath the paddle hood, then Francher was crumbling.

He went down on one knee as he fell, reaching crazily along the deck with his arms, his body extended beyond the packing crates. His hat rolled to one side, moonlight striking his silvery hair. Brandon leaped after him with his hand streaking toward his Navy.

Now he caught a dark form teetering beside the paddle box. His Colt flashed into his hand. He leveled the pistol and then the outline merged with the shadows and the killer was gone. He didn't shoot, and afterwards he was glad he had withheld his shot.

Francher was lying with an awkward twist to his head. Brandon straightened him on the planks while blood rushed from the corners of his thin, tight mouth. It was a thick, foamy fluid that held his life. Brandon knew he was dying.

A bitter smile twisted Francher's lips. "Mistook me for you," he rasped. "Queer—what cards—will sometimes turn up."

Brandon nodded. It had already struck him the killer had been watching him come down the deck, had seen him enter the machinery cases, had seen Francher emerge from the opposite end. The bets Brandon had collected were too much temptation. Or was it the paper that would give him possession of all Francher held?

There were motives here that went back further than Brandon understood. Van Caslin and Bishop were the only ones who knew what had transpired during that final poker hand, and Francher had at least been on speaking terms with both

when he came aboard at Yuma. But definitely Bishop wouldn't be interested in the paper. It left it then with Van Caslin . . . and then Brandon conceded that one other had found out about that game. Perhaps Lana Harrel knew Francher better than any of them.

Instantly Brandon's mouth filled with the bitterness of gall. He shook Francher insistently. "Did you see him? Tell me, quickly!"

He tried to read the rancher's thoughts but it was impossible. Francher was dying. Was his mind drifting down the winding backroad of his past? Was he lingering over memories that marched in from his boyhood years? He looked so old, so drawn, so friendless. His eyes were opaque as glass. Blood streamed from the corners of his mouth and stained Brandon's shirt. It was black in the night and his chest and Francher's chest were slowly turning dark. Again Brandon shook him.

"You'd better talk while you can. You owe me that much!" The glassing eyes touched his face, seemed to smile. Francher owed him nothing beyond what had passed across the poker table.

Now Francher's mouth quivered and Brandon bent closer. The dying man's breath gurgled in his windpipe, his head dropped deeper into Brandon's arm. He whispered, "Roman Two has a tough crew. If you can hold it together, I haven't left you a joker."

It was Francher's last moment. Brandon felt his breath sawing hoarsely into his lungs, then this stopped. All Francher's earthly debts were paid. Brandon laid the still body gently along the boards, reholstering his pistol. Others were coming and it struck him this would appear to them as though he had attacked Francher. He faced them wiping blood from his hands.

He saw Crotch swing down the texas ladder, his hands sliding over the hardwood handrails, his feet barely touching the treads. The captain was no more than half dressed in his sloppy trousers and a blue San Francisco rivermans' jacket worn over shirttails. He was a short man, nearly as wide as he

was tall, with red side-whiskers covering a florid skin, and a redhead's disposition.

The night turned suddenly thick with its evil. Knowledge burst about Brandon that he played the part of a pawn, and soon rivermen would be clamoring for his neck. It came to him like a knife-edge warning, a warning no gambler ignored.

"Who is this, Mr. MacRae?" the captain demanded, his eyes fairly beetling but ignoring the dead man on the deck.

"Aaron Francher. He's dead."

"So that's what the shooting meant! Tell me what happened."

Brandon hesitated only a moment. There was no use to evade that last hand they had played; in Francher's death their game had become public property, the course of his life taken from his control. He told how much each man had lost at the table, how he had come upon Francher on deck and talked with him.

Crotch's eyes ranged to the hat a yard from the body, back to Francher's white head. The killer might possibly have overlooked those white hairs, if he was nervous enough, but Crotch's beetling eyes lidded still further. "Let me see your pistol, MacRae. Be careful how you draw it!"

Brandon wore a Colt's Navy revolver in a harness beneath his left arm, a handy place, and easier to carry than the cumbersome hip holsters common throughout the cattle country. He was conscious now of the piercing attention Crotch gave him. The captain was thinking he was a professional card-player, a killer to boot, like scores of others along the Western rivers. He handed the pistol butt foremost and Crotch checked its loads, sniffed at the barrel with his bulbous nose.

Brandon smiled, "There's hardly been time to clean it."

Crotch took the statement without finding any reason to reply. He thrust the gun into his own belt. "Where are the other men? Only you three knew of the game. Where is Van Caslin—Bishop?"

His glance roved wolfishly among the passengers. It was after midnight and yet a few of the Mormons and deckhands stood about. He found Bishop standing with his shoulder

points to the deckhouse, his face immobile in the shadows. Crotch's glance touched him and Ben Bishop stepped forward. "My pistol is in the stateroom. I heard the shot and came at once."

"We'll see," Crotch growled. They went aft in a group toward Bishop's stateroom, the captain's eyes still prowling the others. Van Caslin met them on the starboard deck. He was hatless, his tunic open along the front, his hair frowsy as though he had quickly gotten from bed. Captain Crotch asked for his gun, which he immediately surrendered. It was clean with all the chambers charged.

Crotch handed it back and fastened his roving gaze on Bishop. "Now we'll have a look," he repeated.

Eagerness swept the crowd as they moved onto the starboard side. Brandon caught a vague outline against the cabin wall. It was Lana Harrel standing beside her door, wearing a dark cape, her face pale in contrast. He wondered was there a mocking smile on her mouth?

He recalled the tension that had tightened her body when she spoke of Francher's ranch. What kind of man did Lana think he was? Did she believe he swindled Francher? Did she believe he had committed murder? On another page of the ledger, what kind of woman was she? She wanted the things Francher had possessed and Brandon wondered had she turned him from her cabin in order to come upon them in this way. As soon as the thought touched him Brandon felt the piercing lance-thrust of shame.

Mentally he could feel the pressure of her body against him. Again the blood hammered through his veins and he felt the excitement of her mouth on his, her breasts lifting under his hand. Another moment and he would have taken her to the bunk. He felt certain she would have submitted willingly enough . . . and then Francher had come prowling the deck and broken the gentleness of her mood.

Bishop's door banging against the deckhouse tore his mind from her. Crotch swung inside and motioned with his hand for Van Caslin and him to enter.

A bracket lamp burned on the partition wall and by its

light Brandon saw that Bishop's bunk was rumpled bearing out his story of having hurriedly left his room. Bishop stood with his shoulders to the bulkhead, his hair shiny and black in the lamplight. A slight sneer broke his lips. Silently he was reading how things were working out.

While the others searched the cabin Brandon dropped his hand to the bed. It was warm from body heat, proving Bishop must have been in his bunk some time when the shot came. For an instant as Bishop saw Brandon's move his expression came to life. There are those who believe in an affinity between gamblers. If this is so it was here now between Bishop and Brandon MacRae. They looked like brothers in string ties and their curly black hair.

A stranger would recognize a similarity about their expression, if only the bland impersonal stare. Beyond that they were as far apart as the poles. Until that moment they had been coolly friendly, nothing more. Bishop's life had been spent on river boats where all kinds of luck had given him a callousness Brandon didn't have. On the lusty Sacramento alone he held the reputation of having shot four men during the gold years.

A few minutes ago fate had marked Brandon with a crooked hand. Now Bishop was thinking to himself he was the one would get it. It set a little flame to burning beneath his outer mask. He said, oddly, "I haven't talked." There was no reply from Van Caslin and Bishop's face fell back into its bland mold. Whatever was headed his way he would play his string to the end.

His impassive eyes touched Brandon and he said, "Gentlemen, you will find my pistol in my jacket. The left sleeve, Captain."

Crotch jeered, "A damned derringer!" His red side-whiskers fairly bristled across his jowls.

At that moment Van Caslin let fly an oath. He had been rummaging Bishop's underthings in a telescope case and came out with a Navy pistol similar to the one Brandon carried. The smell of burnt powder was noticeable at once. Crotch took it by the barrel and of course one shell had been expelled.

"That's it!" he cried. "Is there anything you want to say

now?" At the same time he brandished the pistol into Bishop's belly. Bishop stepped tighter against the bulkhead, shrugging coolly.

Brandon said, "Wait a minute! I don't like to say Bishop killed him."

Crotch stabbed him with one of his scorching looks. It was plain where his sympathies lay. "You want to change your testimony? You claimed you couldn't see who killed him!"

Brandon nodded, his chest tightening inside. "I admit it was dark beside the deckhouse. But I saw the stance of his figure. It was too slouchy for Bishop."

"Who, then, would you suggest? Van Caslin?"

He said it jeeringly and Brandon knew the captain stood squarely behind this scalp hunter. To many solid people there was no shame attached to taking bounty money for dead Indians. He caught the look Bishop threw him. The gambler preferred him to remain silent, and there was nothing he could prove against Van Caslin. Admittedly he hadn't seen enough to implicate anyone. It was merely that certain things led him to believe Bishop was innocent. He was sure Francher's paper was the root of the killing, and Van Caslin was after that. The thing had been planned by someone as wily and shrewd as the scalp hunter, and Van Caslin would have had all the time he needed to plant the pistol in Bishop's room after the killing. Frontier men often carried an extra pistol, so there was nothing unusual about Van Caslin owning two.

So Brandon backed down knowing no good could come from supporting Bishop. "It's true, I couldn't swear who killed Francher."

Crotch took a deeper breath and there was a savage lift to his brows. It rankled him that his night had been disturbed. Now he was taking his spite on Bishop. He said, "I'll tie him in his stateroom until we reach Ehrenberg where he'll be turned over to a marshal." Then to Bishop directly, "I don't give a damn what happens to you. Get on your bunk. I'm tying you fast."

Bishop walked mockingly to his bed, stretching full length. There was nothing else for him to do, but few would have

done it as indifferently as Bishop. The steward came in with one of the Cocopah deckhands and they fastened him hand and foot to his bunk. Afterwards they went out and Crotch locked the door, slipping the key into his pocket.

The captain growled, "Bishop shot a miner on one of my Sacramento boats that I couldn't do anything about. This time he'll get what's coming. I know the trade he lives by."

He was in a vindictive mood and his glance leaped to Brandon who knew instantly he had been placed in the same class with Bishop. There was some justice in the sentiment, even he was willing to admit that much. They who gambled were a reckless lot with little respect shown them. But they still gave a man more chance than Crotch offered. Law along the river towns was brutal and it was clear Crotch would offer no objections to seeing Bishop hang.

Brandon asked bluntly, "Isn't there more to your dislike than his trade?"

"You mean what?"

"I believe, Crotch, you're hard dying about the war. Bishop had Southern sympathies."

"And you?"

Brandon shrugged. "War makes no difference to me. It's all a game arranged by the ruling classes. I've long had the feeling there are as many freemen in the north who would swap what you name freedom as there are Negroes in the south ready to give up their meal tickets. At least their white masters clothed and fed them. More than you can say for your Yankee sweatshops."

"Of course you wore the gray, Mr. MacRae?"

"If I did?" His eyes darted to the spots on Van Caslin's tunic which he took for blood stains. It was an outfit that was partly of Government issue and partly of clothing he had come upon in Mexico. Van Caslin was a hardcase, a rotter. Brandon wasn't sure how he fit into this, but the man was behind Francher's death. He said sharply, "At least, I wore the uniform more honorably than that!"

Van Caslin jumped him then and Crotch did his best to hold them apart. One killing was enough and he wanted no

more fights aboard his ship. From the viciousness of Van Caslin's attack Brandon gauged how dangerously the man fought. He backed under the rush and then threw a staggering fist into Van Caslin's belly. Crotch got his arms about the man as he sagged and it was over except for the jostling around of the captain. Crotch ground out angrily, "Damn you both! Do I have to throw you in irons?"

Presently the fire slacked in Van Caslin's eyes and Crotch eased his hold. Brandon realized then how anger had been sawing his nerves. A few moments more and he would have been at Van Caslin's throat. He wanted no fight with these men, he wanted no blood on his hands. In this respect Bishop appeared much better able to hold his emotions under restraint. It made Brandon feel less adult.

They had been walking up the starboard deck and now outside his door he gave them a stiff nod. He opened the door and stepped inside. Crotch still retained his pistol. From this he decided the story of his trouble in New Orleans had some influence with the captain. And in this he again held Van Caslin to blame.

He let the key to his room lie in his palm long after the door was bolted. His thumb nail worked in and out of the key notches. In and out—it seemed to him this key might fit Ben Bishop's door. As soon as the ship quieted he was going to make sure. He hadn't felt this brotherly feeling at the card table. But he felt it now. He had a mental vision of Bishop hanging by the neck from some river town gibbet and suddenly there had come this bond between them. Whatever happened, he wasn't going to let them take their spite out on Bishop. . . .

An hour before dawn offered the best chance to free Bishop. The Mormons would be sleeping along the fore railings. At the same time, it would be dark enough for Bishop to make his getaway.

Brandon had soap in his gripsack with which he greased his key; it was the best method to deaden the sound of a lock turning. There was a night guard somewhere on deck to watch

against prowling Indians, and bare metal could carry along the quiet packet like the clanging of leg irons.

The *Heath* had her nose on the mud of the Arizona bank; her gangplank had been turned inward as a safeguard against surprise attack. Greasewood and flood debris made a thick screen against the river bank. If Bishop could reach this protection without rousing the Indian guard he would be safe. Brandon didn't understand exactly why he did this for Bishop. They would hang from the same scaffold if he were caught. Yet he suspected Bishop would attempt the same thing for him were their positions reversed.

He shot a quick look after the Indian guard without locating him. Water was slapping the packet's hull making enough noise to cover his footsteps. Already firemen on the lower deck were throwing wood under their boilers. A sudden down-draft of wind enveloped the decks in choking smoke. For a moment the smell of hot boilers was stronger than the river, stronger than the sagebrush desert that spread for miles on either hand. By the time the sky brightened the *General Heath* would have her full head of steam and Crotch would enter his pilothouse and then they would begin their straining, pushing way up-river.

His key grated Bishop's lock with only the faintest scraping sound. He opened the door gently, slipping into the dark, back against the bulkhead. There was a creaking of bunk lacings, no talk.

"Bishop," he murmured. "You're here?"

The gambler's breath ran out in a relieved gust. "That you, MacRae? I thought you might try something like this."

He went directly to the bunk and cut Bishop's bonds. Bishop swung one leg over the bed's edge, sat rubbing his arms. His eyes were framed by a network of lines, and Brandon thought he had been gaunted by the picture of a river mob crowding around him, of a hang-rope waiting at the end of its beams. It could age a man within a matter of hours.

"You'll have to try it now, Bishop. It's getting lighter every moment, don't lose time," he said. "Sorry I can't reach you a pistol. If you run into Apaches you'll be in a tight spot."

The other man nodded and Brandon felt his steady look across the cabin. Presently he heard him moving along the space in front of the bunk. He was selecting a few items from his gripsack. Then he stood directly in front. An unspoken gratitude hung all about him.

"You aren't coming, MacRae?"

"It's rough enough one of us has to run for it. I'll bluff it out."

He didn't mention the chance he took of Crotch taking him in Bishop's stead, of the uproar that would follow once they discovered their prisoner had flown. There was no need to say it. Bishop was thinking of these things, letting his mind turn over the chances. The bets were down and Bishop wasn't one to argue. He stood watching Brandon, then soberly asked a question.

"You're taking over Francher's cattle?"

"Yes."

"You're no rancher."

It was precisely the same remark Lana had made. It provoked Brandon, set a stubborn will to work inside. A willing man could always learn, and need he keep to the same pattern he had used in earlier years? Perhaps it had been the beseeching weariness on Francher's face that had outlined his future for him. His philosophy had been changing ever since he crossed the frontier. The land was new, a man could go a long way here if he chose the right course. Winning money for its own sake no longer appealed to him and the great purpose seemed now to make the land produce, to develop along with the vast power of the frontier. He replied doggedly to Bishop:

"I'm going to look over Francher's place."

"It will do no good." Yet Bishop appeared to understand in a measure. He added slowly, "A man makes his play according to the way he sees it. He's only got one thing in this life to fear. And that's regret. If you don't answer what's inside you don't find peace." He let a moment slide. "I know something of the Jasmynes. Outside cattlemen are buzzard bait in that country. I don't expect you realize what you're bucking—the girl you were talking to—old Henry Harrel, her father,

won't look well on our kind. Then there's others who'll do their best to drive you out. Sam Madrid fights the way an Indian fights. No quarter asked or given."

Brandon felt his heart strangely hammering. He had sensed with an uncanny insight this was to happen when he first saw Francher flattening his bill of sale to the card table. He had known the future held a woman in store for him, and a fight. Lana had laid her hold to him so strongly he would never be able to put her aside. He smiled. "I'll still have my look."

Bishop reached the door, opened it a few inches before turning back.

"Good luck. I won't forget this if I come through. If not, it hardly matters."

He slipped outside, his long frocked coat disappearing instantly across the deck. Brandon was barely more than several feet behind, and yet he couldn't see him climbing the rail in the darkness. There was no splash, no sound by which he could identify where Bishop had struck for the vaguely defined bank.

In that brief moment when he realized Bishop was gone the menacing feel of the river came to him. He sensed its evil in the black shoreline, the few grotesquely formed desert shrubs. The wilderness loomed vast and depressing beyond, and the past played back across his consciousness. The man he'd killed in New Orleans had been an inspector of quays and wharfs. A pampered politician, and Brandon had shot him because he'd called him a thief over as straight a hand as Brandon ever dealt.

His mind ran backward across the weeks; he could see Leyden sagging in his chair, his fingers clutching his breast and the blood despoiling a diamond ring. That same night he'd slipped away in a stolen hack. He was here, now, watching Bishop making the same kind of getaway. The difference was, Bishop wasn't guilty of a killing and shouldn't be running at all. . . .

After a time he knew Bishop had made it. He moved toward his own stateroom breathing easier. They should be far upriver before anyone discovered what had taken place.

CHAPTER 3

Captain Irving Crotch entered the pilothouse retaining his sour mood of the past eight hours. He hadn't shaved, in fact he hadn't bothered to wash, the alkali in his beard itched, and the cook had served him a miserable mess for breakfast. It all added up to keep his temper at a perpetual simmer. This was the first time since his Sacramento shooting that a man had been killed on one of his packets and it served to bring out his unruly disposition. In a measure he blamed Van Caslin for his mood of last night and this morning. Van Caslin was rigging him up for trouble that he didn't want. He had made up his mind since dawn that whatever game the scalp hunter was playing, he wasn't going to get mixed. His only interest now was to be certain there would be no more shootings by gamblers.

Through the pilothouse window he saw Goss, his relief pilot, cursing a deckhand about some business with the hawser. The mooring rope swung free at this moment and Crotch jerked the engine room cord to get the paddles going. He would take out his resentment this morning in a full head of engine steam and the overworked paddle buckets. He didn't care if his packet tore her grubby bottom out.

The deck vibrated as the *Heath's* nose thrust toward mid-stream under the shuddering power of her paddles. Crotch was still swallowing a bad taste in his mouth when Goss stepped inside from the tiny bridge deck. The frown on Goss' face brought him added annoyance.

"You look in on your prisoner yet?" Goss demanded.

Crotch tightened instinctively. "I got too much to bother me to waste time there."

"I thought so. He's not there."

"Not there—where the hell else would he be?"

"He's gone. I looked in on the way and there's nobody in the cabin."

Crotch felt his muscles quiver, then draw tight, and he ran his tongue across the coarse line of his mouth before he got out, "Goss, take the wheel!"

He came down the texas and went over the cabin deck at a sort of dogtrot, thrusting Bishop's door with his shoulder without bothering to insert his key in the lock. The door slammed with a crash and he stepped into the empty stateroom. The first thing he saw was the cut rope on the bunk.

He cursed roundly and then went through Bishop's belongings more carefully than last night. Exactly what he was looking for he couldn't have told and he found nothing of importance except he had an idea that some of Bishop's belongings had disappeared. An idea lashed his head and he wheeled from the room and half ran to MacRae's room. His hand slipped over the pistol he carried in his waistband as he crossed the deck. MacRae's door was locked and he knocked sharply with the gun barrel.

The key turned on the inside, then Brandon stepped back under the prod of the pistol. There was lather on one side of Brandon's face, his straightedge hung from his fingers. "What's up?" Brandon queried. "Do you always break into a cabin this way?"

"So you're still here!" Crotch growled.

"Some reason I shouldn't be?"

Crotch held fast to his ragged temper, his eye on the key Brandon had left in his lock. He worked it free from the inside lock and backed slowly from the stateroom, the gun still covering Brandon. Brandon laid aside his razor beside a china basin.

"You're acting like a redskin that's had too much firewater. Now tell me what's up."

"I don't know yet," Crotch scowled. "You just stay where you're at till I send you a special announcement. You ain't going anywhere."

He slammed the door, locking it from the outside. The deckhand that had argued with Goss about the hawser was

passing and he ordered him to stay beside Brandon's door until someone was sent to relieve him. Then he marched back to the pilothouse and took the wheel.

"Goss, send the crew up here one at a time. I'll find out who let him go if I whip it out of them with a doubled rope."

It took an hour to get them all up and he got no information. When Van Caslin came into the pilothouse around eight o'clock their tempers were both at the boiling point. They got into a fight which they were still at when Crotch yanked his whistle cord for Ehrenberg.

Presently all the passengers were bunched along the hurricane rail to watch the landing. Lana stood beside the texas ladder running her gaze thoughtfully over the men. Brandon wasn't among those watching for Ehrenberg and for reasons of her own she knew the cause. Walking down the opposite deck she had seen a deckhand slouching beside Brandon's door. She rightly judged Crotch was holding him in Bishop's stead.

There was a troublesome unrest in her that had been growing for several days. The meeting with Brandon had been something that disturbed her balance in a frightening way. Especially under the conditions of her leaving the Jasmines, and of her return now. The attraction with Brandon had been entirely physical, and yet she had been powerless to fight it. There clung about him a flavor of mimosa and trumpet vine and mistletoe, of iron grill-work left behind by the Spaniards in New Orleans—these things were part of him as surely as his sharp profile, his gallantry. She was not what could be called a romantic woman, and yet listening to the memories her mother had so often recounted built in her certain visions of the lower Mississippi.

Then when Brandon had exchanged thoughts with her she found his words contained wisdom and wholesome thinking. His ideas were surprisingly like her own. Interest developed in her that was more than physical. She had surrendered her lips to him in a way that now left her weak when she thought how near she had been to giving herself completely. There

seemed no restraint in her, no will to hold back. It frightened her when she projected the possibilities against the future. If she brought home a gambler to Long 7 her father would rope him to a corral bar and brand him. She was sober and a little pale as she searched the faces along the rail.

The *Heath* slid against the mud and at once came the uproar of voices, of hello's and lusty curses. In the foreground a crowd of Harqua Hala freighters waited for their supplies to be unloaded. Nearly half the buildings facing the river were saloons, for in this blistering heat man's thought ran constantly to liquor. Behind the town were sand hills, naked and ghastly in the morning light. A pair of Indian riders pressed over the crest of a hummock, their upper bodies glistening in the sun, their eagle glances fastened to the steamboat.

Lana's eyes brightened with excitement. She took a place against the rail and stood with her skirts touching the men. This was the land to which she belonged. It was the frontier—wild, raw, and lusty—and she was a part of it. It would not have been the same salient land without her.

She heard a shout from above and lifted her glance to the texas deck, a faint smile brushing her mouth. A riverboat captain brought news from the rest of the world to places like Ehrenberg that stagnated beneath dungheaps of their own sin. For the moment Crotch's boat would rank in importance the brothel, the saloon. Crotch gloried in the importance his present role brought him.

"You Republicans!" he bellowed. "They've done it at Chicago!"

A dozen roughened voices threw back the same query. "Who'd they name for President?"

"Ulysses S. Grant, with Schuyler Colfax to keep him company. The black Democrats don't stand a chance."

"Did General Grant promise anything for Arizona?"

Crotch's grin broadened, a wide disfiguring grimace across his red bearded face. "Peace and universal prosperity. Same old bull."

A man laughed. "Now that he's licked the Rebs he better start switchin' backsides off the Apaches!"

Other men, Democrats, cursed. "Grant! The dirty mule skinner!"

Crotch scowled without answering, spat over the railing and laughed in his tight-mouthed way. Then his glance shifted and he discovered Lana ascending the Texas ladder. He watched her steadily until finally his hand reached up to touch the visor of his cap. There was no welcome smile on her face, she was wholly serious as she reached the upper deck.

She began soberly. "I wonder what your game is, Irving Crotch?"

He let his fingers reach up to pluck his lower lip. It was evident what she had in her mind for he had seen her together with MacRae. Fury began biting him which he found hard to hold in check. It didn't set well to have a woman question his actions—not even a woman such as Lana Harrel.

"I don't get you, girlie," he mumbled. "You know I don't play any game except the river."

"You're playing one now," she began doggedly. "And don't girlie me. You're holding MacRae in his cabin. I think you're fool enough to believe what the scalp hunter told you. This time it's going to kick back at you."

Crotch stared in silence. It struck him as curious that she, Lana Harrel, should display an interest in Brandon MacRae. He had believed her heart interest lay in the Jasmynes, with Sam Madrid; up until this point he had been certain of it and now he found her actions disconcerting. Beside this he knew her father well, and knew old Henry Harrel could raise hell. He would raise hell with her about this, but in the end she would have her way, as she always did. She was a spoiled brat, a beautiful one, and Crotch conceded she had the whole river where the hair was short.

Her voice struck again, with more gravity and warning than he had ever heard.

"You've never been as foolish as this, Irving Crotch. You'll release him when we reach Lavinsky."

A thumb and forefinger hung motionless on his lower lip. He'd been on the river too long to know any real surprise. "We'll see," he mumbled.

She let a moment slide then went on coolly. "It wouldn't be safe to make a mistake. I do have friends in Lavinsky who won't let either Van Caslin or you work your spite on an innocent man."

Now surly anger inside reached his surface. "You accuse me of mixing in somebody's game! Girlie, it's not me that's mixing. It's you! It ain't my place to tell you you're making a mistake. But I keep wondering what your old man will do when he hears?"

"He won't hear," she said. She gave him a smile, the first real one. It left him uncertain, as her smiles generally did. Then she turned and went down the ladder. Some day, he thought as he stared moodily at her slender back, a man would win her. He'd better tame her first, Crotch thought.

Miles upriver they raised the landing of Lavinsky. It was sunset when Brandon heard his door being unlocked and immediately the relief pilot, Goss, handed him his pistol. Brandon took it, examined the chambers. He let a moment ride before slipping it into his shoulder harness. All the while his tight gaze held on Goss. It was incredible that Goss should return his Navy. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"Captain's orders. You go ashore at Lavinsky."

"I'm wondering what changed his mind?"

Goss shrugged and Brandon knew he could expect no explanation. Someone had altered Crotch's tune, he couldn't figure out why. He had expected to fight his way to freedom the next time his stateroom door opened, and here he had been handed back his pistol!

He followed Goss along the darkening deck and saw the other passengers crowding the gangplank. The *General Heath* would tie tonight and deckhands would bring wood aboard for their boilers. The passengers would go ashore after their pleasure, mixing with the Mexicans and half tamed Indians. It was the end of the river journey so far as Brandon was concerned. In Lavinsky he would outfit with pack animals with which to strike out for Francher's ranch.

One building along the row of shabby structures was two-

storiéd. In the rosy sunset he could read letters spelling out TALLAHATCHIE HOUSE painted on its weathered wall, tall enough to be legible from the river. Otherwise Lavinsky was a shapeless jumping off town that had been started by a trader to answer the increasing demands of the mines. From here long trains of mules trudged into the hills carrying supplies. The inland freight trails were marked by graves, for the War Department had withdrawn its soldiers from frontier posts in order to fight the war. . . .

Brandon watched Captain Crotch help Lana to the gang-plank. She paused a moment, saw him standing beside Goss, and then he saw her turn to Crotch and say a few words, smiling. Now she was moving down the plank amid the bustle of the unloading. Her figure was lithesome in blue velveteen, her lush mouth breaking into a smile whenever she recognized those among the townsmen she knew. She was the most desired thing along the length of the river and the knowledge gave her a poise that was dangerous because it would start men to fighting, fling them beyond the brink of rationalism.

When she reached the landing a burly man wearing the outfit of a cowman stepped before her. He was a handsome man with a quality about him that told he was one used to having his way. They talked briefly, the man's smile suddenly dying. There was no greeting on Lana's face. Instead, Brandon read strain in her manner. He wondered what she might be saying that was taking the smile from her companion's face.

He watched the lines harden about the man's lips and then the man moved against Lana, pinning her arms tight, his mouth coming down after his kiss. She pulled backward out of his grasp with no response to his passion and after she broke away she walked deliberately across the yellow timber that had been laid above the soggy river soil. The man leaped after her. Then Brandon saw a Mexican boy emerge from the crowd, grin at her happily and take both gripcases from her hands.

Crotch gloated in his raucous way. "Boss me, will she? Madrid is going to have to tame her better than that. She needs a tar rope to her backside, the little devil!"

Brandon said softly, "So that was Madrid?"

"That's Madrid. He expects to be her husband but I'd as soon—" he swiveled his head looking straight at Brandon. For a moment he meant to finish what was on his mind but now he was remembering other things that had happened on the way upriver from Yuma and a scowl crossed his face. He wheeled and moved away giving Brandon to realize he was still poison aboard the *General Heath*.

He went down the plank with relief surging through him to be ashore. Ahead he could see Lana walking briskly toward the hotel, still pursued by Madrid. The Mexican boy was walking between them carrying her luggage. Brandon followed with his telescope case. If there were any vacancies he meant to sign for a room at the Tallahatchie House.

It struck him as odd that he could find no trace of Van Caslin. He still believed the scalp hunter was connected with Francher's troubles and would go ashore at Lavinsky. Far to the northeast a blur against the horizon marked the Jasmynes where Francher had his holdings. It was a country rich in promise. When the soldiers returned they would buy meat, and when they finally ran the Indians onto reservations they would need still more beef. After they were gone there would be a market in the white settlements drawing nearer all the time. People were saying there would be cities in the interior. Brandon felt faith in the country, in the things Francher had been trying to do. . . .

He pushed through the hotel door to enter a low-ceilinged cubicle that held a staircase ascending along one wall, a desk at its end. Lana stood talking to a hollow-chested hotelman who held the steel hook of a false arm partly concealed behind him. Brandon had the annoying impression he should know this hotelman, yet he could recall no one that wore a steel hook like this on an arm.

Madrid was no longer to be seen and when Lana saw Brandon she flushed and quickly lifted her cases.

"Miss Harrel!" the hotelman insisted. "Let Fernando carry them abovestairs!" It was clear she had laid her hold on this man as she had done with most of the others along the river.

Brandon was certain she was purposely avoiding him. The scene at the landing had affected her more than showed on the surface. He turned off to one side into the barroom and saw now that Madrid had come into the saloon portion of the hotel after his rebuff from Lana. Beside him at the counter stood a second cowman, a swarthy, rough-shod man wearing twin Navies slung from his belt.

Madrid had removed his hat and was wiping his brow. On closer inspection he was a dun-colored man with a solid, well-chiseled face, a dominant way. Even with his back to the door he gave the impression of one who threw his will about.

The barroom showed the wreckage of a recent fight. A section of mirror behind the bar was splintered, the broken fragments of a chair still lying behind the counter. One of the chain lamps had been torn from the ceiling and this lay in a corner and the wall above it had been charred by fire. Someone had thrown water over this, probably early this morning. Only the glass had been swept from the floor, and this lay in a pile beside the broken chair.

The man beside Madrid motioned vaguely that the place was open for business. Brandon saw now that his face was battered raw from a fight. He stepped to the counter about five feet from the pair and thought: here was a saloon used to man's baser passions, to his lust and thirst and fury. It was a place made for the shoddy side of life. The fight and the wreckage gave it this flavor, and yet there was nothing about the hotelman when he entered to carry this thought further. He was a thin, grave man of about twenty-four wearing a small mustache on his upper lip that curled in twin points toward intelligent eyes. Brandon wondered again where he might have known him.

The bartender slid a partly filled bottle upcounter. Brandon caught it smiling. "What struck you, friend? A twister come down in your place?"

"A range bull. Last night we held a bull by the tail."

At that Madrid let a sound slide from his throat. "Damned shame you didn't hold him," he growled. It was evident he still smarted and burned from Lana's lack of greeting. Brandon

wondered again what she had said in those few moments at the landing. The bartender's gaze flicked over Madrid and Brandon understood the subject of the ruined barroom was a sore spot between them. One other thing. Brandon recalled the way the hotelman had looked at Lana. He thought a great deal of her, so much that the idea of a possible marriage between her and Madrid didn't set well with him.

Madrid still leaned on the counter with both elbows, ranking and burning inside. The streak of ugliness was very marked and Brandon knew Lana had struck him deeply. The bartender decided to postpone his argument about the wrecked barroom. He glanced at the telescope case Brandon carried, letting a grin break his mouth.

"I've got one room left. The bridal suite, if you want it. A miner stayed there one night after he'd been hitched to a half breed Mexican girl by a parson who drifted upriver. We called it the bridal suite after that."

Brandon nodded, following the bartender into the other room. As the register was being signed the hotelman said hopefully:

"Do you recall the show at the Theatre d'Orleans, Brandon MacRae? Afterward, you trimmed me a couple of hundred at that house on Conti Street. You were kind to a green youngster. You left me enough money to return home to Mississippi!"

Brandon smiled, then, remembering. Seven years had passed, and with the war between, it became the span of a lifetime. New Orleans had been gay before the war, a place for full money belts and fine liquor. . . . He said, "You are Andre Ude, the boy from the plantation."

Then he thought of the iron hook Ude wore in place of a hand and felt bitterness touch him. Before the war the landed classes along the lower Mississippi had known a leisurely life. Marrying late, the men clung to their youthful pleasures, always ready for a neighbor's cock-fight or a game and drink in their favorite bar. Brandon wondered now how Ude fit on the frontier.

Andre read his mind, shrugging his shoulders beautifully. "My father is dead and the plantation ruined. We burned our cotton before they took it—the Yankees. It's no use, I don't think about those things anymore."

"So you came to this baked-out chili-pot?"

"And you! The dandy of New Orleans!" He laughed, then brought his steel hook to the desk top that Brandon might see. "What's there left for a man like me—except to play host to my few guests? This I got with the 21st Mississippians at Mayre's Hill under Barksdale. We took hell that day holding the Yanks from falling on Lee's rear. . . . Come, I'll take you abovestairs," his eyes shone, "to the bridal suite. Those two in there—Madrid—can wait!"

CHAPTER 4

They went up a creaking staircase with Fernando the Mexican boy carrying Brandon's case. They entered a bedroom facing the front street. The room held a wooden bed, one chair, and a plain chest on which stood a china basin. With his iron hand Ude opened a window in front; the air lay against it like a vacuum neither bringing in freshness nor dispelling the resin smell of fresh-cut lumber. The room seemed destitute of everything that might give it a homey look.

"Now," Ude said, "what brought you, MacRae? Were you running?"

"I was," Brandon said. "But I run no further."

Ude's face clouded. "I ran out the same as you. I killed a carpetbagger—the one I found living in my father's house after I returned." A sharper light touched his eyes and he lifted his thin shoulders.

"Those fellows downstairs?" Brandon asked. "Were they the ones who wrecked your barroom?"

"It was wrecked by Madrid's man, whom you saw below, and Harrel's man and Rusty John Dupere. Last night they

egged Dupere into it. I'm trying to make them split the damage three ways but Madrid blames everything on Dupere."

The name went through Brandon. He remembered Francher's few words to him before he died. Francher had tried to tell him something of Dupere, something about getting Dupere on his side. He said slowly, "Dupere was friendly with Francher?"

Ude nodded. "Francher had some tough men riding the hills. They were necessary in order to hold Madrid off. But even they have been driven from the Jasmines." He paused considering how much he should tell Brandon of John Dupere. "Rusty John's an old stockman, like Francher, who owns his own iron. His stock disappeared and they put Bell-M and Harrel's cows on his land. A few weeks ago his wife died and he's been drinking ever since. He's working from Francher's headquarters because his own place burned down. I don't like to see him come to town. But if I don't sell him whiskey somebody else will."

"I'd like to meet Dupere."

Ude gave him a sharper look. "He's not here. He rode back to the Jasmines after the fight. I don't know how he got onto a horse after the licking those three gave each other." Ude's lips broke into a smile and he said, "Rusty John has got a daughter, too."

"I'm not interested in her."

"But you will be after you meet her."

"Andre, I'm taking over Roman Two. Francher is dead and I own his stock."

Again Ude lifted his brows. "I only know this about Aaron Francher. When he left Lavinsky two weeks ago he expected help from someone in Yuma. If he was returning alone then he didn't find the help he was expecting. He needed all the friends he could get in the Jasmines."

"Francher was too old to fight. He wouldn't have returned even if they hadn't killed him."

Ude was quiet a moment, considering. "Francher was old," he admitted. "But he wasn't a quitter. To reach his place you

ride forty miles into the Jasmines. You can leave in the morning with a freight outfit."

Brandon shook his head and Ude immediately caught the drift of his thought. "You're right, of course. Sam Madrid belowstairs will leave with the freighters. Then there's Lana Harrel—her father will fight you in the Jasmines. He's a headstrong, stubborn man."

He paused, reading the purpose in Brandon's face, knowing him for the will he possessed. There would be no changing of Brandon's plans. "I must get below to settle with Madrid but there is one thing I would like to tell you. Cattle raising will not be the future of this country until the gold plays out. There is still no dependable market. You should understand that."

"When the market opens I will be ready for it."

"To raise cattle is to ask for trouble. There are raids by hostiles who have nothing but hate for us, and other raids by dishonest ranchers. Sometimes your neighbors."

"I'll stop the raids."

Ude was wondering what drove a man, what made him do the things he did. This MacRae who stood before him he hadn't known in New Orleans—this was a harder man, a fuller and tougher man, and for the first time he caught himself wondering if Madrid was big enough to win what he was after. His shoulders lifted in their fatalistic way. "Go ahead, then, take over your ranch. Francher was a fighter and you are a fighter. I'll be anxious to see how it turns out."

Brandon smiled at him. "It will be a game to you, Andre. For you watching it will be like one of your cockfights—and just as deadly."

Brandon washed in the china basin imprinted with pink roses circling its edges. The water was tepid from standing all day in the heat yet his skin responded to the luxury of the freshening bath and he felt revitalized. He slipped into a fresh shirt, his hand running to touch his money belt.

Already one man lay dead in an ill-directed attempt to get at that belt. He didn't doubt another try would be made in

Lavinsky. Then he remembered the safe he had seen behind Andre's desk. If there was one man he would trust with the contents of the belt that man would be Andre Ude who had lost all his heritage during the carnage of war. He withdrew everything but five-hundred from the belt, placing the balance in an envelope together with Francher's paper. If either Madrid or Van Caslin wanted a fight now, he was ready for them.

Before he quit the room he adjusted the pistol harness carefully against his left side. His hand slid after the grip-plates a few times easing the Navy into its harness. He had never looked at himself as a gunman, for he made no practice of killing. But he had a way with the gun. There had been no one in New Orleans before the war who could outshoot him with side-arms.

He stepped into the hall and caught the rattle of Lana's door latch. Within forty feet of uncarpeted corridor a man's mind can race the length of his lifetime. Walking closer to her, her kiss came back sharp to him. It hadn't taken her very long to make up her mind she wanted him. Was it always this way with her, wanting her man, letting him know her desires?

The thought gave him no comfort. A man likes to think his woman's mouth is given for the first time in such willingness, that surrender has not been complete before. If it's not this way she offers him little more than a trollop. Lana Harrel wasn't this way at all. She had depth—a strength with its roots strong in this desert country.

Her door was ajar and his glance turned in. She brought a strumming to his pulses as she stood before her window. The room was dusky but he made out her slender back. It sent his blood racing faster. She called quietly, "Brandon, come in. Close the door."

He took a few steps into her bedroom. She turned, a soft nightlight from outside catching her hair. She murmured, "It will be good to be home. San Francisco is too bustling. I've found I need the Jasmynes."

Curiosity drove him to ask: "What business did you have in San Francisco?"

She smiled, a strange trace of tragedy touching her eyes. "I needed to get away from a man. To find how I actually felt about him."

"Who is the man, Lana?"

"Madrid. You knew that. I think you know who I am."

"Yes. Francher was your neighbor."

"Old Hen Harrel," she murmured her father's name affectionately. "You hear all kinds of talk about him along this river. He's been a shrewd, hard man, at times a little greedy, and he's done things in his life most men would have been afraid to try. But you'll never hear that Henry Harrel shot a man without giving him his chance. Don't class him in your mind the way you class Van Caslin—or Madrid."

"You're trying to tell me your father had nothing to do with Francher's death?"

She nodded. "I'll never believe there was any connection."

Brandon was standing close, trying to see her eyes, trying to catch the expression about her mouth. Her husky voice came very low. "Dad tamed a savage mountain country and made it a place for white men to live. While my mother was alive he tried to make up to her for moving to this violent land. It's hardly a country for women. Yet Dad has made a fortune with cattle—naturally, men envy him. And now I'm entertaining a man bound to arouse his suspicions."

"Need it be that way, Lana?"

She laughed faintly. "Now you're asking will the desert sun rise over Lavinsky in the morning! They don't like land grabbers in the Jasmines, and Dad will expect you to continue where Francher-left off."

"So Francher was a land grabber?"

She let the stillness drag, hunting a way that would make it clear. "Maybe he wasn't. I don't suppose he was asking anything except a chance to exist. Maybe he wanted no more than that, we can't be sure. A place to live and raise his stock. It's very elemental when you reduce it that way. The trouble is, there's not enough room in the Jasmines for men like my

father and Sam Madrid. They can't be satisfied unless they have it all. They're grabbers, too."

He was silent, wondering at her admission, and she went on. "I'll have to admit it would be simpler their way. My father feels if his neighbors aren't strong the Apaches will attack. Once the redmen have been successful they'll try bigger raids until even the strong outfits won't be able to hold them off. A lot of weak men would do that to the Jasmynes."

"That's his side. I doubt that it's the whole truth."

She lifted a shoulder. "Your doubts are there because you're the way you are, and perhaps you're justified. Yet I am my father's daughter. Does anything else matter? And I've sided you because I'm the way I am. In spite of the fact you released Bishop from his cabin I have my faith in you!"

"You knew that, Lana?"

"I saw you from my door. You shouldn't have taken the chance. Captain Crotch would have seen you hang, had he known for sure."

She swayed closer toward him. A fragrance of lilac came stronger. It was of her hair and yet it was more; it was Lana Harrel with her dazzling eyes and soft smile, with her lips moving into their tantalizing shape, forming to take his kiss. It was all this, and it was heavy as the tide swept through them feeding their longing. He dropped his hand to her hip and felt her tremble. She had her head tilted down and he reached under her chin at the same time drawing her closer. Her body tightened as she waited for his mouth. They clung together while the moments raced on.

Other women had kissed him, had loved him fully, and yet he knew as her mouth rolled across his lips that he had never actually been loved before. All the past was dead, beyond him in a vague infinity.

"You do that," he murmured, "while you admit there's another man. How will Madrid take it?"

"There is no other man," she told him. "I found that out in San Francisco. You saw me telling Sam it was all off—there on the landing—though you didn't realize it then."

"You don't know much about me, Lana."

"You kissed me on the river. A girl can tell. You are one who will be gentle and good with women—you hold things sacred that should be sacred. There is a tenderness about you. Need I know more?"

Her head had dropped against his chest, her breath coming deeply and in long intervals. He could feel her breasts and the sweet, warm softness was a cloud. Her finger tips slipped across his cheek and then she pushed away. They had come this far but there could be nothing closer.

"What are we doing to one another? If we keep on we're going to hurt each other."

"No," he said, "there'll be no hurt. Just this. Just our love."

She said huskily, "You name it love and it may be while we're here in Lavinsky. But when you get beyond Whiskey Pass it will be something very different." She tore herself away and the moment was gone.

He came below into the barroom and found Madrid alone before the counter staring moodily at the wreckage of last night's fight. Andre Ude's glance met him head-on, with silent meaning, and Brandon wondered if Madrid was purposely delaying in here to meet him. He wondered if Van Caslin had told the news of what had happened aboard the steamboat. Ude poured a whiskey and Madrid frowned at the glass. Without lifting his eyes he said to Brandon:

"You're the fellow who beat Francher at poker?"

Brandon could feel the unfriendliness of Madrid. His manner did something that chilled the blood. "I'm MacRae," he admitted.

Madrid lifted his gaze and Brandon stood face to face with the power behind Bell-M, the man who, along with Harrel, coveted the Jasmynes.

"You're too lucky at cards!"

Brandon felt his cheeks blanch but he put the insinuations of Madrid's remark aside. "It appears Van Caslin has talked," he said.

There was no change to Madrid's facial expression. He lifted a shoulder and said without any rancor to his tones, "I know

how much you put up against Francher's beef. I'm ready to buy it, and I'm offering a thousand dollars more than you put up. Pretty good deal for a tinhorn who can't tell a steer from a bull."

Everything Lana had said abovestairs came back and now Brandon's inherent reasoning told him if Madrid bought Roman Two without Harrel knowing it he wouldn't have to divide later with Lana's father. He was offering to buy his claim on the Jasmines in order to cut Harrel out. Right now Madrid was friendly with Harrel but soon he would be turning on Lana's father in order to have all the Jasmines. Strangely, Brandon's mind focused itself on Ben Bishop; the strong, still way that was his, his quiet talk. A good man, judged by the important standards. Now Bishop was fighting the terrible desert for survival because of the basic greed of the hills. He knew suddenly that he would never sell, never move out of the hills once he got into them, and if anything happened to Bishop he would hunt out Van Caslin and kill him if it took the last day of his life. He said thoughtfully,

"I don't expect to sell."

He saw change go lightly over Madrid's face. His bushy brows came down as though he couldn't believe his answer. He had named a fair proposition and if money was the only inducement Brandon would have taken him up. But money had ceased being the all important consideration since that moment Francher had died. It had all changed with that moment, Brandon decided. The old way of life was finished, to be put away like a closed book, never to be reopened.

"You think you can play it between Harrel and me?" Madrid insisted. "You're wrong if you think he'll give you more!"

"No. I won't sell to either of you."

"Maybe you don't know what you're talking about. This is free grass in the Jasmines, which means any outfit can hold whatever range they run their beef on provided first of all they got beef to run on the grass. And provided they got the outfit to hold it. You have neither and we don't want you."

It came as no surprise, for Ude had already told him Francher's outfit had left Roman Two. But Dupere was still there and Francher had told him to depend on Dupere. He said sharply, "You talk pretty sure, Madrid."

"I am sure. There's no place for you."

It went around inside, lashing him hard. The past with its gaming in darkened parlors had been unproductive, but the future appealed to him for the same reasons it held the pioneer. It gave him a purpose, a use for life; to build out of rank wilderness. He wasn't going to throw that aside without a fight. It made him say slowly,

"I'll still play out the hand."

Madrid's glance dropped to the bulge his gun made beneath his jacket. A hard, implacable gleam returned to his eyes. Brandon knew then if he pursued his purpose it would end in a fight; a long fight that would spill its hate all through the Jasmynes.

"We're talking too much," Madrid said. He came closer, stood toe to toe before Brandon, gave him a freezing look. It seemed he meant to strike. Brandon tensed, waiting. Somehow in that senseless moment he was thinking of the shambles that had hit this room last night. They had backed Rusty John Dupere into this same position, and he wanted to smash Madrid with his fists.

Then Madrid backed. His hand pushed closer to his whiskey glass, he curled it within his fingers and drained the liquor. He said harshly,

"I already made up my mind about Roman Two. I been talking to you pretty easy and it don't make much of an impression. You better not get in the way."

He turned, then, going out with his scorching look still on Brandon. After he was gone Ude said from behind his counter, "A hard man. You'll find that out before you're much older."

"Did he pay for your barroom?"

"Madrid won't do anything he doesn't want to. Told me to charge Rusty John with the damage if I must sell him liquor."

“Andre,” Brandon said quietly, “we are going to take the price of that out of Madrid. He gets away with too much. He’s not that big!”

CHAPTER 5

Brandon gave Ude the envelope that contained the money he had salvaged from New Orleans. Ude’s lips changed a little and his hands caressed the long brown envelope flat to his bartop. Most men held no faith, and for them the world had none whatsoever in return. Others held a little over from their childhood, though it was rare enough to hold even to memories from the younger years, and it only happened at all if life and misfortune had not been too crushing. For these men warmth never left living, and when they found another worthy of their trust all the hardships and cuffs slid to one side and they were back through the years reliving their earliest friendships over again. The hotelman’s face was bland as he looked on the long envelope, silently stroking it.

“There’s a merchant in town who can supply your needs. Honest Lavinsky—don’t hesitate to visit him. Buy the things you need, and in the morning you’ll be free to jump off ahead of the freight outfit.”

Ude’s soberness turned into a saturnine grin. “When you’re through with Honest I want to show you my stags. There’s nothing in this world more mettlesome than pure bred gamecocks. They’ll give you a gauge for courage! A couple of days ago I lost one bird who fought stone blind. His wing was broken and he had one leg hanging by a thread until it finally tore away. Still he fought until he had his brother’s throat pierced!”

Brandon stared into the other’s gleaming eyes. So Ude had brought his sport of fighting gamecocks with him to this violent river’s edge. Somehow Brandon felt the shock of that. He thought, as a man grew inside so he must be until the day he

died. And yet, he himself wasn't running true to form. He was changing. Cards no longer held him the way they once had. But it was only because his blood was warming to a game far more fascinating.

He said, "Andre, we'll take a look at your birds when I come back." Then he broke away bound for Lavinsky's place.

Spanish bayonet cast grotesque shadows against the curbside, growing nearly to the center of the road where the wheel-tracks made their deep furrows. Lavinsky had no jail-house, and very little law. When a man became too drunk, or caused too much disturbance, he was shackled with iron to an ancient mesquite growing close to the river, until he sobered or until such time as he could be sent to Yuma aboard one of the packets. If his case appeared too hopeless he was hanged from the same tree. Several thick-voiced drunks chained to the jail-tree now were howling for their freedom.

A medicine man commenced hawking his wares from the opposite corner. Around him were a few Mojave squaws and, crowding them, a few of the Mormons that had come upriver on the steamboat. Behind the group Brandon saw Lavinsky's store blazing with light from a battery of coal-oil lamps. The place occupied virtually half a block, a solid, imposing structure of adobe and log.

Honest himself came to inquire his needs. He was a short Hebrew with exaggerated pot belly and thick glasses and a cluster of enlarged pores running across his nose. The first thing he did was take the sleeve of Brandon's jacket between his thumb and forefinger. It was of fine cloth, tailored by a Frenchman of New Orleans who made his coats before the war. Honest's eyes brightened.

"A gentleman like yourself will find I carry what he desires. Quality leathers, good broadcloth—is that not right? You will be told I stand behind my merchandise."

"I'll need boots," Brandon told him. "For riding, not walking. Shirts like the miners are wearing. I need horses, and a pack."

Honest's hand stroked his well-fatted chin. "You 'are going into the Jasmynes? I have the shirts you will wear. Double

breasted, from the best houses in St. Louis. Trade with me and everything is guaranteed. I have two horses in my barn that were taken in exchange for flour, beans, such items. They were not much when I put them in my stable but they have had rest and grain. Such horses as I have are rare. They will tell you I am not one to sell a bad horse."

"I'll want an animal used to the desert, sell me no other. I have no saddle, either."

"If we look I think we will find a second hand outfit. Plenty serviceable enough—a Western saddle for around \$80." He let his hand run over his moist scalp as though parting hair he no longer possessed, a habit with Honest, of either stroking his fat chin or his bald scalp. His glance touched the gun beneath Brandon's arm and a suggestion of displeasure entered his face. "You will no longer wish to carry your iron under the arm. Here are fine leather belts with holsters attached."

"The gun will stay where it is. Let me see your horses."

Honest's mouth tightened. He had such eyes, never letting a man ponder what were his thoughts. In the West a man wore his gun openly, proudly; it was a right no one questioned, no one took from him. Honest had grown to prefer to see the weapon worn this way. Now he switched his glance, swilling a lantern to check its supply of oil. He led between his crowded aisles, through the rear where a stable stood attached to the store structure.

Both horses were bays, fine animals, one several hands taller than the other, with deep chest and solid legs. Brandon liked the taller, a stallion. He liked his eyes, and the way he held his head. A man could ride him all day and not draw completely from that storehouse of energy. The smaller of the two bays bore signs on his chest of having carried a pack. He looked as though he would prove surefooted and tireless.

"These two you must examine by daylight. They are every bit as I represent. The stallion is seven years—I swear not a day older."

"I'll pay for them tonight."

At that Honest was startled. "But look them in the mouth! Never buy a horse without looking inside!"

Brandon gave him a slanting smile. He knew very little of horses bred and trained for the cattle country, nor of the cowman's work from the saddle, yet riding horses had been no novelty in New Orleans. From his earliest recollection he could remember riding in a carriage with his mother to some park on the outer limits of the city. When he was old enough to ride his father had bought him a sleek mare. Then followed his days with Devol's cavalry. . . .

He said with slow amusement, "I am sure the horses will not disappoint me. My faith is in the man who sells them."

Warmth spread across Honest's face. Again he repeated, "You will be told I stand behind everything I sell. You will be guaranteed. I am honest."

They returned to the mercantile section to make Brandon's final selection for his packs. Coffee, sugar, flour, shells for his Navy. A man packed his larder when he traveled alone into the Jasmines. His life depended on his gun, his ammunition and his horse.

Lifting his glance he saw Van Caslin pass before the door's rectangle of light. As he watched Van Caslin was joined by the man he had seen beside Madrid in the Tallahatchie bar-room. He had been certain Van Caslin held an interest in the Jasmines, everything pointed toward this friendship between Van Caslin and Madrid, and now he had proof to justify his suspicions.

Honest Lavinsky, observing the meeting, said coolly, "This is Christopher Lake. A cruel fellow. I do not like to speak of neighbors but Arizona can never be clean so long as his kind remain unchecked."

"One of Madrid's riders?"

"His foreman."

Honest let his gaze follow the pair. Who the one might be dressed in ill-fitting Army tunic he didn't know. But the tight mouth, the frosty eyes went down into Honest's soul stirring embers that never died, that gave him no peace whenever men came close to violence. It was something that had been with him since the war, the tragedy of his existence whereby the results of ten years and more of labor had been taken from

him. And in this pair who passed before his doorway he recognized men with no remorse, no conscience. Every subdued emotion within him rebelled and he spoke restlessly:

"Sometimes the gold seekers slaughter beef where they find it, asking no one's permission, and paying nothing for it. It is an evil custom and should never have begun. Whenever Sam Madrid finds a butchered steer he loses control of himself, often threatening a miner who might very well be innocent of the affair. This business will lead to trouble, and Madrid knows it, for he has nothing but rowdies riding for him.

"In the morning when you join the freighters you will be riding with them. I thought to warn you, for I am a sincere man. Even the Indians know what is in my heart."

Vendetta was headed for the Jasmines. Brandon knew this from the things he had already learnt. If the gold seekers continued killing anybody's beef where they found it, if Sam Madrid continued the pursuit of power, then war would come to the hills that would not blow away until many men had been killed. It was plain why Madrid made his alliance with a man like Van Caslin, who had spent his life gathering Apache scalps.

Half an hour later Brandon had closed his deal with Honest, had pocketed his bill of sale for the horses. Honest said in friendly fashion: "In the desert a man dries himself quickly out. Here I have made provision for refreshment."

There was a counter along the end of the store serving dual purpose as measuring table for yard goods and also liquor bar. Honest chose for himself a tall tumbler that held Brandon's eye. Into this Honest squeezed a lemon, helped himself generously with powdered sugar, then filled the glass with water. With his tumbler he touched Brandon's shot glass. He let his thick mouth break into a smile; a generous Jew who knew good living.

"Except for ice, here is everything my heart would desire. This is something I miss. In the summer I sweat so bad it comes through my pants. In winter when the river is cold, is not so bad. I wish we had a little ice house. But it is no use."

Brandon smiled, now hearing someone walk up beside the

counter. He turned to see Fernando, the Mexican youth who worked for Andre. Honest said simply, "He is now ready, Fernando. You may carry his supplies."

Fernando answered in good English. "The boss said there would be much to be carried to the hotel."

Brandon motioned with his head toward the leather saddle pouches. It was all here except the saddle, the pouches weighing more than fifty pounds. The boy put them over his shoulders without flinching. His people were accustomed for generations to carrying heavy weight with their backs. Brandon handed him the coin he had gotten in change from Honest. It was a fifty-cent piece and the silver brightened Fernando's face. After he had gone Honest said approvingly,

"You are generous. Is something many have forgotten, my friend."

It is peculiar how a man's mind will work. One minute they were standing at the counter talking and enjoying their talk, a quiet pause in the flow of the night. The next moment all the comfort was gone. Brandon sensed a tension reaching out, a wicked, clawing feeling he couldn't trace down. In some dismal room at the landing his fate had been decided—it was as clear as that, and he understood as surely as though he had been handed the message in writing.

He turned to the door knowing the town was not always as friendly as this past hour with Honest. The street had become deserted while he was bargaining, the saloons all taking their quotas of idlers. He passed beyond the lighted business areas, making a round to the street's end, then crossing and coming back the opposite walk. The buildings were all one-storied, of colorless Mexican adobe or weathered timber cut from the distant pine forests. The breeze was hot brushing his cheek, the fetid whiskey stink of the deadfalls.

A pair of men loomed near the Tallahatchie House, dark and lonely against the still walks. They vanished as Brandon turned toward them and he thought of Van Caslin. Suddenly the night became oppressive. He was passing a treacherous looking saloon from which the sound of men's arguing rolled into the night. He glanced at the sign and read: "Lavinsky's

Pride." This would not be one of Honest's enterprises, for the Pride was an incubator of rottenness and corruption.

A man's boot rapped the hard packed earth at his side. Instinctively he stepped further away. His hand swept under his coat as he faced the sound. He found himself looking close range at the bruised face of Chris Lake.

The man stalked directly at him, his features craggy and long in the shadows. Last night's scars Dupere's fists had left on his cheek were plain, crystallizing the warning that had been prowling through Brandon. He thought, this is the fellow who's here to stop you. Watch him!

Lake had his thumbs laced through a scarred gunbelt. It wouldn't take long for his hand to drop down and grasp his Colt. He had a way of looking at a man with an eye sharp as a razor's edge.

"In the morning you better pull out on Crotch's boat. Don't be careless and get left behind." He spoke this frostily, with his mouth forming an ugly leer. When Brandon failed to answer he spoke again. "Have I made it plain?"

"Plain enough." Brandon let his glance run up and down. He would know Chris Lake anywhere they met. Lake would be an outline to watch on the desert hummocks where he might ride with a carbine. Brandon spoke with a slow shake of his head. "How long have you been in the habit of telling a man what to do?"

Chris Lake's leer broke into a lopsided grin. "Madrid likes to let a fellow know where he stands."

"What Madrid likes doesn't matter."

Lake's voice dropped into lower key. "Then I figure you won't be very healthy come morning."

Twice they had told him what he must do and the idea of taking orders from Madrid gave him a sour taste in the mouth. It was time now to press the issue home with its instigators. He didn't want to use a gun on Chris Lake. Last night Rusty John Dupere had piled into Lake with his fists, and it was more fitting to take up where Dupere had failed. Andre Ude had suggested Dupere had been whipped, it would be good to shove that down Lake's throat. The man was tall and power-

ful from saddle riding but Brandon didn't believe he could fight. Not the way the sporting element of New Orleans had taught Brandon to fight.

A moment passed during which Lake was making up his mind to go after his gun. Brandon could see the decision pass behind his eyes. Then he stepped in with a left, a stinging, hard blow that caught the side of Lake's face, turning his head. He wanted to wear Lake down with his fists, to feel him stumble and grow weak under his punishment. Shock rolled into Lake's eyes, then the brutal, cold look of anger. Again Brandon's right crashed above the ear, tilting the head. Lake teetered on his high heel boots like a steer driven to murder, grasping Brandon's coat front and pulling him closer, driving his other fist into Brandon's face. Lake wasn't thinking any longer of his gun, he was out to smash his man with his bare knuckles, to punish him with his boot-tips the way he'd learnt in the river saloons. He slapped Brandon brutally on both sides of his face, drawing blood from his mouth and bringing pain to Brandon.

Lake's hold broke on the coat front and his fist slid across Brandon's shoulder. It brought Lake a measure of surprise. They didn't usually slip away from his grasp in this way. Now Brandon rolled back under the blows and ducked. Lake's follow up was a sweeping miss that pinwheeled him in a partial circle. Brandon had judged him correctly, he fought his battles mainly by a series of wild rushes that left his guard open during his attacks.

But those fists! The power of two-hundred pounds of live muscle lay behind those arms. If his blows connected solidly he could crush a man's skull. Brandon moved in closer and fainted. When Lake pulled up his guard he gave him two quick thrusts above the heart. Lake was clumsy, slow—so slow Brandon was able to get another across to his stomach. Then Lake's guard came in and he grunted, his eyes turning into hateful circles in his bruised face. One minute he was standing like this with his arms hugging his belly, the next moment he flung his elbows hard into Brandon's mouth.

Brandon stepped back tasting blood. This time he backed

until the wall of the Pride brought him up short. He thought Lake would pull him down under the impact of his next rush. His panting was on Brandon's cheek, his breath tainted by whiskey and hot from sweat and pain Brandon had put into him. And all the while Lake kept pounding his head against the wall of the Pride.

Brandon fought to get clear of his hands, to clear the wall and find space for footwork. Once more the slow man's guard opened and Brandon drove his right into the stomach. He struck unmercifully with all the strength he owned back of that fist. It smashed the holster belt, sinking to the wrist, tearing out Lake's wind in a gust.

He went after Lake this time keeping his guard close, his blows shorter than the other's swinging fists, but driving in like hammers. First left then right, he didn't allow any pause. Lake covered his head and then when he finally lifted his torso Brandon went back into his stomach. The cowman was blowing, his face covered with blood, and slobber was running over his jowls. Brandon caught the point of his chin and Lake spilled across the walk. He had stepped into that one, the drive in Brandon's blows numbing his brain and throwing him off balance.

He fell hard, his shoulders smashing an awning upright. Brandon waited a few moments for Lake to get onto his feet, his own lungs pumping fiercely. Then Lake rolled over on his back, his hat gone. Brandon saw his face in the lamplight. It was slashed below one eye, his nose flat and one corner of his mouth torn. He wasn't going to get up. Last night's fight and tonight's mauling had taken their toll of Madrid's man. Brandon thought Rusty John Dupere should see him now. He moved above Lake pulling his gun from its holster and tossing it into the road.

Vaguely he became conscious of others crowding the walk. He felt the hard point of steel ram his back bringing an immediate sense of defeat. In his battle with Lake he had become so intent he had forgotten Van Caslin. He remembered now there had been two men disappearing in front of the Tallahatchie House. It made him curse at his own carelessness.

His hands went up and he saw Van Caslin step around in front wearing a savage grin. At least Van Caslin's being in front meant someone else was holding the gun against his ribs. Whoever his unseen antagonist was he would trust him further than he would trust Van Caslin who stood in his disheveled tunic, showing his wolfish triumph on his face. There was a great urge in Brandon to clamp his hands around Van Caslin's throat until the triumphant look vanished. But the gun pressed against him gave him no hope of that.

Van Caslin's hand reached under his coat searching his shoulder harness. Brandon heard his Colt strike against the Pride's wall and again knew the nagging dread of despair. The futility of his position brought a laugh from Van Caslin. That laugh was the last sound Brandon remembered. There was a chopping motion in front of his eyes, a flashing of steel before Van Caslin laid a Colt barrel against his temple. Then a black vacuum enfolded him in its cold arms.

CHAPTER 6

When Brandon came to he was brooding over Michael McDonigal, the first professional prize fighter he had faced in the New Orleans ring. Men of Devol's brigade all were gamblers who enjoyed the sporting life, and every professional ring man put on an exhibition for them during the war. Brandon recalled Devol slapping him on the back, saying jokingly, "MacRae, why not go a few rounds with these fellows each week? You should do well with your hands. Besides entertaining the brigade it will teach you something."

Brandon took him up on that to Devol's secret surprise, and McDonigal in skin-tight pants was the first professional he faced. The pudgy Irishman walked completely around him all the time sparring his bare knuckles before his belly. Abruptly he stooped in a turkey-cock squat and warned Brandon to close his guard in order to parry an attack. To lend point to his

instructions he drove in a fist between Brandon's eyes. Brandon heeled backward to the floor of the big barn where they battled.

He could feel McDonigal's knuckles exploding against his forehead now. Lights were dancing before his eyes. Curiously, the sounds filling his ears made him think of Andre Ude's gamecocks choking to death in their final struggle. All this was a whirlpool in his brain, a whirling wheel that started with that down-stroke of Van Caslin's pistol.

He opened his eyes to the sounds of the gamecocks and found himself looking at a packing case being moved closer toward his head. There was straw on the floor planks—they were wide and well gouged planks covered with grime—and the packing crate moved closer until he could touch it with his hand.

A pair of shabby boots moved into his line of vision next. He forced his head up for a look at the man. The move set sparks thrashing against his temples. A swart-faced character no more than a boy sat down on the box and began feeding shells into his pistol.

He was a sober, slender-shanked kid with a reckless mood. The box had been pitched back and the kid leaned his curly yellow head against the wall behind him. Beyond were other broken crates, a row of empty shelves toward the center of the room, and a smoking lantern hanging from a baling wire loop. Brandon judged he lay in a warehouse that had been abandoned or was not at present in use. His guard was staring at him speculatively, as though he would sooner end this with a pistol ball than sit here wasting time. Brandon thought of the man who had held the pistol to his back while Van Caslin slugged him. He agreed with Honest that Madrid's men were a rough crew.

Without special dictate Brandon's hand traveled down seeking his money belt. His shirt front was open and the belt was empty. The discovery sent shock through him. Now the kid bent his unsavory mouth in a crooked smile.

"Take it easy. You're just waking up."

The empty belt was a bitter discovery until he remembered

leaving his envelope with Andre Ude. Perhaps this explained why they kept him prisoner instead of throwing him into the river. Lake would be back after the paper Francher had endorsed over to him. They would force him to tell what he had done with it.

He asked thickly, "You're one of Madrid's men?"

The kid shook his head. "I work for Long 7."

Surprise went through Brandon now. He wondered if Lana Harrel was aware of this, if the kid knew she was in town. The kid knew, of course, and Brandon wondered how Lana would react if she realized how closely Harrel men were working with Madrid. The kid had a hawklike face that was burnt very nearly black by the desert sun, a face that showed little hope of redemption or compassion. On the softer skin of his throat he carried a mole that was almost beautiful, the kind a woman might have on her back. Brandon took these things in in one swift glance, thinking he would never forget the man. Now the guard said in his flat, hard way,

"If it makes any difference you can call me Malpais."

"I'm wondering what Harrel will say when he finds you're here. He won't back Madrid on this deal."

"Don't count on it," the kid said, laughingly. "And don't get queer ideas. You're here for a while."

He considered himself a pretty tough character to whom men spoke respectfully and whom women were helpless to resist. Yet, oddly, he had been wondering what Harrel might say when Brandon voiced the same thought. Madrid had ordered him to guard the prisoner, but until now he hadn't thought too much about whether Long 7 would be in accord on this.

There was a definite streak of weakness in Malpais. He had headed West out of the border states when his number came up during conscription, and his life had been his own dark secret after that until he appeared one day at Harrel's Long 7 riding a lame horse, his belly bilious from lack of good food. When they asked him where he hailed from he had gestured toward the malpais with his hand. Ever since they had called him that. . . .

The thought passed through Brandon's mind that Malpais would like to shoot him and then get out. It lifted the hackles along his neck, and yet he still hoped he had one friend in town. He pinned his faith on Andre Ude. It was a thousand to one gamble that Ude could do anything against the power represented by Madrid, but it was a chance, and Brandon had been a gambler too long to lose faith now.

He said slowly, "This time Madrid is asking for trouble."

The kid shook his head. "I don't believe it. Bell-M is a pretty tough outfit and Sam Madrid don't want anyone crowding the Jasmies. He and Chris Lake and Harrel play for keeps."

"How about Van Caslin?"

"I'm not too sure." Malpais dug the rowel points of his spurs across the planks following older grooves, considering. "Van Caslin was an officer in the old army before the war, he's been to Mexico since. Lake knew him when he was in the army, and when Francher lit a shuck for Yuma Lake sent word downriver to Van Caslin. They made sure Francher never bought into the game."

"By murdering Francher's brother."

Malpais nodded. "I heard Van Caslin talking about it."

It made it certain Van Caslin had done the job, and Madrid had known about it—at least, he knew about it now, and if he continued his alliance he was abetting murder. Malpais was telling this, Brandon realized, because he wouldn't be able to use the information. To the gaunt cheeked kid with the mole on his throat he was as good as a corpse at this moment. Malpais' eyes held that slate colored look that comes from staring at the dead.

Perhaps far back in his brain he felt remorse, for a man can always go too far and his conscience will break the hard shell he builds around himself. Malpais was still young and his shell was not as thick as he imagined. Brandon could see the sweat beads start to work through his temples. It was worth working on. In fact, it was all Brandon had left to work on, and he knew the next half hour would prove the most important in his life.

Malpais said finally, "When they march in you better tell Lake what he wants to know."

Brandon's mouth had turned suddenly dry and he wished he had a glass of brandy from Ude's barroom. He understood the thought channel Malpais' mind was taking—in spite of his toughness the kid didn't have the stomach for what was coming. Brandon could see it in his eyes and it bore out his belief of Van Caslin's utter ruthlessness. He asked softly,

"Francher must have hit Madrid pretty hard. Was it a water-hole he took or just good grassland?"

"Don't you know?" Malpais seemed incredulous.

"I've never been in the Jasmynes."

"It's good grass and water, both. Francher had a couple tough men sitting in Whiskey Pass until Madrid chased them on. You don't have a chance. When Madrid walks in here you better tell him what he wants."

Brandon kept silent wondering what had happened to the dependability Francher had counted on in his men. They had run out while Francher was away and now Brandon had it to face alone. Malpais' look probed deeper, harassed by his own thoughts.

"Van Caslin has lived so close to the Apaches he knows all the ways to make a man talk. Take off his finger nails one at a time—drive little splinters of cactus soaked in coal-oil under the flesh. He might get to work on your eyes. You better tell them mighty quick."

If Brandon could keep Malpais talking a chance might come to get past his gun. He was beginning to feel his strength returning, the throbbing had gone away in his head. He didn't have any intention of being here when Madrid paid him his visit. He had to put Malpais out of the way before that—either lay him out or take his bullet.

Thoughts of Francher's range ran back and forth across his mind. Why should he care what they did with a piece of half desert land? He had never worked with his brawn and anything like labor had been frowned upon in New Orleans. The answer was that his basic concepts were changing. He had seen thousands of uncounted cattle on Texas rangeland as he

headed west—the South had been too busy fighting to get brands on these cattle. There was need for new range to graze this stock, and Arizona was opening up. He meant to be here, he meant to take part in the movement as it happened.

He was still telling himself Lana had no definite place in his plans. She was exciting, and had grown responsive against his chest, and yet she herself had said the feelings they had for each other would cool when they reached the Jasmynes. A woman sensed such matters of the affections intuitively and could penetrate into them where a man saw only the surface. Yet in spite of his reasoning Lana remained constantly in his thoughts.

Malpais' words slashed against his brooding. "You think you can talk Van Caslin out of it?"

Brandon lifted his head and found Malpais leering brassily. He was still considering the possibilities of two outfits in the Jasmynes turning on each other like kill-crazy wolves after the smaller outfits had been licked. From all he had learnt he doubted that Harrel was in full accord with Madrid. He repeated again to Malpais, "How do you think Harrel will take the idea of torturing a man?"

"He won't know about it. So long as Madrid keeps you away from the Jasmynes no one will ask questions."

Malpais had worked up his brain until it was inflamed. Over a drink in the Pride's bar he had overheard Van Caslin's talk, and it had been frightening. Malpais was a tough kid, but not tough enough for what was coming.

Brandon considered it was time to make his lunge at Malpais. The kid's eyes were still watchful, but they had a cloudy look, and perhaps his reflexes were slow. He seemed actually drugged by Van Caslin's talk, by what had been proposed. Still he held his pistol stubbornly toward Brandon, covering him. The hammer was drawn to half cock. Brandon thought, if I move a leg muscle he'll let me have it!

The scraping scuff of boots outside passed dimly along into the warehouse. So close to the floor, Brandon heard it and wondered that Malpais had missed the sound. This had to be

the moment to strike for now Van Caslin and Madrid were coming.

The kid cocked his head, his glance flicking away the merest fraction of time. Brandon gathered in his strength, threw himself at Malpais in a lunge. His left hand closed across the pistol, felt the firing point of the hammer gouge his thumb. He knew triumphantly that he had spoiled the kid's shot. Then he was directing all his force to the gun, wrenching Malpais' arm until the Colt fell free. But Malpais was coming off his seat, he hadn't been put out of the fight. He was hardly more than a hundred pounds but he was a wiry, slashing, nerve-taut battler.

Brandon took a glancing blow along the cheek that disturbed his aching skull and caused the lantern light to shimmer in a grotesque dance. Malpais was coming at him in a furious rush. He sent his fist into the man's middle doubling him literally in half. At the same time the other's knee shot pain through his groin and the fury of their fighting carried them across the warehouse floor. Brandon's back was against the wall. He felt a slashing pain in his right foot as Malpais brought his boot down against his toes.

The lantern was still dancing freely in its iron ring, the fight was taking on the unreal aspect of a nightmare. Considering the punishment Lake had already given him he knew he could not hold much longer to consciousness, and yet the punishment he was giving in turn to Malpais was breaking the kid's stride. It put heart into Brandon and again he met the tip of Malpais' chin that bent the kid backward. Brandon knew then he had the fight.

Now from the edge of his eye he caught movement beyond the lantern. It brought him first the sickening feel of despair and then he caught the crunch of steel against Malpais' head and the kid collapsed on the floor. Andre Ude stood beside them. Without having actually seen the details, he knew Malpais had gone down under the hook at the end of Andre's arm.

A hushed protest fell in the gloomy warehouse. Now for the first time Brandon became aware Honest was also in the room. "Did you have to strike so hard? He is only a boy."

Brandon glanced to Honest, drawn by the impelling quality of his voice. Honest's eyes carried a pained look behind his thick lenses. Although he stood squarely against injustice, Honest disliked inflicting punishment. Brandon knew his being here at all had been a struggle between opposing elements of his makeup.

"He's too tough to kill," Andre Ude snapped. He was taking Malpais' pulse and his answer to Honest was hard and final. "You shouldn't have joined me if you're not ready to see the landing cleaned up."

"You are right," Honest said and beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. "We have made up our minds to have a clean town. And it has started—from now on is hell!" He was thinking of the bad blood that existed because of the way Madrid reacted to his slaughtered beef. In a substantial measure the miners had begun it by butchering the cattle, but Madrid had been carried away by his want of power. Now in this Honest was taking sides. It ran contrary to the creed Honest lived by, it heaped more misery to the unrest that still troubled his nights.

Ude grinned thinly, the lantern light touching his narrow face. He tried to run his fingers over Brandon's temple where the welt of Van Caslin's pistol stood thick and dark. He said sharply, as Brandon drew away from his probing grasp, "I guess you're not as badly mauled as I thought. You've got to ride out of here."

"I can stay in a saddle."

Now Ude snickered. "You should see Chris Lake. The doctor's still working on him and they haven't brought him around."

"One of us may be dead if we must meet again," Brandon said soberly.

"My friend," broke in Honest, "you had better get this town behind you. They will be coming and we are not strong enough to whip all the river rowdies Madrid can throw at us. The time is coming when we can preserve peace and order, but it is not yet!"

Brandon got his feet braced squarely on the planks, trying

to fight off the unsteadiness. The queasiness in his stomach came up and gave him a bad moment and he knew the fights with Chris Lake and then Malpais had shaken him. Ude handed him his Navy which Van Caslin had dragged from his shoulder harness. It had been found by Fernando, beside the darkened wall of the Pride.

They left Malpais lying on the floor, moving toward the end of the warehouse where a door swayed on rasping hinges. Brandon followed Ude in the murky darkness, the other's hollow chested frame sagging as he walked. Ude spoke over his shoulder.

"Lana Harrel will be bringing your horses from the stable. She insisted on helping—God knows why—but there's something about you women can't resist. I would give my other arm to have her show the anxiety she shows for you."

They stood a moment beside the door listening. Brandon could hear the muted jingle of bit chains outside. It struck him profoundly that Lana was going against her own people by coming here now. What Henry Harrel would say, how Madrid would react, was something he couldn't foretell. Andre Ude, too, was pondering quietly. His face was a dark study, but his words were of another matter.

"Something else I must tell you," and Ude's steel hook was pressed against him, warning him of the importance of Ude's next words. "A short time ago an Indian who is considered friendly rode into town. He was wearing a California frock coat, which he picked up in the desert. Captain Crotch identified it as Bishop's. It would appear as though they got your friend."

His words went through Brandon. They added weight to his spirit. Although he had expected Ben Bishop would end up this way he thought of him regretfully, alone on the desert without food or weapons, with the Apaches closing in. He had done his best for Bishop but it hadn't been enough. For his death he held Van Caslin accountable. He knew Van Caslin would be paid back in full.

CHAPTER 7

Brandon liked the river-scented wind that was clean and cool and without the unfriendliness men wove indoors. He had lived too much in small rooms with their feel of watchful eyes and their smell of tobacco. Most of his life had been wasted at night with cards, and now when he found the outdoors it was inviting and real like a fine woman's smile.

They moved through a river yard fenced off roughly with timber slabs, a freighters' compound from which some of the slabs had been removed as new buildings appeared in Lavinsky. He found his two bays standing in deep shadow, with Lana and Fernando holding their bridles.

She wore a riding skirt with a man's blouse, navy or blue, he couldn't tell which, and a flat-crowned hat. Only by careful inspection would she have passed for a woman in the dark. But he knew the softness that lay beneath that mannish garb, he had felt it pulsing under smooth silk and it was difficult to hold his thoughts to practical channels.

She had brought him his horse and his supplies were lashed to the pack animal. Beneath his saddle he made out the bulky outline of a Sharps' rifle. Someone had not overlooked a single thing. Probably Honest, who was very thorough. He thought of that a moment, of Honest entering this game against the cowmen. Honest was dependent on both the ranchers and gold seekers, but in a showdown the supplies purchased by miners would overshadow the modest amount spent by cowmen. Yet he knew Honest was not influenced solely by these things.

He moved toward the saddle horse and the stallion thrust his cold nose against him, pushing him. The animal had not been ridden for days and showed his impatience.

Lana murmured, "You'll not have the sense to stay out of the Jasmines, of course. But get on him and ride!"

His eyes lifted to her. "I'll see you in a few days."

"It will do you no good!"

Her mouth had gone tight and she meant to make it sound final. There was anger in her covering a softer glow that was still showing through for Brandon. She was annoyed that this test of her sentiments should have been thrust upon her, but in spite of her anger Brandon could read she wanted him as violently as he wanted her, and the hunger was bottled up inside. He touched her fingers as he took the reins. They were icy cold.

He said, "I'll feel the same when I reach your country. So will you. Nothing will change." She shifted her glance and he added, softer, "Lana, they have chased Francher's men from the hills. If they whip John Dupere and me, what will keep Bell-M from turning on your father?"

She kept her glance averted without answering. It was going through her mind and he knew the thought had often dogged her. To Brandon life was a rough fight for existence, man had little friendship in his makeup. It was a game of survival, with the winner reverting to the tactics of the wolf pack. The time a man needed help was the moment he was most alone. He knew these thoughts were dragging their weight through Lana and he felt a sudden ache. Yet the compound was hardly the place to talk it out further, nor was her mood one for yielding.

He swung into saddle, the stallion thrashing about with his stored-up energy. Now Ude thrust his brown envelope into his hand saying crisply:

"Head priver a quarter-mile until you cut the freight trail. You'd better keep away from the freighters and don't risk a fire at night. The hostiles are bad but there are plenty of gold hunters out there alone. You can make it with luck."

Brandon slipped the envelope into an inner pocket. He was wondering if he'd ever have need now for the money it contained. Beyond the frontier there were assets more important than minted gold. His glance touched Honest and he knew the other man was wondering if he had the courage it took, the plain guts to blast his way into the Jasmines and stay there.

He said, "Lana shouldn't have got in this at all. Both of you must watch her after I'm gone."

Honest's mouth broke into a smile. "Do not worry, my friend. Some can be trusted in this town." His eyes were tight slits behind his thick lenses.

Then Lana's words touched him from beside his stallion. "They won't try anything, Brandon. Not this time. But don't force me to do anything like this again."

He thought back to the way Madrid had kissed her on the landing, and the way she had refused him, and he wasn't too sure what Madrid would try. Now her black eyes were sharp with quick lights. She was fighting him now, and yet she could never change the fire that already had swept their veins. It would always be there for them to remember, always lifting itself and bringing to each an intimate thought of the other. Whatever happened to their affections after they reached the Jasmynes, she could have been his along the river.

He touched the stallion with his bootheel and bucked forward dragging the pack horse. He would remember her standing this way in the compound with starlight striking her cheek, her words denying him, her lips silently asking for his kiss. He cut through the yard toward a break in the compound's dark fencing. He could see the river glinting dully under the nightlight of a scattering of stars. Stronger than this, he could still feel Lana's presence. She would be waiting always, waiting and willing for his arms. . . .

Cigarette smoke lay in thin blue veils above the ceiling lantern and in a cone of light Madrid saw the kid lying face downward on the warehouse floor. Behind him came Van Caslin and his foreman. As he looked down on Malpais he cursed Chris Lake beneath his breath for not having done a better job with MacRae.

Lake's stomach was still queasy from his fight and the sight in the warehouse failed to bring him any relief. Madrid shoved an angry glance over him and he said caustically, "While I'm patching you up MacRae gets away!"

"He's not so tough," Lake growled. "Wait till the next time."

"For you the next time won't be any different. Last night you fouled another job with Rusty John Dupere. And tonight! You're a faker, Chris!"

Fury hit Lake, then, setting his stomach to heaving so badly he expected to bring up what little still remained since Brandon's fist had torn him inside out. Gradually reason took hold and he knew he must redeem himself in the eyes of his boss. If he made certain Brandon never reached the Jasmines it would go a long way toward saving face. The job called for a man who knew the foothills from every draw and hummock. He was that man, though tonight he was too sick for the saddle jolting.

He dragged Malpais to a sitting position without the kid coming to. Malpais had the gray shine of a dead man, with dried blood caked in his hair and on his jaw. Then Lake took his first full look at Madrid, expecting more anger than he actually found. Encouraged by Madrid's restraint he said, "We've got to stop that fellow, Sam."

Madrid nodded. "He's got to be taken care of. Sometime, Chris, a man has a run of luck you just can't understand. MacRae's got it now but it won't last."

It was a mark of Lake's character that he let Malpais fall back to the floor with no feeling whatsoever. He sent Van Caslin to the Pride after whiskey and took the lantern from its ceiling bracket, moving through the warehouse into the compound. Madrid walked silently at his side and Lake knew a bitter self condemnation for having underestimated Brandon. The gambler could fight. He had never expected anything like the battle Brandon had given him.

There was plenty of track in the compound yard for a practiced eye to read. Lake went back and forth across the yard piecing the story together. One man wore wide boots, boots that shouted aloud here was a man with foot trouble. The other sets were made by small men or boys. The small tracks were as important as the large ones—he carried a vivid impression of Lana Harrel in riding outfit, her thighs in the form-clinging wool of riding skirt, the tantalizing pointed breasts, the narrowness of her boots.

He dared not look at Madrid beside him but he knew the brooding man was reading the same meaning into the boot-prints as he. He had seen the coolness of Lana's welcome on the landing; he could judge perhaps better than any man the passion that lay in Madrid—through long months in the saddle together he had seen it eating its way deeper into Madrid—and now he estimated the jealousy in Madrid's breast. For a long time he had suspected that only Madrid's passion for Harrel's daughter had held Bell-M from grasping Long 7. Now he knew the fight was to be for the last inch of the Jasmynes.

Women held only a momentary interest for Lake, he could take them and then forget them, and he felt relieved that this was shaping out the way it was. Might as well take all the land, all the water that fed the Jasmynes. Someday a mighty cattle empire would be encompassed within the hills with Sam Madrid as king. He himself knew only loyalty to Madrid, a sort of warped, twisted honor for his brand, and he would live and lay down his life to see the kingdom come about.

Madrid's voice sounded quietly at his side, "Lake, come with me to the stable. We'll see what Ollie Hand knows."

Lake nodded, crossing the compound toward the public corral where Bell-M kept their horses whenever they stayed in town. Lake found himself suddenly sweating; Madrid was so grave and deadly, the currents ran so swift and deep through him, and when he was like this Lake was sobered.

There was a small stable built into the corner of the fenced lot. Here they found Ollie Hand bending over a much worn bridle. Lake called to the stableman, without bothering to question when decision had reached him to follow Brandon.

"Ollie, get a rope on my sorrel! I'm pulling out!"

The old man put his bridle to one side, climbing to his feet. "Wonder what's got into Honest?" he grumbled. "Never knew him to close while there's a chance to make a sale."

Lake checked himself with a hand half lifted to the saddle beam. He cast Madrid a swift look thinking of the wide boot tracks they had read in the compound. "How's that, Ollie? Ain't Honest's store open?"

"I'm needin' a couple of links of chain to fix this bridle. But

his place ain't open so I'm patchin' with what stuff I got. Bridle ain't worth much anyhow. It'll make him sick when he finds out he lost a sale."

Lake lifted his saddle down, standing with his gear beside him and holding his own sharp thoughts. Madrid said slowly, "He'll have it coming to him for this. Honest's had too much to say for quite a while—taking sides with the miners and the damned butchers that're killing our beef."

Up until then Lake wouldn't have believed Honest Lavinsky would be putting his nose where it had no business. It gave him a feeling of having been schemed upon. For to scheme upon Bell-M was to scheme upon every man on its payroll unto the lowliest hand, and Lake knew he would have to teach the storekeeper not to interfere where Bell-M laid its plans. But not immediately. Every minute he wasted put MacRae that much further across the desert. Then Ollie Hand brought him his tawny sorrel and he threw on the saddle. Madrid was looking at him steadily. Lake said coldly, "Don't worry, Sam. He ain't going to reach the Jasmines."

Madrid's eyes were flat. "See that his luck don't run much longer."

Malpais saw Madrid reenter the warehouse a few minutes later when he lifted open an eyelid. It was one of the first things to touch his awareness as he wiped drops of whiskey from his chin. His mind had cleared to the point where there were two things that stood out against the thumping of his skull. He had let MacRae surprise him and now Harrel would give him hell in front of the Long 7 hands. Harrel was a man who could put things roughly and it didn't set well with Malpais to have his prestige chipped away in front of the other hands.

Secondly, he retained a blurry impression of someone breaking into his fight with Brandon MacRae, of smashing steel against his head and starting this string of fireworks that still blinded him. This latter thought set off a churlish rancor that drove through his system like poison. So he carefully kept his eyes lowered from Van Caslin who stood poised above him

with a whiskey bottle. It was better to find a few things out before admitting consciousness.

He sensed Madrid staring at him brassily, then Madrid's voice. "So he's still out? I never thought he was worth a hell of a lot. And I told Harrel so."

Now Van Caslin's voice came from closer above him. "He's not as sick as he looks. Don't let him fool you."

Malpais pulled his eyelids open and looked into their faces. He saw Madrid's mouth twist in a sardonic leer that sent resentment lacing through him. He hated Madrid for that handsome way he leered, and for his arrogance, as much as he stood in awe of his power. Madrid spoke, not too unfriendly:

"How do you feel, kid?"

He lay back watching them both closely. "Somebody bent a gun over my head. I'll pay him back as soon as I know who he is."

Madrid spoke with a certain gravity underlying his tone. "It was Honest, kid. I don't know why. Figure it out for yourself."

Malpais tried to read the thoughts at work behind Madrid's high forehead. Here was a relentless man who seldom displayed his feelings, who wore his gun vainly pegged low to his thigh, who would use it with no remorse whatsoever in order to drive home his way. Malpais hoped he would get the go-ahead sign to do what he wanted at the landing; if he didn't he was going to do it anyhow.

"Honest!" he ground out. Surprise drew him to a sitting posture and he stared at Madrid. The last time in town he had been drunk and had given Honest trouble and Honest had talked to him sternly—so sternly he still rankled under it. "The damn Jew!" he drawled. "You sure of that, Madrid?"

The older man simply shrugged. "Ollie Hand says his store's been locked. You'll find his bootprints in the compound if you need anything further." Now Madrid's gaze drifted to Van Caslin. "I'm staying over in town so I can ride with the freight outfit and make certain nothing happens to Miss Harrel. Lake is taking care of MacRae. You'd better walk the kid to his rooming house."

He swung on his heels, turning again before he reached the warehouse door. "Kid, don't try anything with Honest. Harrel might not like it if you caused him trouble."

After he was gone Malpais drew himself to his feet. He was still smarting from Madrid's implacable will, and the exertion of pulling erect was making his head ache. Madrid had a way of talking that was brutally sharp and a man didn't know exactly what was expected of him. He thought he'd been given a free hand with Honest, yet Madrid's last words had been in direct opposition to his early talk. The hell with Madrid, he thought; after he fixed Honest he didn't have to return to the Jasmynes. He became aware of Van Caslin's fingers wrapped around his arm. "Take your hand off me," he snarled. He didn't like Van Caslin and his closeness had a way of causing his flesh to creep.

Nevertheless Van Caslin went with him to the shabby room he occupied behind the Pride. Van Caslin, he thought, was the chief reason the Jasmynes had suddenly lost their appeal to him. It had been a good enough country where a man might do as he pleased, but now the scalp hunter coming into this gave it a flavor Malpais couldn't stomach. They talked together a few moments longer while Malpais sat on his bunk unhitching his belt. Presently Van Caslin left the room intending to return to the steamboat. He would sleep in his stateroom tonight and join Madrid and the freight outfit in the morning. Again Malpais felt a reluctance to return with them to the Jasmynes. Harrel had sent him to Lavinsky after supplies but if he elected not to return to Long 7, then Harrel would have to find another man to send on his errands.

Malpais outened his lamp before he returned to his bed to lie in the darkness. He wondered how he could repay Honest for that wicked head blow. Now when he brooded over it he knew he would never leave the landing without settling accounts. If things were still quiet after he fixed Honest he would steal aboard Crotch's boat and head upriver in the morning. He wanted no part of any business in which Van

Caslin had a hand—he didn't have the guts to fight Van Caslin's way, he admitted this.

But he wouldn't put all his trust in slipping out on the steamboat. He'd have his Long 7 pony ready to hit the desert. If things went against him in Lavinsky tonight he could always make his getaway. He was a clever kid.

He dressed himself and strode noiselessly down a narrow hallway from which doors gave entrance to other rooms such as the one he occupied. From the end compartment he could catch the noises of the new saloon girl entertaining her man. Anger filled his mouth with bile, for he had considered her his girl. They were all the same to Malpais, they might put up a show of being hard to get at first but after a man ran his hand across her rear a few times she gave in and let him have his way. If it hadn't been for this Bell-M business and Honest Lavinsky he would probably be the one in there now being entertained. The girl wasn't much to look at but she had a certain way that made it plain she knew her trade. And now as he listened avidly at her door he checked up another score against Honest.

Again he paused beside the street door sorting out the night's few remaining sounds. The Pride was the only saloon still open and those inside weren't thinking of anything but their bottles. He stepped onto the walk and crossed it quickly, tracing his way around the building's rear and so coming to Ollie Hand's stable through the town's back lots.

He found Ollie asleep on his cot breathing the stable's rank air. He knew the man was a light sleeper and it was a tribute to his stealthiness that he was able to saddle his pony without awakening the stableman. In those moments while he saddled the pattern of his future days became clear before him. Harrel and Madrid were close to grasping the Jasmynes but it would do the men no good who aided them. Lake, maybe a few others, would share in the plunder, but the ones like Malpais would get nothing for their loyalty except cursing and cuffing. The hell with them all, from now on he was going to look out for himself.

He let his pony stand behind Honest's store. A thought

struck him now he would be clever to stock up with food stuff he needed. An extra rifle and shells—a man needed plenty of ammunition when he rode the Indian trails. It would hurt the Jew more to lose his profits than anything else he could do. Unconsciously his hand shifted to his Colt to ease it against its holster. So far as he knew Honest slept somewhere in the building. He put his shoulder to the stable door and it gave in opening. If Honest was here now he'd repay the beating he'd gotten earlier in the warehouse.

The partition between the stable and store proper was shelved and carried a surplus of items of regular trade. It was a matter of only a few moments until he had filled two grain sacks. He lashed these fast to his saddle skirts thinking what it would be like to awaken Honest and let him know what was going to take place. There was a horse stirring in the stable, Honest's personal mount, which he haltered next and led out beside his own animal. Both horses set up a nickering that was sure to awaken Honest. Very well, let him come into this now. The sooner the better.

The stable floor lay littered with wild hay. Another pile stood against one wall. With the fork Malpais spread it loosely against the door leading to the store, the rest he spread between the stalls. Then he went to one knee rubbing flame to a match, letting it catch the hay. Behind him the main door squealed open. He heard Honest call: "Who is it? Speak! I have a gun!"

He faded quickly away from the light, his hand running to his Colt. Again he caught Honest's words, raised this time in a fevered pitch:

"He has a fire! *Mein Gott!*"

From one knee he got off his shot at Honest, saw the Jew stagger as the slug tore him brutally. Firelight played across the storekeeper's face, he saw pain stamp its tight lines across the heavy mouth. The gun slid from Honest's fingers and clattered to the floor. Malpais waited no longer. Without holstering his weapon he charged outside and leaped onto his pony. He dragged Honest's mount along on the end of its reins.

It seemed to Honest he could never make it away from those searing hot flames. Foot by foot he dragged back into the main storeroom. Lying on the floor he slammed closed the door and then lay listening as fire crackled against the planks. He was there when the others reached him. The pain of his bullet smashed shoulder was insufferable, causing him to lose consciousness as they carried him away.

They fought all night with their bucket brigade, carrying water from the river, two score of men who labored, some in their nightshirts. They confined the blaze to Honest's building and the one next door, without letting fire destroy their town. . . .

In another quarter of the landing sweat ran off Honest's forehead while the doctor dug a ball from his flesh. He was told he must lie in bed a few days until the danger of infection was past. Yet the following forenoon he dressed without aid and walked to his fire-gutted building. His mouth went suddenly dry and an excitement stole over his heart. An excitement that was alien to Honest, and beyond him, something of the fundamental urge of life, which sprang from the deepest wells within him. The darkened walls brought back other scenes that, for Honest, were still crowded with meaning; they brought back the terror of the war years that had hit him so hard. Something snapped inside. Within an hour he had borrowed a horse and was riding the trail Malpais had taken a few hours before dawn. . . .

CHAPTER 8

Late the following afternoon Brandon stood within rifle shot of Jasmine staring into the gulch searching a tawny sorrel gelding. At dawn, far out on the chalk-colored wastes, a rider had come on him working out his tracks. Brandon had been in a low hollow of the desert and hadn't seen the rider at first but his bay had given him warning. Carefully, as they worked

across the ascending land nearing the foothills, Brandon had scanned his backtrail. Then, riding out of the west where night still held, the sorrel took shape. A burly man rode darkly outlined against the skyline, a rifle held across his pommel.

He recognized posture and outline as Chris Lake closing in for ambush. For the next few minutes Brandon searched the desert about him, determined to give Lake more than he bargained for. The land had roughened, with innumerable hummocks and winding draws. Selecting one draw nearly shoulder deep Brandon staked both pack horse and stallion behind its protection and returned toward Lake. He lay in the draw with his long Sharp's barrel across the edge of the depression, sent a warning shot toward the rider. Immediately Lake drifted between the hummocks.

For five or ten minutes they swapped lead across the brightening sand wastes. Light burst behind him in a flaming sunrise making his position almost untenable. Lake held the early advantage of lingering darkness behind his hills; now as the sun sent its light spears deeper into the west Brandon found his target clearly illuminated while Lake shot almost directly into the sun.

Already the dust of a new day was rising and the hot wind was sending little devils across the sage hills. Lake was working closer toward his hollow, aiming deliberately to panic his horses. He was working around behind Brandon and coming into a position where he could rake the draw with rifle fire and leave Brandon afoot.

Brandon made out Lake's face a few moments later pressed tightly against his gun barrel. He drove a shot across a hundred yards of desert, taking close aim and knowing this was a fight for blood. The ball raked dust very close to the other man's barrel and Lake jerked back out of sight. Brandon wasn't sure if his ball had found its target. For a full minute he considered the possibility of hunting Lake down. He preferred to settle the matter at once and be done with Lake; but there was no way to rout Lake from the hummocks without putting himself openly against the other's gunfire.

A quarter of an hour later he tired of waiting for Lake's

next move. He climbed from his draw, advancing across the hills with his Sharp's ready. There was no sign of Lake anywhere and he decided the other man had pulled out. He chose to take advantage of that still moment, and he drew the stallion behind a taller hummock and mounted.

No shots followed as he headed both his horses across the desert away from Lake's position. All day he rose gradually with the land, the Jasmynes taking shape out of a blue horizon haze before him. At noon he ate a cold lunch from the supplies in his saddle pack, risking no fire. For an hour he let the horses rest, smoking a cigarette and resting himself with his ear close to the sun baked earth. There was no shade, no relief from the blistering heat. But neither did he hear sound of hoofs around him and he decided he had eluded Lake. By late afternoon he entered the Jasmynes. And now he looked into a small camp of pine-timbered shacks thrown aimlessly up and down a ravine.

The hills were firred with occasional timber, the air tangy with pine resin. He had caught the odor miles out on the colorless wastes until the hills had drawn him like the half-delirious dreams of cool water. He let his eyes drift over the scattered hitching posts finding only two horses carrying lariats beneath their saddles, neither of them Lake's animal. They were in front of a saloon, and there were several other deadfalls up and down that rutted road.

The freighter's train in which Lana traveled was still crossing the desert, yet after the brush with Lake he had no doubt the news from Lavinsky had reached the hills. As far as the camp itself was concerned it had only distrust for cattlemen. He had no need to enter.

Below him were men who had come into the frontier following the gleam of gold. The Civil War had ruined thousands in its four years of strife and every valley for miles around had been staked by these people in fantastic hope for quick wealth. He saw now that the camp was virtually deserted, the men being at work on their claims. If Lake had arrived he had hidden his sorrel in some shed. Brandon put

his horses on the trail to Francher's, the clear outline of Whiskey Pass immediately before him.

The Jasmynes stretched north in a narrow stem forty miles before joining with other masses, black in the distance, silent with the hushed stillness of empty space. The pass led into a canyon which in turn lowered into grassy valleys that had been Apache hunting grounds until very recently. It was new land, raw land, over which men must die before ownership became established.

The desert's sun was down but its heat still lay across Brandon's shoulders darkening his shirt with sweat. Grass deepened as he passed over the divide and fell into the sharper downslant. Here were signs of cattle in these folded hills, the hoof marks plain in the softer soil. Now the first wild-faced cow scurried out of his way. There was a fat calf beside her, both their flanks marked by Francher's brand. He drew down the bay and sat facing the Roman Two, not quite believing. It had been a long and hard way across from the landing, and now beneath these ragged hills he looked on his first long-horns. Madrid had said there were no Roman Two's left. This was wrong, for he possessed two. He would put them between Bell-M and keep them in the hills as long as he had the strength to ride. He had run as far as he meant to run and here in this country he would stay. Someday these hills would run full with cattle. The men who claimed them now would grow with the land.

His stubborn will formed itself around that thought and he threw the bay from the faint trail, quartering in behind the cows. They reacted from instinct, running before his animals, plodding toward their range. He rode after them without deliberately willing it, unconscious that he had fallen into his first act of becoming a cowman. . . .

There was still prowling anger in him over the handling Lake had given him. No man lifted a hand to him in this manner that Madrid had chosen, and if he did he would get the same that Leyden had gotten that night he ran from New Orleans. So far he had drawn his gun only twice, against Leyden and against Lake, but he knew the limits toward which

anger could drive a man. So it was a man earned his reputation.

He thought of John Dupere and the wreckage left behind at Ude's hotel. It was a web—a vicious network. Because of that fight Ude had become entangled. They would never forget that and some day Ude would pay for his brashness. Rusty John Dupere had jumped them first because he could stand no more of their harassing. It was the ancient story that a man could take so much and then his restraint would explode and he went back eons in time, fighting to preserve whatever he stood for or valued in his own light.

Now he recalled Lana had named her father a hard-tempered, grasping man, but there had been no reproach in her tone. Her voice had rung clear. "You will never hear that my father shot a man without giving him a chance." He read fuller meaning into her words. It was the manner in which Harrel fought—completely and with no quarter asked, but cleanly and above board.

Madrid was not like this at all, and suddenly one other thing crystallized itself in his mind. Lana's father would make no fight for Roman Two that involved killing. He had been holding Madrid off from actual war until they starved Francher into submission. It was the long way, the patient way, and Madrid could not like that.

Brandon sat very still, a fundamental truth beating into his brain. So long as Roman Two stood on its own grass Harrel would never come in on the kill. There was nothing Brandon wanted more than to strike against Madrid, against Lake, yet it would be better to tie Bell-M's hands by crowding them against Lana's father.

Against the background of this final reasoning Lana stood sharply-drawn in his mind. She brought herself to life so readily. He couldn't forget the night he left the landing, her face pale in the starlight, her eyes filled with anger, and at the same time wistful. It surprised him how deeply she was coloring his life.

The sound of splashing water tore her from him now. His bay quickened his pace, bore Brandon onward to the lip of a

pool where both pack animal and stallion stopped dead and buried their noses. It was an irregular pocket in the basaltic rock thirty feet across, fed by springs. From the pool a lively stream flowed toward the valley. There was a trail following the stream, a few shaggy cattle grazing in sight on the broken bottom lands. Somewhere out of sight would be Francher's headquarters.

The sun's heat had beat fiercely against him all day and now the yonder water was a temptation. He came out of saddle and half drew his shirt from his shoulders. He let the gesture stop at this point remembering the dragnet Lake probably had thrown about the hills.

His horse blew out a gusty breath and Brandon let his eyes swing to the stallion understanding at once he was not alone in the canyon. He had let others work behind him in the rocks outflanking him. He took it with a gambler's calmness, yet the palms of his hands turned moist. He moved between his two bays, glance shifting to the rocks above the pool. His heart was tripping in the excitement of a new chapter about to open. He reached after the Colt in its shoulder harness. Then a command struck him flatly.

"Don't reach any further! We got you hogtied!"

He took a deeper breath. Flame came alive in him, a flame that took its fuel from danger. It was as it had always been with him and he knew again his keenest moment was when he stood alone facing the world. He let his fingers slide from the Colt. Had this been Madrid, he thought, there would have been no warning before the shot. He called, "All right. Come into the open!"

A cowman carrying his carbine walked out from a tangle of rocks. He was a thin, stoop-shouldered man with a wrinkled face and pouchy-lidded eyes. He let the rifle barrel work into the crook of his arm. "It's Roman Two," he said in half-hearted tone. "What're you after?"

Brandon smiled easily and drew fuller breath into his lungs. "I want to see Rusty John. Take me in."

"Rusty don't want to see anybody."

"Still, I want to see him."

The thin man let his heavy eyes drift around, not completely sure of the situation. "What do you think, Jeffries?"

A second voice drifted from deep in the rocks. "Let him come down. Maybe Rusty will enjoy this."

The thin man swung his glance forward with a faint grin twisting his mouth. "Drop your gun. Kick it this way."

Brandon hunched his shoulders, doing as he was asked. The thin man bent down after his Navy and shoved it into his own waistband. He was off guard now and the carbine was sagging in his arm. Still Brandon had no thought of disobeying orders; these two were his men and he had been offered this chance to gauge them at close hand. Malpais had let him understand his men had run off, but Malpais had not been wholly correct. There was a stirring on the height and a younger man worked downslope followed by two horses. Both animals wore Francher's brand.

The new man was about twenty-two. He wore shabby levis and a coarse shirt, his face sun-browned and reckless appearing, his eyes quick-running. He was smiling as he looked at Slim, an iron-hardness in his smile. Along the young backroads of his past this man had lived by violence, and Brandon knew it was still in his mind, a fever that haunted him and gave him no peace. A good many men had that look about their eyes after Vicksburg and Chickamauga and the rank fields where the war had piled its dead.

Jeffries' eye kept running to his two horses. He asked finally, "Where'd you get the bays?"

"From Honest Lavinsky."

"Pay for them?"

Brandon nodded and Jeffries still held him with his head-on look. "You're the one chased those Roman Twos. You're not after blood, or you wouldn't ride in this way."

"I still ain't so sure," the heavy-lidded man grumbled.

"I'm sure," Jeffries said.

Brandon threw his glance at the slim man's waistband where his Navy handle bulked against the soiled shirt. He let his words drop levelly against the still air. "If I was after anyone, Slim wouldn't be wearing my Colt."

Jeffries laughed thinly, "I guessed that, too."

"Then let's get down to Rusty John."

They hit their saddles, putting the horses downslope beside the splashing stream. On their left a sheer wall rose almost vertically. From the base of this a talus slope crowded them against the stream. All of this canyon fulfilled a hunger in Brandon he did not immediately understand. The smell of things dead a thousand years and dried into dust, of the black earth that had been composed of this mould, and of the scant timber, these things came closer and stirred him. He understood the richness of the lower valley and knew Madrid would never give up his fight to own it all. They who were here now were simply the first comers. Others would ride in and want their jag of the hills. They would fight for every acre they took, but already it would be parceled out among those who made the first grab. And Brandon would have his share. He was very sure of that.

The rider calling himself Jeffries rode with his carbine across the saddle and kept watching the heights with his eyes squinted to narrow slits. He was expecting trouble, and when a man looked for it he generally found it. He was a man who would have no peace until he worked off his restlessness inside.

They rode out upon a sloping benchland overlooking the valley. Working around to the left they followed the talus slope. From here Brandon could see the long front of a log house a few miles on their right. He motioned toward it but Jeffries shook his head saying it was Harrel's.

"Which way is Madrid's layout?"

"Across the valley. Six miles."

They passed on around the overhanging wall. The talus had nearly disappeared at this point, a few pines growing against the very edge of the wall. It was a good place in many ways. Put a man with a rifle on top of that wall and he could hold off an attack virtually by himself. Francher had been foresighted.

Now as they broke through a thin stand of timber Brandon saw a pair of pine buildings take form beneath the wall. The

larger one stood with its rear against the rock, its roof covered by pine shakes, and from its chimney pale smoke crawled upward beyond the cliff. Sixty feet in height, Brandon estimated that bold rock, and thought again it would be a good place from which to fight.

They came into a hoof churned clearing between the buildings. Brandon took in the yard with a running look. A woman was watching them keenly from a fence beside the main cabin. She looked tired and drawn and Brandon remembered Ude had said something of John Dupere's daughter; apparently they were living at Francher's headquarters. Slim slipped out of saddle and took a position beside the woman, his heavy-lidded look holding to Brandon as he closed in.

The woman had a tragic face with deep-set eyes and reddish hair tied in a bun at the back of her neck. She wore a blue skirt of rough material, boots showing beneath the hemline, and a simple blouse. He saw now that she was much younger than his first glance revealed, possibly two or three years younger than Jeffries, whom she was watching. He catalogued this look in the back of his mind and turned his attention to Jeffries. The man sat his horse loosely, returning the girl's look in a possessive way.

"We found him in Whiskey Pass, Anne. Said he wanted to talk with Rusty."

She shook her head. "Rusty can't see anyone."

"You say the word and we'll start working him over."

Her glance was straying over his horses, much the same expression about her face that Jeffries had had. Slim said in an undertone, "Told us he bought 'em from Lavinsky. Seems strange."

They knew his horses, of course; they were both obviously hill animals. Brandon touched the bay closer. "Is Dupere inside now?"

She gave him her full attention and Brandon was struck anew at the hopelessness in her eyes. He wondered how anyone so young could have so futile an expression. And then he caught something new coming to life in her guise. She said,

"Are you one of the men Francher sent? Is that why you came?"

What she was thinking was apparent—that he was one of the gunmen Francher had contacted in Yuma. The empty harness beneath his arm had given her the thought. He saw her look leap to his Navy in Slim's belt. Then, abruptly, another thought raced in, that word of Francher's death could not have reached them back in the *Jasmines*. It would be up to him to break the news.

He came out of saddle ignoring Jeffries' swift warning. Moving closer to the girl his fingers touched the paper he had won on Crotch's boat. The girl's eyes were studying him speculatively. He asked quietly, "Are you anything to Francher?"

"I am Anne Dupere. Rusty John is my father."

It came home to him anew the reason for her tragic manner. The savage hills had laid their claim on her. Somewhere inside the cabin her father lay broken from the terrible fight Madrid had forced on him. There was something else, something that had to do with the look she had given Jeffries. Currents ran between these two and something Jeffries stood for or meant to do was not altogether satisfactory to her.

Brandon held out the paper and very carefully she reached for it. He said:

"I'm sorry about Francher. He won't be coming back. Francher is dead."

CHAPTER 9

Anne Dupere was preparing herself for fresh shock. Deep inside she was withdrawn and afraid and Brandon knew the frontier had stretched her nerves taut. Her eyes lay on Francher's signature and at first he doubted if she understood its complete significance, that he owned the buildings and all

they represented. Pity touched him for Anne, he thought of other things Ude had mentioned of her and he realized much of her appeal lay in her wistful, unhappy eyes. She was tired of violence, of rough men with plundering ways.

The marks of his fight were still visible, and Brandon knew she graded him accordingly. She took him for another free-booter, another Southerner ruined by the war and not particular where his next fortune was to be made. Unconsciously she drew herself away.

"You can see my father, of course. We're staying in Francher's house because we have nowhere else to go."

Brandon advanced a half step toward the cabin and then stopped as Jeffries' voice struck. "Hold on a minute!"

Anne said, "Not now, Jeff! He owns what's left of Roman Two. That may mean he owns us, too."

"It don't mean me!" Jeffries said in a final tone. "I'm my own man."

A faint lift came to her breast, a tightening about her mouth. Brandon continued to study them, again judging Jeffries as a man always ready to argue, a man who would never rest until he rode out the rough currents that flowed inside. Jeffries' hand lay hooked on a shell studded belt, the dark butt of his pistol curved and waiting for his grasp. Recklessness touched Brandon and he thought if Jeffries wanted to dispute this he would be willing to take his fight now instead of later.

Then Anne said more firmly, "He'll see Rusty first. After that maybe we can all talk sense."

Brandon followed her into a low roofed cabin feeling response to this slim girl. She had a brief, decisive way about her and he considered she could be relied upon. Her one weakness lay in the fact she hadn't been able to do much about Jeffries' manner. Obviously they were in love with each other, but Jeffries failed to please her.

The cabin's interior was dark coming from the outer sunshine. Brandon was aware of a well swept earthen floor, the simply made furniture. A bracket lantern cast its glow on a long pine table that had been worked smooth by the draw-

ing knife. Beside the table ran two parallel benches with stout legs attached through auger holes.

There was a fire burning in a fireplace along the shorter wall. Anne had been cooking in the kettles that hung suspended from iron chains, the odors of her meal suddenly reaching Brandon's consciousness. He caught her backward glance as she swept lightly across the floor.

"I'm judging what I find. You look like another fighter. You'll want to carry this to Bell-M, to Harrel." There was a pause and he knew she was settling a question within her. Then, resignedly, "It won't work."

He said sharply, "We won't ride after Bell-M. We can hold what we have until they come to us."

Highlights quickened in her glance and a pleased look came to her. He touched her lightly on the forearm, bringing her about to face him. "Before I talk to Dupere will you tell me about yourself? How do you fit here?"

Her breath ran freely, her small breasts lifting. "There isn't much to tell. We had a cabin like this one—not so big as Francher's. A few cattle, perhaps fifty left after the redskins got through with us. I rode in the wagon with Mother when we brought them here—and then the land grew too rough and we abandoned the wagon for horses. The men turned our cattle into the hills before they quit us, all but Jeff, he's a Dupere hand, not one of Francher's men. We've both been raided since Francher left for Yuma. Francher's riders high-tailed."

Brandon nodded. "And your mother?"

"The hills were too much for her. She had been a school teacher, and this was more than she could stand. After she died Father still refused to pull out. Even now, when they've burnt our place, he won't go."

"It was Madrid who pushed you around?" Nowhere in her talk had there been any suggestion of Madrid, but there was malice in her eyes, an anger that showed in spite of her soft voice.

"Madrid doesn't want us here. He wants it all. He stole our

beef, or killed it on the grass and blamed the miners. Harrel didn't help us, either."

"Probably Harrel was convinced it was the miners," Brandon said. "What about his daughter?"

"Do you know Lana Harrel?" and her brows lifted.

When he acknowledged this she gave him no answer, simply turned her still face toward the bedroom. She stepped quietly away. Brandon knew she blamed Harrel along with Madrid, and this conviction she shared with John Dupere. Her father blamed Madrid for his wife's death, but Anne was fighting to override the brutal ugliness of the thought.

Again she gave him a pleading look. "When you see my father—he's broken and sick. This isn't the way I remember him."

She turned from him to the rear of the cabin disappearing through a door. Brandon entered to find himself in a much smaller room. Anne was bending over a bed, shaking her father by the shoulder. At first glance it seemed hardly possible Dupere was alive. Beneath a head bandage appeared a bruised and discolored face, the marks he had brought with him from Lavinsky. Below his mouth jutted a wiry, rust-colored beard which made it obvious why he had been named Rusty. The beard was damp from moisture and blood that had seeped from his mouth. Anne began wiping his chin, speaking quietly:

"He came about Roman Two, Dad. Francher has been killed and he's come to tell you. It was Madrid?" and her eyes lifted to Brandon.

Brandon nodded. "It was a man named Van Caslin, who works for Madrid."

"He has so many rough hands." Her voice held a flat tone of defeatism.

Dupere stared at them with his bleak look; the news of Francher's death seemed to take the last of his spirit. Anne's body was trembling miserably as she talked on. "A few nights ago they beat Dad in a saloon and then let him ride home alone. After he left Lavinsky he fell and laid on the desert for hours. When he came to his horse was waiting beside him,

and this morning we heard him riding into the yard. He had tied himself fast to his saddle."

It took backbone to cross that desert in Dupere's condition; Brandon had just crossed its bone-dry creases and he knew. He had seen the damage done in Ude's barroom, he had stood himself under Chris Lake's sledging fists and from this he judged the fight in Dupere. He said gravely, "Your father needs a doctor."

"Jeffries has done what he could. There are no doctors in the hills—none except those among the gold seekers, and they don't care what happens to cattlemen."

From the bed Dupere roused himself. "So they killed Francher! It's the way I saw it was shaping."

"Dupere, you ought to have a doctor."

Dupere shrugged and gave Brandon a ragged look. "It would be best for Anne to clear out. Cards show all over you but I still read you for a decent sort. Better than any in these hills. You take her away from here while there's a chance."

Brandon saw the start that came to Anne. He stepped closer, caught the whiskey air nearer to the bed. "We're not moving, Dupere. We're going to play this out with Madrid."

The sick man's eyes turned to frosty bits of marble. "You talk the way Jeffries talks. He's for riding after Bell-M and burning them out. The damn fool can't see they'd shoot him off his saddle before he quits Roman Two. Then Madrid will come after us a-shootin'. There's no use making that kind of talk."

Anne's head had lowered, a slight flush burning her cheeks. "I wish you had felt that way before, when Mother was alive."

"Anne! That'll do!"

Thought of danger to Anne was too much for Dupere. Burying his wife had been the end of him, and the idea of anything else happening to Anne was going through him like a poison. It made a coward of Dupere, a weakness he was trying to fight with the bottle. Brandon felt a thrust of annoyance at Dupere. He said, "Jeffries is not going anywhere, either. He's wrong about his plans. But at the same time we're not running from Madrid. We're going to stay."

The bloodshot eyes lifted, drove around Brandon in a haunting castigation. "I know what it means to fight," he said heavily. "Right now I'm finding out it does no good."

The uselessness of talk with Dupere in his present condition struck Brandon and he left Anne beside the bed. He caught the undertone of her final words and knew she was not far from breaking down.

Nothing was to be gained right now from the sick man. Brandon decided his first move must be with Jeffries, to stop him from pursuing a foolish course. If Roman Two struck against Madrid it would bring Harrel into the fight and they would be wiped out. At the same time it was necessary to win the loyalty of the pair in the yard before he could expect any cooperation.

There was a needle gun hanging above the mantle of the main room. Brandon inspected it, found it ready to fire, loaded with a single ball. The two men outside might call his bluff by rushing him together, but he hadn't read them that way. Thought of that single charge would go around in each man's head and stop them. Jeffries in particular had seen rifle-work before at close range.

He stepped into the entrance carrying the needle gun at his hip. The sun was quickly lowering behind the rim at the rear of the house, thrusting its shadows across the yard. Slim was leading all the horses further away from the cabin as Brandon came into the opening. Slim stopped fifty feet from the door and looped the reins fast to the fence rail. Brandon kept his main attention centered on Jeffries leaning against the fence closer to the house. Jeffries had caught his step on the threshold and now as his glance lifted cool shock passed across his face. His glance leaped to Slim still busy with the horses.

Brandon watched the slackness return to Jeffries' face. When he was sure Jeffries had made his decision to let this ride he called sharply, "Slim, come here!"

The older man deserted his horses, marching deliberately toward the cabin. He stopped five feet from the needle gun, his heavy-lidded eyes ignoring the muzzle. A new respect had come in his face.

"All right, you can give back my Colt," Brandon said.

The Navy still rested in Slim's waistband and he touched it carefully and handed it butt foremost to Brandon. Brandon lowered the rifle barrel against the door casing, slipping the Navy into his harness. The greater part of his attention was still focused on Jeffries, yet he knew the slim man's eyes never left his movements. He smiled quietly. "You never would have got it if I hadn't been willing."

Jeffries' lips curled. "Don't rate yourself so high, friend. You might come down hard."

"There's something I've got to know. How bad is Dupere?"

"Not too bad. I put him to bed, and didn't find any smashed bones."

"It's inside his head," put in Slim. "It's deeper than you know. His spirit's licked, the way an old man's licked who decides he don't have anything to fight for. After you reach his age nothin's worth it anymore. Francher found that out, too."

"He's not that old," Jeffries contradicted. "It's those ringy devils from Bell-M that've shook him up."

Slim had pronounced the dogma of a man virtually whipped, and Brandon wondered what had brought him so close to the end of his trail. The power of the Jasmines was here, the evil that worked inside a man and warped his will. He said to Jeffries soberly, "Can we get a doctor out here?"

Jeffries turned his palms outward, shrugging. "We were on our way to try Dunleavy when you came. I think we might talk Dunleavy into coming, though he's only an herb peddler at best."

"Tonight we'll try to get him," Brandon said. He motioned with his hand toward the rim beyond the cabin. "Is there a trail up there?"

Both men followed his motion and Slim, who was a Francher hand, answered. "Couple of hundred yards around the bench the talus reaches nearly to the top. Man could work his way up there."

"When we're through eating you're going up with a rifle. Jeffries, you first. We'll make shifts of it." His eyes ran to the

open-end shed at the far end of the corral. Built against it was a log structure which would be the bunkhouse where these two slept. There were a few horses inside the corral, the mounts belonging to Dupere and his daughter. He suspected Roman Two had been raided clean. Their three saddled horses outside the fence, and his pack animal, made all the horses remaining. It decided him on tonight's plans. "I'll watch from the bunkhouse until Slim gets back with the herb peddler."

A smile worked across Jeffries' mouth, giving him insolence. "What're you getting ready for?"

"That bunch of horses will be temptation for any raiding party that knows how weak we are."

Jeffries still underestimated Brandon's leadership, for now his words came clipped. "Maybe I got other plans for tonight."

"These are your plans. Forget anything else."

From the edge of the door Anne's voice reached them. "Jeff, he owns Roman Two. Please do as he asks."

"Makes no difference," Jeffries said. The insolence was still on his face. He was ready to fight to prove the mettle of this stranger who had suddenly come to interfere with his authority.

Anne spoke again. "I don't want any more sick men to look after. Jeff, you'll do what he says!"

Jeffries' eyes dropped finally under the pressure of her insistence. He stirred the ground with a boot-toe. "We'll see," he muttered.

Brandon said, "Would you rather fight it out?"

After a long moment Jeffries said sullenly, "We'll let it ride." Then, with a fresh motion of his hand, Brandon sent Slim back to the horses.

He watched Slim swing the corral gate, turning the horses in. Soon Slim was off-saddling, carrying the blankets and bridle gear to the open-end shed. In a little while Jeffries stepped inside to help, his face dark and strained. Brandon knew resentment crowded him, something that had to be settled before he could be depended on.

CHAPTER 10

Two years before war ripped the States Harrel had built his home in a total wilderness, had seen the Union establish a territorial government out of like wilderness the other side of the Jasmynes, had seen the redmen withdraw and whites come in increasing numbers. Lana walked into the house feeling a strange emptiness in her return. She paused before the long window overlooking the hills, her mood pensive under the tension of meeting Harrel.

She had seen her mother build comfort into this house, make it return some measure of the things they missed from another world; and Lana put her own work into it now that it might offer the same comfort it had held while her mother lived. This room had been their favorite, with its stone fireplace and the mantelpiece flanked by log walls, its ebony piano they had hauled from the river landing by bull teams.

She was afraid to turn her attention to her father. Anger choked him and she knew the hills had not softened during her absence. A thousand men crowded the gulches—a thousand hungry appetites that would be sated by beef slaughtered wherever it grazed the hills. The one blessing of so many white men was that they had driven the Apaches to cover. For that her father should have been thankful, except that Madrid had filled his mind with bitterness.

She kept her glance averted, peeling her gloves from her fingers. She had seen anger in Henry Harrel often, yet never so finely held before. He had waited until the great door of the living room closed behind them, actually, before he let the anger show in any great measure. It made him all the more dangerous. She knew him well, every turn of his temper, and now he was ready to explode in white heat.

He was short for the men of this range, not over five-foot seven, with stocky shoulders and thick arm muscles and a

powerful stride that placed added challenge in his manner. His skin was brown as the native spruce which ran crosswise supporting the roof of this lavish room.

While he paced before his mantel he sucked an empty pipe. He couldn't blow the dottle loose and blood deepened the hue of his cheeks. Lana had never in her life known him to do anything the easy way. When he struck, all the weight of his soul was behind him. Something had to give, and that something was generally not Henry Harrel.

"Might have let me know you were coming home," he began in a begrudging way. "I hear there were plenty at the landing to meet you."

"Madrid was there," she admitted. "But not to meet me. That was an accident—he was expecting someone else." She meant to talk to him about the man Madrid had been waiting for, to watch his reactions when she spoke of Van Caslin. But not now. She knew he had heard about Brandon MacRae, and until she found out how much he knew, the situation was potentially dangerous.

The furrows in his brown face deepened. "About this tin-horn that's trailing after you. Do you have to meet your men on the river?"

She gave him a faint smile. "Does a boat make a man any worse—or any different, for that matter? You've always told me it was what filled a man's clothes that mattered."

"And so it does!" He waved the pipe at her in a hopeless gesture. "A gambler! Mother to God! if you got itchy flanks can't you do with a man from our hills?"

Now she was feeling a temper of her own. Her anger gave her eyes a glow. "You're putting it very crudely!"

"No other way to put it. You know well enough I didn't build Long 7 to hand it over to a cardsharp from the river packets!"

"You needn't worry. Brandon MacRae won't be expecting anything from you. He plays it his own way, or else he doesn't want it at all."

She had her own evaluation of Brandon, formed by the judgments that had been slowly taught her by studying the men

from the Jasmynes, and by what Andre Ude had told her of him.

She believed there was pride in him for his profession, without the slightest shading of shame that his father had gambled before him. There had been an aristocratic dignity about them with none of the shoddiness of the cheap cardplayer. His mother had come from one of the best plantations along the river and there had been complete respect for them throughout the circle in which they moved. Since the war the Delta country was entering a new era; Brandon wanted no part in the change.

She put her anger behind her and tried to explain in part her feeling to Harrel. He was thrusting his finger into a pipe bowl that was caked too thickly by carbon to allow the nail to reach the bottom. Lana feared he had seen enough of the lower river to be wary of the shiftlessness and inaptitude of the men born there. Her father cut her short.

"Part of this I blame on your mother. She put ideas in your head that're rotten as old melons."

"You'd better leave Mother out of this!"

He reeled toward her, still carrying his bad humor. "The hills have got no place for fancy pants. Damn it, Lana, must you let such stuff trail you?"

She was beside him now, her dark eyes stinging him inside. "I don't want any more of that kind of talk! My bags are still packed. If this is what you think I can go on."

"Girl, I spoke too rough!" His head dropped, utter shame flushing his cheeks over the choice of words he had used. "Forgive me, Lana. Sometimes an old man will blow, no matter what. I ought to go out and have my mouth scalded."

"It's all right, Dad. Just keep Mother out of it when you're angry. I can't stand that."

"I know I'm wrong. But I been hearing things that don't sound good. Francher's dead and I've got to find out why. Did Madrid have anything to do with that? I don't want these things to happen to the Jasmynes. The other night they backed Rusty John in a corner and nearly killed him, except John's

too crusty to kill. Why the hell does Sam have to do these things?"

"Something else you may not have heard—Malpais shot Honest Lavinsky and burned out his store. So you see the blame comes back on us."

"I never should have found a place for that wild kid. Madrid swore he warned Malpais not to get rough with Honest."

"My dear father, Sam Madrid is not good medicine for us."

His look leaped up, knife open at last and rearing his pipe. "Is that why you changed your mind about Sam?"

"Yes. It's the things Sam stands for."

"Well, this will have to be settled between you two. I only thought it would be a good match because Sam means to do things in a big fashion after the gold hunters move on. Now I've got to ride over to Roman Two and see John Dupere. I don't like him feeling I been pushing him around."

"It's pretty late for that." She saw worry prowling around in her father, the weeks she had been away had driven a loneliness through him. She knew now that ever since Dupere's wife had died the knowledge had grown in him that he shared the responsibility for that along with Sam Madrid. Being alone had given him plenty of time to think. There was doubt in her father over Madrid's methods.

Intuitively she knew he hadn't yet heard that Brandon was at Roman Two. She must warn him before he rode to Dupere's and discovered it for himself. His pipe was going freely, without blowing his cheeks out. She dropped her hand fondly against his arm.

"Father, there is something else you must know. Brandon MacRae now owns Roman Two. Francher turned it over to him before it fell into Madrid's hands."

His eyes swung to her and he was still a long moment. She could read the drag and strain of doubt go through him. He said, finally, "It's money with this fellow. I'll offer to buy him out."

Slowly she shook her head. "Don't make the same mistake Sam made. Brandon MacRae doesn't care to sell."

"Are you trying to tell me Madrid made him an offer? He told me he wouldn't consider such a thing!"

She recalled she herself had offered Brandon a price. It was something Harrel must never learn. She said, "Father, don't you understand Sam no longer has time for us. In a little while he'll turn against you."

He was heading for the door, now he paused in his stride, stood a long moment. "No, Lana. You're doing Madrid an injustice. You can tell me you no longer love him, but I'll never believe Madrid would turn against me."

Anne Dupere lifted the iron lids from her kettles, letting odors of food escape into the cabin.

Brandon brushed her arm in returning the needle gun to its slings above the mantle. She kept her glance averted, stirring the food with a long ladle. Still she kept her look averted while she set the table. Brandon thought Jeffries was missing something fine in her. Jeffries wasn't good enough for Anne unless he changed. She spoke as she placed the last dishes on the boards.

"Father hasn't such a bad idea. We could get out of the hills while we're able. We'd make Jeff go with us."

He was silent, watching her, and caught the slight droop of her shoulders. Men to her were all unwieldy, irascible. Suddenly she said, "You've seen more of Lana Harrel than I realized. She brought you here, didn't she?"

"No one brought me here. She didn't want me in the Jasmynes."

Anne shook her head. "It was Lana who drew you, whether you admit it or not. She shouldn't have done that. If she loved you, she should have gone away with you. Anywhere—away from the hills!"

She was a strange mixture of intellectual, which came through her mother, and the physical which came from a closeness to the soil, and which asked no complex questions, measured things by standards of pleasure, pain or necessity.

"There's a water pail on the bench," she finally told him. "You'll find the spring yonder, the other side of the house."

He found the pail upended, a chunk of home-made yellow soap beneath, then followed a beaten path around the cabin. After a hundred feet the rim disintegrated into a mass of splintered shafts. Water bubbled in the rubble at the base, coming from underneath the rim. A narrow pool had been scooped out of the rock to accommodate his pail. It was cool against his body, bringing a wintry chill. Wiping his hands against the cloth Anne had provided his eyes closed down. From here he had a clear look over the valley.

It was a rock-piled land, and yet a place where a man might build to what he possessed and be satisfied the rest of his days. The downward slope of the hills was purpling in dusk, still light enough to see across its broken draws. Down there brown dots moved against the graze. Cattle; the broad valley was well stocked, but would he find any with the Roman Two brand?

The corner of his glance touched the corral. He found Jeffries standing with his hands against his hips talking earnestly with Slim. The planes of his face lacked detail at this distance. But these two were making up their minds about him, making their choice. Brandon thought the girl would hold Jeffries. If there was any good in him at all she would do that. If not, it would be better if he left the Jasmynes. He thought Slim was angry with Jeffries now. Slim was a product of the Texas ranges, to whom loyalty for a brand came above all else.

Anne called now and the two turned toward the cabin. Brandon reached the door first, setting his pail on the bench so the others might use the water.

He went inside and caught Anne's quick smile. She said, low-voiced, "I'm giving Dad his meal while they're washing."

She lifted her tray on which stood a beef stew with potatoes and a tin of steaming coffee. Brandon waited alone in the main room until she disappeared and then decided to have another talk with Dupere. He entered the bedroom in time to hear Anne's discouraged complaint.

"Must you always be so stubborn!" Dupere was shoving the tray aside.

Brandon crossed to the opposite side of the sick man's bed, gave him a piercing look.

"You make it hard on her, Dupere."

The old man's lips drew out in a tight line. Presently his glance broke. Anne wheeled, running to the door with her hand covering her cheek. Dupere looked up, a helpless resignation taking the place of rebellion.

"When he's young a man can buck his way. After he's old he fights by himself, and man alone has got to face a lot of things. The world wants to stop him, and his own thoughts fight with everything inside his soul. What he's done wrong all through the years comes back until his conscience lifts goosepimples along his backbone. Then he knows what it's like to be alone."

Brandon felt pity touch him for Dupere. At the same time he knew he was getting better. No man should feel this low when he had a daughter like Anne; Dupere was simply feeling sorry for himself. He needed a shock to jar his mind from his troubles. Decision came to Brandon deliberately, hands slipping beneath his shirt to uncinch his money belt. He said slowly:

"They're still trailing mile-long herds out of Texas. Dupere, I want you to find a cattleman who needs money, then trail his herd here. Take your daughter along with you."

By this time he had the belt free and now he threw it beneath the mattress on the opposite side from Dupere. He had no safeguard the two outside wouldn't turn their guns against his back. He had considered that while watching Jeffries talking with Slim. The money his belt contained might be too much temptation for Jeffries.

Dupere's eyes watched him spreading the belt. His voice turned dry, emotionless. "Have you got any idea the percentage redskins take from a trail herd in this kind of country?"

"Hire the right kind of Texans and the Apaches will let you come in. There's enough in the belt to start with a fair herd."

"It ain't that easy," Dupere shook his head heavily. "Some-

body's going to kill you if you don't get out of the Jasmynes."

"We're not running."

"Then right now there's a grave looking for you! A place not even your mother could find!"

Brandon watched him levelly, saw a flame light the back of Dupere's eyes. The thoughts he had planted would go around in Dupere's mind, grow. He was too much of a cowman to let the deal die; in the end he would accept the money, ride out after a herd.

"You might be right about the grave. We'll see." Brandon smiled. He turned, then, and stepped out. Dupere's glance followed until he entered the other room.

In the main cabin Slim and Jeffries sat at the table, their plates heaped with stew. Brandon drew his knees beneath the boards noticing the others kept their eyes on the food. At close glance Jeffries was a cleaner-cut man than he supposed, with a square face and a forehead high and smooth. If this restlessness in him ever laid itself he would make a loyal hand.

Afterward, when the meal was finished, Slim leaned against the logs. "If anyone rides on Roman Two, holdin' the rim won't be a bad idea. The other boys got hit in the open, that's why they sloped. There's a couple new Spencers in our saddle boots."

Brandon let his glance run out to Jeffries. "You willing to take orders?"

Jeffries was picking his teeth with a quill, mulling over his thoughts. His glance darted to Anne without breaking his expression. "All right," he agreed. "I'll take a turn with a rifle." But there was a flare of resentment still running through him.

They rose from the table with shuffling boots, moved into the yard. Brandon walked with them to the bunkhouse at the end of the corral, entered the open wing that served as saddle shed. Jeffries' face was in tight repose as he slid his Spencer from its leather. Brandon said, "Slim, forget the doctor. Dupere will be all right. Take your first watch from here."

Jeffries slid him a thorny look, said, "I'm climbing the rim. I guess whatever is between us can wait." Then he marched toward the talus slope leading to the top of the rimwall.

Brandon's glance drifted thoughtfully along the corral fence, wondering how long he could keep his men in line. He had the feeling of a hunted animal, hackles slightly lifted against the base of his neck. He sensed trouble heading for Roman Two.

Idly he noted the fence, a crooked affair of cedar logs lashed with rawhide, the hide put over joints wet and each pole becoming inseparably part of its neighbor in drying. He thought how much of the border country Francher had brought with him and imprinted on this land.

Slim's words broke into his musing. "You did right to keep him from riding after Madrid's scalp. Jeff's a man Francher never trusted."

Brandon threw his look back to Slim. He said slowly, "You and I will get along."

But the man's heavy-lidded gaze had dropped to inspect his carbine. His confidence had been unexpected and now he felt frustration and embarrassment. . . .

The intense restlessness was back driving Brandon along the corral fence. There was something about Anne Dupere, something about her beaten, irascible father that gave him no peace. It was the look in her eyes, the pleading, almost begging way in which they followed him. She, too, knew that sometime tonight or tomorrow they would fight to retain what they possessed. She had become unnerved under the menacing influence of the hills and in panic looked to Brandon for help. Jeffries she had known much longer; Jeffries was handsome and attractive and reckless, and perhaps there was a sensual bond between them, but the quality he had noticed lacking about Jeffries had let her down. She put her faith in him, a new man to the hills.

He leaned his Sharps' against the door casing feeling the evil mounting outside in the darkening shadows. It was like a hand that drew his glance toward the one narrow window. He recalled the things Lana had told him in sketching the violence of this land. These women knew how unbending it could be.

Anne's voice struck him now. "You've killed men, haven't you?"

He felt her gaze against his back, knew that the position of his Navy beneath his broadcloth coat had given her the thought. He pulled his concentration back to the cabin's interior. "Once, Anne," he said gently. "I believe he needed killing."

"What can a woman do with a fighter?" She said it almost passionately, her voice low and taut and Brandon turned and caught the frown that drew her face. She murmured, "Dad was like that, whipping men and driving his will against them. My mother never knew a moment free from fear."

"You make it hard on us, Anne."

She shook her head. "No, that's not so. There was a time he fell asleep in a barber chair and the barber trimmed hair from inside his ears. When he awoke he nearly killed that barber. The sheriff had two deputies help him lock Dad up. It cost mother a hundred dollars before we got him out. All because he allowed God caused hair to grow in his ear and he couldn't see any reason for trimming it. Jeffries will be like that, too. He'll kill men because he can't settle things any other way." She studied his unyielding expression, her eyes sliding finally to his string tie. This was a moment in which she hoped to find something soft about him. There was nothing.

"Anne, a man's got to fight for what he wants. Another would take it away from him if he failed to stand up to it. His money, his cows, his woman."

"Oh no, a man can keep those things in other ways."

"Then they wouldn't be worth it," he said sharply and turned toward the door.

He went outside feeling the menace of the shadows. Still there was nothing real, nothing tangible to focus his fears. The danger was gathering beneath the black rim, beneath the opaque clouds. It would strike soon and rip the night's quiet apart.

He walked on toward the spring, his mind partly occupied by Anne and by the unrest that laced her. That part, her uneasiness, was mostly due to Jeffries. So far there was noth-

ing between them except in a physical sense, there was none of that spiritual and mental understanding that drew men and women together.

Jeffries knew nothing of her inner longings, the things that set her apart from the purely physical being, and not knowing, he cared nothing. Appreciating the tragedy of Anne's life would make a different man of Jeffries. Failing in that, Jeffries would never be good enough for Anne.

Brandon tossed his cigarette, wondering what this had to do with himself. Why should it matter what happened to Anne? He wouldn't care if Jeffries rode after Madrid and got himself killed. He wouldn't care except that he lost one more hand. And yet he knew as Anne's look came back that he would care. These people had become a part of him and he would like to see them together completely. The fundamental reason for this thought channel, he understood, was Lana. She brought him this interest in Anne's affairs; she brought him face to face with the emptiness of his own stark years. It brought him a sense of shock to admit that he loved her.

A rock turned somewhere on the valley slope bringing him to a dead stand. Sharp wind fanned his brow and instantly he caught the banging report of a rifle. His hand leaped after his Navy bringing it level for aim. The shot had come from a long distance and he saw nothing but a wall of blackness. The corner of his glance took in the brassy glow streaming from the cabin. He ran toward it in long strides calling to Anne. As he raced near Anne extinguished the lamp in the window. . . .

CHAPTER 11

They stood together in the dark yard piercing the slope for raiders. Anne had come out of the cabin and stood close beside him and Brandon was unable to make her return.

Twice Slim cut loose with shots winging into the valley, long shots across the draws in quest of vagrant sounds. From

his position on the rimwall behind them Jeffries withheld his fire waiting until the horsemen broke clear of the protecting gullies. In this he was wise, Brandon decided. If they succeeded in luring Madrid into the yard they would have him within a box. If Jeffries could only be depended upon! It was a long bet, but Brandon placed it, staking his all on the chance.

Now the definite sound of iron shoe striking shale came to him, the bell-clear tinkle of a bit chain clinging long to the still air. Slim followed with a searching flurry of shots. They were all wild in the blackness because the oncoming riders were still working within the shelter of the gully. Brandon called softly to Slim telling him to come up. And then fresh sound reached them from the cabin doorway. Brandon turned finding Dupere standing with the needle gun which had hung above the mantelpiece. Dupere had slipped hastily into boots and wore his nightshirt tucked into his pants.

"Thought you were sick of fighting," Brandon said dryly. His mouth broke into a slim smile.

Dupere cursed and stared into the darkness, his bristly beard thrusting itself dead forward. "Madrid!" he shouted thickly. "Where're they at? Damn them, let them show themselves and we'll give it to them!"

Now from the concealment of the nearest draw Lake's voice called to them. "Rusty John, that you?"

"It's me," Dupere growled. "Show your face and I'll blow it off your shoulders!"

"We don't want to fight you Roman Two hands," Lake returned. "We only want the gambler. Send MacRae down and the rest can make a break across country."

Again Dupere swore, memory of the galling punishment he had taken at Lake's hands still grinding through him. The fight in Lavinsky had been savage and Dupere was bitter. "We ain't going anywhere on the run," he shouted. "You dirty killer, you burned my place. We ain't running further than Roman Two. Come ridin' with your ringy hands or we'll hunt you down!"

"Hold it!" Brandon called. This bickering was getting them nowhere. "Lake, keep on shooting and some pretty fine horses

are likely to be killed. If you want me, come in and we'll talk it over."

"No talking about it," Lake answered.

"All right," Brandon said. "Start your shooting!"

There was a moment's pause during which Lake whispered with his Bell-M riders and then he spoke, louder again, "Hold your fire. We'll ride up there."

"No shooting this time unless you start it," Brandon promised. He was conscious of Anne's fingers tightening over his arm.

Lake called a warning before showing himself. "There's someone on your left will open up if you try to doublecross us." And Brandon knew Van Caslin was yonder by the spring, had sent the first shot that had almost caught him. He watched Chris Lake's solid outline take form, behind him a half dozen others loosely strung out. They were riding irregular, long guns in their hands, pistols showing in their belts. Bell-M's warriors were ready for battle.

"Keep thinking of Lana Harrel," Anne Dupere whispered, and there was a trace of resentment to her tones. "If she does mean anything, you must not open this fight!"

Brandon was thinking along the same channels. Suppose he whipped Chris Lake, but in the final showdown brought Harrel into this on Madrid's side. If he lost Lana, would anything in life have significance, anything be worth winning? And then he thought: let Jeffries cut loose with his Spencer and empty a few Bell-M saddles, they would lie on Roman Two land, a definite proof of Madrid's invasion, and even Madrid's glib talk could hardly gloss over that. Let the fight start!

Slim came up following the corral fence, and now Lake motioned with a hand and pulled his men to a halt. His eyes ranged over the four figures standing beside the cabin, for the first time positively identifying Anne Dupere. "One missing," he said flatly. "Where's Jeffries?"

"For you to find out," Dupere laughed roughly, his fingers fondling the oily stock of his rifle. "Come a little closer and have your look. Nearer you get the better clean-up we can do."

Chris Lake had faith in Van Caslin stationed there at the spring. He jabbed his sorrel with pointed rowels and led his men out from the gully under the threat of Roman Two's guns. When he was thirty feet from Brandon he drew in the sorrel, sitting gravely in the saddle, his fingers cupped over the gun holstered at his belt. His eyes held the stabbing power of sharp metal, and inside he was smarting under the castigation Madrid had given him earlier. Madrid had not liked allowing Brandon to reach the Jasmynes. He said flatly, "Well, talk! What's the deal?"

Brandon sensed a freer lift to his breathing. Lake's talk proved certain concessions had been expected by Madrid. This hadn't been meant as a final, all-out raid, or Lake would have held them back until later when Roman Two turned into their bunks. Perhaps they still thought they could frighten him into selling by another threat against his life. That first shot at him, from Van Caslin, had been something else again. Something personal, something deadly from Van Caslin.

"See if you can get this, Lake," Brandon said slowly. "I'm willing to meet Madrid if this is what he wants. I'll ride to Bell-M with your men. You stay here with Dupere until I get back."

"I don't understand," Lake said, puzzled.

"Just that. You'll be safe until I come back. Rusty John and Slim and Jeffries have too much interest in this to let anything happen until they're sure I'm all right."

Chris Lake's face turned purple in the night, his fingers folding the butt of his Colt. It was thrusting around in him what they'd done to Dupere, to Francher before he took the river packet, to other men here in the valley. His voice cracked. "You don't expect I'll take that deal?"

"Jeffries!" Brandon lifted his voice. "You can see all of Bell-M. Chris Lake is the one closest the fence."

"Got him under my Spencer!" Jeffries yelled from atop the rimwall.

Lake let his eyes drift upward a brief moment until a great force dragged them back to Brandon. Brandon said, "That's the deal. Take it for what it's worth. Or you can start fighting!"

Van Caslin was behind the spring ready for action. But what good would he do Bell-M if Lake went out of saddle with the first shot? Jeffries, on the rimwall, was beyond vision, and the raiders were swiftly weighing their chances. There was no fear in Chris Lake. Anger brought a bitter bile to his mouth, but he was a man Madrid had selected for additional reasons above and beyond his recklessness. Blazing anger lay openly in his face as he wheeled the sorrel partway around. He sat solidly in saddle, a rough arrogance through him, deeply humiliated before his men, but far from defeated. With a waving motion he sent them back to the gully.

"No deal," he announced sourly. "But don't think Sam Madrid is finished. He'll hound every last one of you out of the hills."

He rein-yanked his sorrel savagely riding after his men and Dupere's needle gun came up across the corral rail. "You ain't letting them ride off?" he asked incredulously.

"They left Van Caslin beside the spring. One of us is sure to die if you shoot, Dupere. There'll be another time."

"It ain't the way I like it," Dupere said angrily. "But you're boss."

Slim let a snicker escape. "It was some smooth!" he said wisely.

Brandon felt a keen elation over Jeffries. He had taken his long chance and Jeffries had come through in fine form playing his role better than Brandon had dared hope. He had held Lake under the sights of his rifle, could have drawn the trigger any moment under the utter hatred that festered in him. Yet he had performed like a thoroughbred, reading Brandon's plan and granting him leadership. Had he gone off on his own tangent and killed Lake hell would have let loose in this yard and then Roman Two would have been finished.

The last faint echoes of Bell-M working over their backtracks drifted from down slope. Anne Dupere came away from the corral fence drawing a long intake of breath. She had stood frozen to the spot while disaster hung in the balance and now her cheeks were drained bloodless. Brandon moved beside

her. He noticed her breasts rising and lowering beneath her sustained agitation.

"You've done it, you've whipped Bell-M without gunsmoke," she murmured.

"Luck," he told her, "is a fickle woman. The next time we woo her she'll be taking us a merry chase."

"No," she said, "this wasn't luck." She put her back to the door casing letting him see her full face drained white and tense against the rough cabin logs. She thought here was a man who had lived too long with his faith in luck, placing too much stress on chance while his own ability deserved the emphasis. The cut of his clothes and his string tie lent him the flare of a gambler, and already he had outgrown them in great measure in the Jasmines. He said very quietly, "Jeffries came through. Anne, he'll make you a man you can be proud of."

She let her eyes lift to the rimwall then dropped them to the ground. The stony, fertile soil of the valley that nurtured knee-deep grasses with its thousand years' fallowing, its bone and fiber of long forgotten death. She stood very still, her fingers laced in front against her rough wool skirt. Tiny lines spread from the corners of her mouth. She was dead-serious.

"She's not good enough for you, Brandon. She's only what you made her in your mind. She'll disappoint you, the way she disappointed me."

"You don't like Lana. Why?"

"How can I like her? Don't you understand, she's part of them—of Madrid and Harrel and the Jasmines. They killed my mother."

"You make this harder than you should."

"No," she said. "I don't think so."

He looked at her soberly, wondering at the resentment in her, not quite knowing how to grade it. It came to him presently she liked him in a large measure. There was some jealousy in Anne Dupere. He said swiftly, "You've got it all wrong. There can't be anything between us. Nothing except friendship."

"I understand," she said looking up. "There'll never be love

between us. I shouldn't give you up—no woman can ever be as good as you've made her in your mind."

They watched Jeffries striding toward them from the black slant of the talus. His poise gave Brandon his first inkling that Jeffries was dissatisfied at the way the affair with Lake had ended. He strode too rapidly, gun swinging vigorously at his side. When he got near enough he choked out an order to Slim.

"Catch up and saddle! You and me are going to do a little riding." Then, because Slim failed to respond, his tone stiffened. "Damn you! We're going out after Lake!"

It was an incredible moment to Brandon; a vivid and stark scene out of a half-real world into which he was fitting himself. He saw the loosely-hung, untrammelled characters fall into a semicircle around him, a blanket of carbon-blackness beyond them. The talus in its irregular shape slanted upward toward an opaque ceiling, the corral fence led off in its own tangent toward an unknown infinity. Scarcely six hours had passed since he had entered into this sphere, and now he had become the focal point directing their actions. Sensing the utter strangeness of his position, Brandon spoke:

"Jeffries, let it go!"

Jeffries turned, marched a few yards toward the cabin until he stood almost within arm's reach. "I could have shot him! I could have made the range a decent place. You understand that? I didn't kill him when I had the chance!"

"You played a wise hand, Jeff."

The face before him never lost its harshness. "You've had your way. Now I'm my own man. I'm going out and do what you don't have guts to do. I'm going to ride him down! You understand? I'm through with you!"

Jeffries was making it personal. From the very first there had been this disharmony between them, two minds keyed and geared at different tempos. It would have to be broken down before it grew into an intolerable condition between them. Brandon hated to do what must be done during the next few moments. Jeffries understood brute action, it was the only thing that made its impression.

No sound came from Anne Dupere. Her father and Slim stood rigidly positioned inside the perimeter of vision, waiting. The move was up to him.

Brandon stepped quickly against Jeffries slugging his fist hard along the long slant of his jaw. He expected to put Jeffries quickly out of the fight without giving too much punishment. But the square face only bent backward, the hand holding the Spencer let it drop to the ground.

He struck harder. The other man winced in pain and came back slugging full strength. This was the boy who had fought against Rosecrans somewhere in the high pine plateaus of Tennessee, who had looked on flaming muzzles of Yankee guns with disdain. There was no defeat in Jeffries, no backing down. He came forward with his knotty fists swinging and Brandon understood he must put him out of the fight at once or present Anne Dupere with a revolting picture. Jeffries needed to be hurt, needed to know pain and humiliation before the good in him came to the fore.

He put every ounce of his power behind his next blows aimed for Jeffries' chin. The man came at him with his face in the clear, guard down, and Brandon's blow struck solidly, jarring Jeffries across the yard. He fell, striking with his head, and lay on his back with his boots pointing outward. A trickle of blood began creeping through his lips.

Now Brandon felt Anne brush past him as she ran toward Jeffries. She knelt on the ground, placing her hands against the prone man's chest. Neither sob nor protest escaped her. Brandon walked slowly nearer until he could see both of them clearly. She lifted her glance when he stood near. A mysterious smile that had nothing to do with humor touched her mouth.

"A good man," he offered quietly. "I'm sorry I had to do it."

Her face remained unreadable. She stared. Slowly her nod came, a painful acknowledgment, and then her upper body lowered and she dropped her lips against Jeffries'. Brandon turned his gaze.

"Slim, help me carry Jeff to the bunkhouse."

John Dupere stepped forward putting his big arms around his daughter, drawing her off the ground. Slim then helped

him lift Jeffries. Together they carried him along the corral path and into the bunkhouse. Slim motioned with his head to let Brandon know which bunk and they laid Jeffries on his blankets. Brandon loosened his neckerchief, the upper fastenings of his shirt, while Slim trimmed the lantern. He said presently,

"Bring some water and a little whiskey. Then you better get on the rim."

"I have the water," Anne spoke from the door. "Rusty's bringing the whiskey."

She moved toward the bunks standing above Jeffries. Presently she began brushing his hair, sponging his face from her pail. The little good that was in man, Brandon thought, was no match for a woman. She could be practical, and at the same time sweet and generous, giving more of herself than the best of men deserved.

Slim turned to the door with his rifle, then held back. From outside came Dupere's thick-voiced question: "Who's there? Speak out or I'll shoot!"

They caught a faint stirring of sound and knew a rider had worked down from the mouth of the canyon. Now the man's words fell out of the night's stillness. "Rusty, it's me. Harrel. Put up the rifle—I've come friendly."

"Your kind don't come friendly!" Dupere growled.

Harrel ignored the unfriendliness, putting his horse in closer to the lighted bunkhouse. His shaggy eyes were leaping over the yard, the open door of the bunkhouse, and the people inside. His tone stayed on an even keel. "What's going on?"

"Harrel, we ain't wanting you here," Dupere said again, insistently.

Harrel let his eyes drift to Dupere. His mouth curled as though there was an answer he meant to spit out. "John, maybe we been damn fools! I came to find out," he said flinging his leg over the saddle and stepping down.

There was doubt in Brandon, a dread of what Dupere might try during the next few moments. His thoughts leaped back to Lana's words warning him they could never be friends when they reached the Jasmines. Bleak chill passed over him; she

was in him too deeply to forget her. He called swiftly to Dupere standing with his needle gun still covering Harrel.

"Let him come in, Dupere."

The door casing filled edge-to-edge with the width of Harrel's stocky shoulders, a man who walked with a choppy, rocking gait when out of saddle, his wide-lipped mouth sober as his eyes ranged through the bunkhouse. Brandon watched him draw a pipe from his pocket, blow into the mouth-piece until his cheeks reddened. There was no passageway through the bit and Harrel lowered it, running his heavy forefinger into the bowl.

His gaze found Brandon, picking out things he had been expecting. The stamp of a gambler was obvious, the inflexible planes of his face and the cool, detached eyes. Yet he was forced to admit purpose behind Brandon's eyes. He recalled Lana had told him Brandon would not sell. Well then, there would be war with Madrid. For Madrid wanted Francher's place—Harrel admitted that much. The weeks in a lonely house without Lana had had their effect on him. He rated himself a good judge of character and now he measured the depth of Brandon's will against what Lana had told him. It brought him new respect for her discernment.

"Have a fight?" he asked softly, the edge of his eye on Jeffries.

"I had to knock Jeff out," Brandon said. "Sometimes a man is better off that way."

Harrel's unruly features lingered on Brandon. He nodded. "Ring-tailed bobcats don't generally make house pets. I know—Long 7 has got one on its payroll. I hear you tangled with that one." It was obvious he was talking about Malpais.

"Malpais got pushed around a little," Brandon said dryly. "It was in the warehouse at Lavinsky, where he tried to convince me Bell-M and Long 7 wanted all the valley for themselves. He wasn't good enough to make his point stick."

Harrel was still slapping the pipe against his palm. He had a questing look to his eyes that reminded Brandon of Lana. It was a look that was always searching an answer. "Funny about that kid," he murmured slowly. "He came to Long 7 out of

the desert. Tried to be a real tough. One day I found a letter that must have fallen out of his sack. It was from his mother. His name is Reginald. Reggie—*him!* Makes you speculate what hopes a woman's got for her baby when she lies on her bed of birth and gives him to the world."

"Jeff was going to kill Chris Lake," Anne said softly from the wall bunk. "That's the reason they fought."

Harrel's eyes drifted around to Anne. He held her gaze squarely and nodded. "Haven't seen you out to the house for quite a spell."

"No," she said. "I haven't been over."

"Too bad. Young women like you two ought to spend more time together. Helps you whip the loneliness."

Her hands were trembling slightly and as she became aware of this she placed them behind her back. Brandon read interest, a definite friendliness in Harrel; he was comparing Anne Dupere with her ashen gray cheeks against his daughter, weighing their good points and bad. Harrel sensed the antagonism in Anne. It made him look back over his mistakes, and he was stung by shame. Women could bring a sense of respect and of fear alive in Harrel. He asked doggedly, "Would it do any good to ask why Jeffries was gunning for Chris?"

"It was a raid," Dupere growled from the doorway. "Lake rode in with his tough bunch asking for a fight."

"You shot it out?"

Dupere nodded. "We shot some. Lake turned back."

"News," Harrel stated. "It don't look much like a fight around your place. The way I got Chris figured he wouldn't let it go that easy."

Dupere told what happened without mincing or drawing his story out. When he was finished Harrel stood thoughtful. Presently, "What I want to know, did Lake ride in here on his own and start shooting?"

"They shot first," Brandon said. "Van Caslin, who rides for Madrid, was out by the spring."

"A damned killer!" Dupere put in harshly.

"Don't know him yet," Harrel said flatly. "I'll see Madrid.

Making you move out is one thing. Killing a man in the night is another."

"Just one minute!" Brandon said. "Stay out of it if you can. Roman Two is not going to take this lying down."

Harrel had his pipe going freely and was filling the bowl with long leaf tobacco. Abruptly he turned for the door and went outside and climbed into his saddle. He held the horse a short moment, looking back into the bunkhouse. His gaze picked Brandon above the others.

"I'll have my talk with Madrid. If I don't get back in the morning I'd take it a favor if you told my daughter."

He put rowel points to the animal, heading him over the downslant, his craggy face thoughtful and pointed straight before him.

Madrid's raiders ran their horses as far as McPhee fork where they drew in letting the animals blow. McPhee wash came in from the north, here joining the stream that began in Whiskey Pass, behind the Francher layout. Chris Lake sat his horse slackly, his gaze running along the draw. Beside him Van Caslin held his sweat-caked mount, his face washed of all expression.

"It'll work out just as well this way," Van Caslin said. "Maybe better."

Lake's gaze struck him hard and he went on, defensively, "Madrid didn't want to shoot up the place."

"It'd be all finished if you'd made that first shot count," Lake threw back at him. "We could have ridden off and they'd thought the Apaches done it. Now this time you better do a finished job."

He continued to look at Van Caslin from the edge of his eyes and the man murmured, "I will."

"All right. Sid, come up here and show Van Caslin where those two are camped on the old McPhee workings. Come in slow so they don't have any warning, and make sure they're both dead before you leave. The rest of us will drive up a couple Roman Two steers to make it look right."

Van Caslin grinned. The type of job he had now was the

kind of thing he was most proficient doing. It was like shooting clay pigeons, and for a man who had taken so many Apache scalps, there was no feeling of conscience afterward. He went over the plan zestfully.

"When it's done Sid circles the hills and comes down to Bell-M in the morning. I'll ride to Jasmine without returning to the ranch and start a story that MacRae is going to shoot the first man who butchers Roman Two beef. There won't be any doubt about MacRae by the time I'm finished in camp."

"It better be convincing," Lake warned. He let his hard gaze lay on Van Caslin another moment and then struck spurs to his horse and moved on with the Bell-M riders close in his tracks.

Van Caslin waited a few moments beside Sid until the hoof beats of Lake's animals blurred in the night. The mission he was about to ride on held a powerful appeal; it was a masterful stroke that would have far reaching effect. A year ago the gold in the McPhee mine had played out but recently two men had commenced the helpless task of relocating the vein. They lived here alone with no neighbors for a mile in either direction among the hills. For a good many days Madrid suspected them of living off Bell-M beef, without ever finding a single hide as proof. It would be easy to dispose of a carcass somewhere underneath the old tailings dump, he reasoned. Now they were to be punished, and at the same time Brandon MacRae would take the blame for their deaths.

They put their horses slowly up the draw, Van Caslin still musing on these thoughts. Madrid was a rough man, saddle galled and soaked in alkali, and his men were a scummy lot, but Van Caslin liked it that way. He was in his element in this place, and any other life he had ever known had long ago been forgotten.

The trail became suddenly stony, at the same time lifting more sharply with the grade. Presently they came to cedar and stunted oak. Sid called a halt and here they quit their saddles, looping their reins to the brush. From this point Van Caslin led on foot.

They reached a steep wall fully thirty feet above their heads,

tailings making a gradual slope toward the ledge. Van Caslin peered above and found a dim trail that wound almost vertically across the solid rock. The tailings bore signs of a well-marked trail, but here a rock might slide, while the older trail would offer them safer approach. Van Caslin walked to the foot of the ledge, removing his spur rowels and drawing his pistol. He waited for Sid to do the same, his eyes drilling the man.

"When you fire, aim for the middle. Don't punch empties around this place," he murmured.

They went up the trail and found an army tent stamped with the faded letters U. S. on its canvas, occupying a narrow flat. After they moved around to its open flap they heard the heavy breathing of two men coming from within. Van Caslin drew closer until he could distinguish the reclining outlines of the men.

He lifted his Colt and then paused until Sid stepped beside him, motioning Sid the left-side sleeper. He waited until Sid's gun was steady, then pulled trigger trice. Afterward, when the banging reverberations of their shots faded from the hills, Van Caslin stepped into the tent. . . .

CHAPTER 12

Before break of day Brandon ate breakfast in the main cabin. They were all here including Jeffries who stayed silent during the meal. Anne was the only one to express herself. She was a changed person now that Roman Two had made its stand. The unrest was gone from her and a form of happiness flushed her face. Part of this, Brandon realized, was because Jeffries sat beside her. For her the desert wilderness had receded into the hills, the haunting emptiness and the fear of being alone were gone.

She said once, as though pronouncing a verdict, "So we're staying on in the Jasmynes?"

"You're blamed right!" Dupere had answered.

Now when Slim finished eating he eased his back against the wall waiting for orders. His eyes were pouchy-lidded, expecting some talk from Brandon. Brandon nodded. "All right, Slim. Saddle Jeff's horse, too. But you'll have to stay behind."

"You don't have to leave anyone here with me," Anne said. "Slim stays here."

Slim left at once letting Dupere seated on his side of the table alone. There was none of the weakness in Dupere that had been there yesterday. He had moved his belongings into the bunkhouse turning the cabin over entirely to Anne. Last night's battle had brought life back to him and he sat quiet now expecting Brandon to outline his plans.

"We're scouting Madrid's place," Brandon announced when he was ready. "Assuming Harrel stays out of this, at least for the moment, we will concentrate on Bell-M. Today we use to figure out what they're doing."

"That's the way I got it lined out," Dupere said and let go a long-held breath. "Only way you can fight blackguards is know what they're up to."

"If we find any Dupere or Roman Two cattle they'll be turned back where they belong."

"Then you'll spend the day cutting his cattle. But it suits me. I'll help Slim snake out the horses."

After he was gone Anne told them happily, "He'll be all right, now. Last night after the fight he told me to hide his whiskey. I put it where he won't get the scent for a while." She gave them a swift smile then left the room allowing Brandon his moment with Jeffries. For the first time the man gave him his head-on look.

There was no malice left, the tempo of Jeffries' thinking had come into tune with his. He said: "Last night you put it pretty strong. I don't hold that against you. I was asking for what I got."

It took a big man to say that, but Brandon had known from the first Jeffries wasn't small. He said, "I'm sorry we had to scrap. It was the only way to keep Harrel out of it."

"It mightn't work. He'll come into it anyhow."

"I don't believe it," Brandon said. "This is all between Bell-M and us."

Jeffries kept his glance on the far wall, unsmiling. "There's not many who think about it the way I do," he said slowly. "I believe that bunch in Jasmine needs watching. Madrid has stirred the gold hunters up against cowmen, and yet in each case I notice he never went too far. He never did anything bad enough to make them really rise against him. He's smart, and I wonder if he's not cooking up trouble for a reason. They bear watching."

"Perhaps there you have a point," Brandon admitted and let his thoughts absorb him. There was sense in what Jeffries had tried to tell him; a thoughtfully planted hatred in the miners might be turned to good use by a man as cagey as Madrid. But how? Where would a man turn his attention to checkmate Madrid until his scheme came into the open?

Anne returned to the room bringing Brandon his belt from beneath the mattress. "You'll want it now," she said. "The cabin won't be the safest place while you're gone. But I do appreciate you're leaving Slim here." Her lips broke into a warm smile. For Jeffries' benefit she spoke of the belt, of Brandon's desire to restock Roman Two. "He'll make something of the valley, Jeff, if the others give him a chance. Now your horses are saddled and ready. Brandon, that stallion you're riding was Mark Dresher's animal. He was run out of the hills a few weeks ago and now you've brought his bay back. That animal knows the Jasmynes!"

"Then I'll hardly get myself lost," Brandon smiled wryly. He left the table and moved into the yard which dawn was beginning to lighten. He saw now why others turned to look at the big stallion, giving him a questing study. It was strange that he should return with Dresher's horse—it seemed uncanny, but he would conquer Madrid riding an animal that had belonged to one of the cattlemen Bell-M had whipped.

The peaks to the east were alive with silver, dust of carmine sweeping violently across the sky. The two men had brought the horses around, John Dupere was already in his saddle, a burly man with his legs hanging almost straight in

stirrup leathers, and Slim was holding the other saddled horses. Brandon went up into saddle and then turned and sent his glance back to the girl. She was in the doorway with her back to the logs.

She still wore her smile. "Dresher would be happy if he knew," she said. "He wanted to fight but lacked the courage. They tore his cabin to the ground."

Dupere frowned. "Some hard riding to do. And time's running," he said, thrusting bootheels against his gray. Brandon and Jeffries followed him out of the yard. Their thoughts were alive with what lay in store.

An hour later the sun burst fully upon them bringing its swift warmth, its promise of white heat later in the day. They had crossed the valley's waist following the cut-bank of Whiskey Creek in the vagrant dawn and were hard against the northern slopes. Far away Bell-M headquarters lay in morning shadows, the full sun not yet rounding the peaks. Dupere drew in, his narrowed gaze on the distant buildings. His brown face was heavily furrowed. He spoke thickly,

"Wonder if Harrel's still yonder?" There was still resentment in Dupere; these two men had once been friends but now the bitterness in Dupere had ground too deep. He added soberly, "Them two were always schemin'."

Brandon said, "Spread out. We'll each work up in our own way and see what we can learn."

"Cover more country that way," Dupere agreed.

"You notice that hill to the right of Madrid's house? We can meet there early this afternoon—say two o'clock. No shooting before that unless it's necessary. We can make our plans there after we talk it over. If one of us fails to show up think nothing of it. But we'll all be at Roman Two for supper. Anyone missing then will be a sign he's in trouble."

"Good enough," Dupere nodded. "We will sink our spurs in them in due time," and immediately put his horse toward a barren draw angling across the valley floor. Jeffries held his silence until Dupere had disappeared. Then:

"You saw that bunch a ways back with vented brands? A sign one outfit sold its cows to another—way we keep track

of our bought stuff. Only Dupere never sold anything to Madrid. Rusty didn't miss seein' 'em, either."

"There'll be a good many cattle in this valley wearing the wrong brands when judgment is made," Brandon said and Jeffries agreed brusquely, his mouth tight and straight.

He said only one thing more; news Brandon was happy to hear. "We got a few hundred head of Roman Twos shoved back in the hills near Rusty's old place. Not likely they'll pay 'em much attention. But you never can tell." He put his roan gelding forward skirting the hills' rises, heading directly for Bell-M.

Afterward, Brandon turned his bay into the hills finding the earth hard and dry, with footings solid. The slopes were all marked by steel-gray boulders blending readily against the dusty bushes. Before he had advanced fifty yards he had the brass bound Sharp's from his saddle boot and rode with it openly across his saddle searching each rise carefully before crossing it.

Reaching one such crest he turned behind him. A pair of buzzards circled the blue sky above the hills. Tiny black spots, ominous spots. While he watched they swooped suddenly down, disappearing behind the bear grass covered rim of the land. He sat still a brief time longer thinking perhaps a cow had died behind one of the many ribs of land that intervened. Still the impression of them diving earthward dogged him.

Again he faced about, heading into the country above Madrid's headquarters.

A half hour later he caught his first clear view of the Bell-M layout. The main house was a log affair with narrow windows, standing within the jaws of a draw coming down from the hills. It appeared solidly built of heavy timbers, a regular fortress. To one side stood gray mounds where Madrid put aside wild hay against winter's blizzards; on the opposite side were other structures, a bunkhouse longer and wider than Roman Two's, a cookshack with wood smoke drifting from its tin stack. Sheds and half-open barns dotted the valley's severe slant. Behind, in variegated hues of color, rose the rock and brush marked lift of the tawny hills.

A half dozen horses drowsed against the corral fence, saddled and ready to ride. Madrid's warriors, he thought passingly, were constantly ready for the trail. But one of the horses was the animal Harrel had ridden last night.

As he watched men were coming from the bunkhouse. Madrid appeared at the main house, stretched himself lazily and searched the hills. He looked directly toward Brandon but failed to notice him. Now he moved toward the cookhouse. In spite of his orders to the others temptation mounted steadily in Brandon until he lifted his rifle and brought the cookhouse chimney into line with his sights. Now he made out Harrel coming from the main house; marching rapidly up beside Madrid. Gradually Brandon lowered the Sharp's. What good would it do if he sent a shot winging a few hundred yards into Madrid's kitchen? He had disciplined Jeffries last night on a like weakness, and he knew now impatience was a flaw in both their makeups.

Last night's raid still bothered him. Why should Lake give up so easily? Eight riders might have shot his outfit to pieces before they knew what was happening. Actually, Van Caslin had been the only Madrid man to fire. And where, Brandon thought, was the scalp hunter now? He had seen Lake entering the cookshack, below, but he failed to find Van Caslin.

Brooding on these thoughts he turned his horse back into the hills. He meant to work deeper and higher in their folds where he might watch Bell-M without danger of his horse giving alarm. Thus he thought as he glanced at the stallion's ears and found them laid flat back.

There was another horseman somewhere on the rise. His thoughts turned at once to a guard, and he decided Van Caslin was out riding these hills.

From dead ahead he caught the faint flurry of hoofs on bedrock. Instantly he reined the stallion toward a rock that stood tall as a bunkhouse on the slant of the hill. He rode fifty feet and came face-on with the approaching rider. The other man spied him and, oddly, his first impulse was to throw spurs to his mount, leaping him off-trail in the opposite direction from Brandon. This rider was not Van Caslin.

Neither was he here for the purpose of serving lookout, or obviously he would have been ready. Though Brandon did not know it, this was Sid circling home from the mission at the McPhee mine.

The last Brandon saw of the man was his hand reaching after his pistol. This was the second time he had been caught in gullies, the last time Lake and himself maneuvering themselves into a stalemate. He thought this time it would be different.

He lifted the bay quickly back into the trail, the big stallion boiling with energy and eager to run. There was no worry in him over the warning Madrid would get if they should fight. His mind was still occupied with the belief this other man meant to waylay him.

Close on his left ran a deeper draw that cut its scar upward through the hills. From this second draw Brandon caught the sounds of the running horse and knew for a certainty he was still between Bell-M and his man. In the same instant he heard Sid fire. The crack of his shot rolled back and forth across the morning air. Instinctively Brandon hugged closer to the stallion. But Sid was not firing at him; he had shot his Colt by way of warning Madrid.

Brandon went over and down into the draw, now pivoting uphill toward the other rider. A bend in the gully lay immediately before him. From beyond these jutting shoulders came the sounds of the running horse. Brandon drew in behind the rock knowing he had his rider. An instant later Sid burst upon him riding a weary horse, and Brandon drove the bay into the bend.

Sid's horse saw his stallion and tried to swerve without hitting. In so doing his hoofs slipped in the loose shale of the gully's bank; he was tired and he floundered, screaming shrilly. Brandon glimpsed vicious fear on the other's face, the piercing eyes staring straight forward, the pistol barrel thrust half into his face. He brought the Sharp's barrel up and swung it as Sid's animal struck his bay heavily. It was a shattering blow on the chest that nearly unfooted the bay. But he went on around the bend and as Brandon glanced back he saw Sid

had been torn clear from his saddle and lay on the gully floor. The other horse, too, had gone down under the crash and was now fighting its way back to its feet.

He went on not having time to stop longer. Below in the valley Madrid's men would be warned by the shot. They would be cautious in their first advance into the hills, and yet even this delay would give Brandon very little time in which to make his getaway. Even as he ran the big stallion full speed through the gully he realized he must lead them away from those sectors Jeffries and Dupere had chosen to patrol.

As they worked higher along the slope he was certain this man he had just surprised had ridden in last night's raid; he had been vaguely familiar with the man's face. Why, then, was he just now returning? The sweat on his animal, his bone-weariness, told Brandon he had been long ridden.

Brandon's thoughts returned to the buzzards he had seen against the lower hills; they had never completely left him. If he eluded the dragnet of Madrid's oncoming riders he meant to circle gradually back and see what they had been after. But already he could hear the Bell-M men firing their pistols! Madrid was calling his men in from every corner of the ranch. . . .

Jeffries had worked in close enough to make out the Bell-M men's coarse morning banter, to read their expressions. He lay with his Spencer outthrust before him, his lean belly flat to the bedrock. He had brought the rifle simply as a precaution, under no circumstances would he be able to use it with the ranch yard so filled with riders. The last man out of the main house was Harrel, and Jeffries meant to miss nothing of what was coming.

Madrid was peering off into the hills. The shot came unexpectedly and his arms jerked against his sides and surprise washed swiftly across his face. His head turned slightly to meet Lake bouncing out of the cookshack.

"Hell! Something wrong!" Lake said.

"Get the boys into the draws! Hurry, and don't let him get away."

Lake repeated the order over his shoulder; already a half

dozen riders were running toward the horses. Lake's eyes pulled to the hills as though from invisible strings. "It's Sid," he said slowly. "They been watching him."

"No, they haven't had time to get on his trail. But he must have run into something."

Harrel thrust himself in front of Lake, his eyes drilling the blocky foreman like tapered steel points. "I didn't see you last night. Maybe you can answer some questions Sam don't like to talk about."

"No time to talk now," and Lake spun on his heel and headed for the hitchrail. But Harrel was ready for his turn. He had seemed only partly aware of Lake's agitation, his left hand hammering his pipe bowl into the other palm. Now his right hand flashed outward and he grasped Lake's shoulder. He brought him around roughly. On the instant his craggy face darkened like thunder.

"Oh hell, Chris! when I talk civil to a man I want a civil answer. Good many things about the hills are getting a ringy look. The fellow who's doing the shooting can wait."

"Well I don't have time to talk!"

Madrid cut in, his voice holding a secret amusement. "That shot in the draws can't wait."

"It's going to wait sure enough!" Harrel shoved his glance over Madrid, let it range beyond him against the hills and then slowly drift back over the yard. Bell-M men were pulling down cinches on their horses, a few were swinging into saddle. He drew his look back to Chris Lake, his eyes tight and hard.

"Riding around I find a good many Bell-M critters, some of them sucking Rusty John's cows, others with vented brands. Sam won't talk about it. Goddamnit, Chris! What've you been doing?"

Chris Lake stood stock still, his thick legs planted widely against the coarse grass of Madrid's yard, his nostrils dilated. White heat passed before his chunky face.

"Are you trying to say Bell-M has stole cattle?"

"Cut it, Chris! You've stole so damn many cows there ain't any brands but Sam's and mine in the valley. What I'd really

like to know, what were you doing last night? And where's Van Caslin?"

Livid anger spilled from Lake's face. His eyeballs danced to Madrid, received the message they sought. Madrid had heard all of the questions he wanted—questions that couldn't be answered—he had come to the end of his alliance with Henry Harrel. As far ahead as he could see there was no flaw to his scheming; Long 7 lay within his grasp. He nodded slowly, barely perceptibly, and Lake's hand swept down after his belt gun. He got it clear of its holster, long blue barrel glinting dully in the sunlight. It crashed twice, the heavy slugs smashing Harrel backward off his feet.

Harrel's gun had come almost clear of leather when the first lead struck him. Reflexes alone completed the draw and his fist still clutched the Navy as his spinal column took the shock of contact with the earth. He was torn badly apart inside, his chest and lungs smashed by the terrible impact of Lake's bullets. He knew he was finished, and yet somehow he knew, too, Lake was a dead man. It was his will that told him, his implacable, rock-hardened spirit that had never known defeat. Without further willing it, without aiming, he lifted the Navy. He felt the big gun buck against his arm driving his elbow into the earth. Three times he let the hammer drop. Each time he saw Lake jerk convulsively, saw him stagger beneath the pounding impact of his lead. The fourth time his thumb released the firing pin but the gun left his hand before the powder exploded. He was driven flat against the earth, aware that Madrid had fired at him and hit him. Yet the edge of his glance still clung to Lake; saw him go down bloody and broken. There had been no life behind Lake's glazed eyeballs and this told him Lake was dead.

Madrid stood above Harrel, smoking gun in his hand. *Damn you, Harrel, you shouldn't have made me do this!* he muttered silently through tightly set teeth. He threw his glance across to the hitchrack. The men had drawn guns and three of them were stepping down.

"Get up to the draws!" he ordered thickly. "Lafferty, take charge until I join you."

The horses leaped out toward the slope throwing gravel across the yard. The cook stood beside the cookshack doorway, a rifle in his arm; three others stood beside the hitchrail. They had not ridden with the men because their horses weren't saddled. Oddly, Harrel's animal still stood against the rack, none of these horseless Bell-M hands had mounted him.

Harrel was struggling laboriously to his feet. His fingers clutched the grassroots, his heels dug into the earth. Madrid raised his pistol and got Harrel's head within his sights. His thumb dogged back the hammer, then slowly let it fall without exploding the shell.

"Harrel," he said, "you can't make it. Lie where you are, you'll die easier."

The scorn in Harrel's eyes was a physical thing striking Madrid as solidly as a full-bodied blow, dragging through him with its acid poison. Somehow he got to his feet dripping blood from his mouth, from his chest. He marched with unbelievable stubbornness toward his horse, fumbling the reins loose from the tiebar. With one hand he jerked the cinch tight around the horse's belly. He had a boot in the stirrup but was unable to hoist himself into the saddle. One of the Bell-M hands gave him a boost from the rear.

He sat his animal vacantly searching for Madrid with his fast-glazing eyes. The blood was pumping from his chest, his wind was sawing in a noisy gurgling within his throat.

"Sam, where are you? Wherever you are—Damn you! I'm going back for my Long 7 hands. We'll drive you out of these hills!"

The cook raised his rifle but Madrid's signal held off his shot. Now the Long 7 horse was walking away from the hitchrail. Henry Harrel had fallen forward and was holding himself by the saddle horn.

It would be better if he fell from his horse somewhere in the valley. It would be safer and easier for Madrid if he died away from Bell-M. His horse would drift and someone would find him. But who could explain what had happened, who could prove he carried lead from Bell-M?

Madrid said slowly, "He'll never make it. He won't last until the edge of Long 7 grass!"

Lana Harrel rode her blaze-faced mare with the swing of one born to the saddle. It was early forenoon and already the heat had become scorching. She rounded a corner of the talus and came within sight of Roman Two quarters. A little quiver began dancing up and down her back. Knowledge that it was this closeness to Brandon that caused it sent blood coursing her cheeks.

It was only the second time she had been so near to headquarters, for Francher had been almost a recluse in the matter of welcoming visitors, particularly visitors from Long 7. But she was glad to see the line of trees casting their shade into the yard, the low buildings against the rim. Now her questing glance ran over the horses watching her from the horse pasture. They brought the sensation of shock as she recognized both animals—the black was Slim's and the other horse belonged to Anne Dupere. No one had told her Anne was living on Roman Two.

She drew in her mare, considering, and not finding much pleasure in the situation. A few months ago—actually it seemed another lifetime—she had been friendly with Anne. Before the poison of these black valleys had worked between them corroding their friendship. The trouble had come when Rusty John's wife died; a frail, overtaxed woman having a weak heart, who never should have entered these hills.

Somehow the blame for her death had resolved itself against Madrid, against her father. And the reflection in both cases had reached back to her. Heaven knew, there was some cause for the sentiment, for neither Sam Madrid's nor her father's actions could have been easy on Margaret Dupere's nervous system.

She remembered so starkly the morning she had ridden out to offer Anne her consolation. The dead woman still lay stiff and cold in her bed when she met John Dupere riding with an undertaker he had discovered in the gold camp. The terrible castigation in his eyes had made her flesh creep. Then his

brusque voice ordering her to return to Long 7. He was choked with anger, racked with whiskey. No Harrel was going to enter the Dupere cabin! . . . Oh my Lord! if it hadn't actually been her father, then it was the man she considered marrying whom he sincerely believed had killed Margaret Dupere! Lana had tried to persuade him but this only set loose a flow of profanity. Such miserable, heartbreaking, tragic profanity! She had returned to Long 7 with the iron of his curses heaving about her insides. The next day found her on her way out of the hills, taking her San Francisco vacation away from Jasmine's sorrowful troubles. . . .

Dropping so sharply from the rimwall Slim's voice startled her. "All right. You can ride in, Miss Harrel!" She felt a strange chill passing over her, knowing now Roman Two stood under sentry guard. It was as bad as this, and they were still distrustful of a Harrel! She let her glance lift along the rim, found Slim atop an outcrop and lifted her hand as a gesture.

Anne Dupere had come to the doorway. She recognized Anne against the red backdrop of the cabin, read the strain across Anne's young face and in the hollows of her cheeks. She brought the blaze in closer knowing definitely there was malice in Anne's manner.

"I rode over thinking I'd find Brandon," Lana explained. "Do you mind telling me when he's expected?"

"He may not ride in until tonight. Meantime—" and Lana strongly suspected there was hesitancy over offering the long-familiar politeness of the plains, "—meantime, light and rest in the shade."

Temptation came to Lana, to accept the invitation to sit and talk with this girl who had been her friend so short a time before. Anne looked rather ill because of her sallowness, but she was keeping herself up nicely with her navy skirt and white shirtwaist, her hair carefully braided. But Lana shook her head gravely. "Dad came over here last night to talk with Rusty John. He hasn't come home yet."

"Your father was here last night. He rode on to Bell-M." Anne Dupere slipped her hands behind her, placed her back

against the cabin's wall thinking: she has bought that new buckskin skirt in California; the blouse is cut too daring and reveals her breasts. I wonder if she wore it purposely for Brandon? She has breasts that have been fondled before—by men who are our enemies. She held these feelings from her face and added, "As far as Brandon's concerned, I wouldn't know where you'd find him."

Things of the past were sweeping back to each woman. Anne Dupere remembered nights she had spent in the Harrel living room, the way Lana coaxed soft music from the ebony piano they had shipped from a Southern plantation. She played with deep feeling; a woman very close to romance, passion, the things which concerned themselves with the emotions. . . . Half forgotten talks they had shared while the valley was younger, secret pledges coming back from the past. . . . Lana could taste the flavor of old confidences, turned stale now and rank from the poisons that had seeped through.

She felt an unexplainable apathy rising against the younger woman, a jealousy born from the knowledge Anne Dupere lived so closely with Brandon, cooked his meals, undoubtedly shared his thoughts. She hated herself for her smallness and bit her mouth.

"Anne," she said, "you've let the valley's misery come between us. I don't know why it must be this way, but I've felt your dislike for a long while."

"The valley is a greedy place," Anne said levelly, "from which Rusty expected only a chance to make a living. So little for us to expect, so much for the big cattlemen to allow!"

"I have always wished the best for you," Lana said loyally. "I have worked for that. And prayed for it."

"And yet, when Mother lay dead you never came near us. I waited for you and hoped you'd come. The day Rusty told me you'd gone away I couldn't believe it. How do you reconcile your talk with this? How can you expect things to be the same?"

"I meant to call on you when your mother died. I was on my way—" she paused, sharply remembering it would be impossible to tell how John Dupere had turned her back from

this mission. It had been her one weakness, fleeing the valley, and admission of her running dragged through her insides turning them sick with a bilious distaste. There was no word she could offer Anne Dupere, no chance for forgiveness. She said quietly, "I was kept away from your mother's funeral by circumstances. You know nothing about them, Anne."

There was a deep hurt underscoring Anne's condemnation. "Who kept you away? Who but Sam Madrid? Who has come between our friendship other than the big cattlemen? And now you bring *him* to the Jasmines! Isn't one man enough for you?"

Lana's glance leaped. She felt heat coloring her cheeks. "I didn't bring Brandon. I did everything to make him stay away. But you're wrong about something more important, very wrong. Madrid doesn't mean anything. I don't believe now that he ever did. Sam and I are through."

There was a bitter twist to the edges of Anne's mouth. She said cryptically, "Make up your mind, Lana! Make it up before you hurt Brandon!"

Lana's eyes came up on Anne Dupere with the conviction, the hard pride of a planter's daughter of the lower river, of a woman who has later endured and conquered the horrors of the lonely frontier. The moment was a long, tormenting suspense when it appeared Lana Harrel would have her say, when Anne Dupere would have her answer. Then the strong rooted wilfulness of the Harrels flushed over her, bringing a touch of anger. Her face became emotionless, bland, as she looked at the other girl, the injustice of Anne's words scorching her and grinding around inside.

She turned the blaze gently, using the heel of her boot. Her brooding thoughts were rough right then, but she rode quietly away from the cabin still holding her head straight and her eyes in front.

CHAPTER 13

Brandon picked up the small dust cone on the valley's floor and studied it from the elevation of the hills. All hostile riders from Bell-M had been left behind and he sensed nothing to fear from this horseman. The chase Madrid had given had held him from his rendezvous with Jeffries and Dupere; on the other hand he had drawn the Bell-M hands away from headquarters, and perhaps the others had been able to contact Harrel, to learn the direction of Madrid's next move.

He traced back the new rider's trail, deciding he had come from Roman Two. Realization made him put heels to the stallion, setting him into a downslope jog. The chase had been long and the bay was starting to tire; Brandon could feel the rapid expansion of the beast's lungs.

Ten minutes later he rode out from behind an outcrop recognizing Lana Harrel atop her blaze. He lifted an arm, coming off the last rise of the Jasmines. Lana veered toward him.

They met on the bear grass covered plain, dryness and heat like an oven's heat around and about them. His face was grave; he was thinking of the ruthlessness that lay in his enemies. Madrid would never accept her rebuff lightly.

"Shouldn't ride alone, Lana. You have too much to offer in the way of temptation."

She answered with a tight look. "I was beginning to worry about you. I thought you'd gone after Sam Madrid. They're going to scoop out a hole somewhere and bury you."

He smiled the dusty, trail-worn smile of a tiring man. "We're waiting with guns until Sam Madrid starts the dry-gulching."

"They told me at Roman Two that Father had gone to Bell-M. He hasn't come home."

"I was there and recognized his horse. He'll be riding back shortly."

"You know the reason for his visit?"

Brandon nodded. "We had a raid last night at Roman Two. Your father wanted to talk to Madrid about it. Didn't they tell you?"

His eyes were on her seeing the warm flush that lay on her cheeks, the striking, clear beauty of her face. The riding skirt she wore moulded her well, accentuating her thighs and the full curve of her hips. His body was crying with thirst and he was tired and she drew him with a relentless wanting he had never known before. Suddenly he drove the bay in closer and reached after her hungrily.

"No, Brandon! I don't want any of that!" Her eyes were bright and glinting as she tried to elude his searching hands. Anger still roughened her spirits after her visit to Roman Two.

They were close, their horses standing head-to-head and dead still. Brandon forced his arm about her waist drawing her to him. She fought him off feeling a frost coating her emotions.

"Remember, I said this would happen when we reached the Jasmines? The hills have come between us. They're hostile, dark—you should have stayed away!"

The smile on his lips was a brassy indifference to her words. His pressure against her back increased. When she failed to respond he drew her against his chest by main force, dropping his mouth against hers. She fought him pressing both palms against his chest. The rapid hammering of her heart was close to him, he could feel the heat of her body through her thin blouse. There was no give in her, no softness. But presently the hands against him ceased struggling. They slid around his neck, began pressing back with all the fervor of a woman surrendering. When they broke apart they were each breathless, each reeling a little from sheer wanting.

He said soberly, "Lana, will you step down. I need you. I need you now."

She was tight-lipped, still unquieted. "I told you not to do that. It's not going to work out."

"I want you," Brandon told her bluntly. "You want me. What else matters?"

"The hills matter. The greedy, hostile valley!"

"To hell with the hills! Nothing matters when I want you."

There was a close attention in her eyes and then the force of his feeling burst upon her and set loose a safety valve. She laughed. Again she touched her mare near him, dropping her fingers to his arm. "Listen, Brandon. We've got to forget for a while. There are more desperate problems—pretty soon men will be killed in the valley. I don't want you to be one."

Her practical reasoning was bringing him back to reality. This morning's chase through the Jasmynes had driven a recklessness through him but now she was steadying him, her lips and her still unspoken promise put fresh courage into his veins.

"All right," he said. "I'll not kiss you until you come to me. But don't hold off too long!"

His eyes ranged the skyline of the close hills, identifying them. At present she was in an unromantic, a practical vein, and he wanted no woman without having all of her, and having her mind on him. He said soberly:

"This is the draw where I saw buzzards this morning."

"Vultures," she repeated huskily and a little grimly. "They're always in the hills. They smell death. Dead calves. Animals that have fought and been injured. This is McPhee draw."

"What's up yonder, against the hills?"

A tightness drew her mouth into a line. The day which had begun in anxiety when her father failed to appear at breakfast had degenerated rapidly with her visit to Roman Two, and now she had succeeded in turning Brandon's attention away from herself. It was a victory, but not the victory woman enjoyed winning. Her heart was still pounding at the nearness of him, of the prospect of them lying down in the bear grass, of the ecstasy that would have come against the hard earth. It had been near—he must never know how much she had wanted that hard earth beneath her.

She told him how McPhee had worked the mine on the ledge, how the vein had run out and McPhee had quit. She

had met the new men in Jasmine, the two who were now camping on the ledge. Good men who had lost everything during the war. She felt sorry for them throwing their strength against the rock. She said, "Let's ride up and talk with them."

They rode stirrup to stirrup beside the dry creekbed which in spring would carry an angry flood when the snows melted from the Jasmynes. They rode silently, each knowing the other was sorting the past moments against the treasures of former affections, and finding no memory so bright. Whatever the future held behind its impenetrable curtain, this was certain: their love would endure.

When they came to the first scattered timber a pair of frightened cows crashed into the open. Beside each mother ran its young calf. Lana's eyes closed down as she read the fresh Bell-M on each of the young animals. She gave Brandon her slantwise look, held it against him.

"An unnatural thing," she said dryly, "but I'm afraid not unusual, for the Jasmynes. Among honest men it is customary to brand the calf with the same mark as its mother. You will note we do this differently!"

"I'm not green," he told her quickly. "I know that calves follow their own mothers. It's not easy to hold them apart, nearly impossible unless you take them across the range and fence them off. In this case Sam Madrid counted on Francher not coming home until these Roman Twos weaned their heifers. Or would you say Madrid expected Francher never to come back?"

"I wouldn't know what Sam Madrid thinks," she answered sadly. "Power breeds power—too often it makes men greedy."

They rode on following the draw deeper within the hills. The dark glint of his eyes told her that Brandon was very nearly through with caution, with allowing Madrid the run of the hills. Presently he would make up his mind and he would become a rapier thrusting at Madrid, an unrelenting steel-point darting ever deeper into Sam's side. She was putting a woman's appraisal on him now. She found nothing bearing out her father's fears. There were none of the marks

of the tinhorn about Brandon, none of the cheapness. He was thoroughbred all the way through.

The cut banks made a broad bend and they came now upon the carrion that had drawn the vultures. The air above suddenly darkened and filled with the flapping sound of their wings as the birds left the ground revealing the offals of a newly killed cow.

Brandon said, "Hold on a minute." He stepped to the trail handing Lana the stallion's reins, moved forward to the mass of bone and flesh the vultures had relinquished. There was no hide left on the animal, merely a framework of ribs. He thrust his look among the brush and discovered a strip of hide within a few yards of the dead animal. Examining it quickly he found the Roman Two. His gaze leaped to Lana.

"Your friends on the ledge kill meat as they need it!"

Sam Madrid's retaliation against men who slaughtered beef arose in his mind. His own anger was soaring. The waste of selecting the choice cuts, of leaving the rest for the buzzards, was appalling.

"Those two wouldn't do this," Lana said.

His fingers traced out the numerals on the hide and again she shook her head. "You're wrong. I believe I know those two. They wouldn't let beef rot on the grass. Brandon, I think for the first time I'm afraid. Terribly, utterly afraid!"

He let the hide fall to the grass and stepped toward her. Some sense was alive in her, some warning that turned her face chalky. She said very quietly, "We'll ride to the ledge," and he understood that for some reason she was afraid of what they would find. Violence was thickening throughout the Jasmynes and its unholiness ground away a woman's courage. . . . He mounted his stallion and rode beside her to the trail Van Caslin had used in ascending the ledge. As soon as they reached here she lifted her voice calling the miners.

There was no answer, and Brandon watched her steadily. She had gotten control of herself, the first slashing dread of her intuition wearing away.

"Go up to their camp, please," she told him. "Let me know what you find."

He too had his forewarning of what to expect. The stillness of death hung upon the ledge, the feeling of a deserted and forlorn house. He had known this same pressure to fall upon the manor houses of the South as soon as the war had driven their owners away or taken them prisoners. It was the sick, the unhealthy feel of decay that had come upon the plantations. . . .

The flap of the tent stood open, the interior silent. He saw a square of paper stuck to the canvas and it was dazzling white under the sun's glare. He went inside first and saw that the miners were dead. Both had been shot in their blankets, neither man moving after the bullets had struck. Again he stepped outside glad to be away from the ghastliness inside. He read the notice tacked to the tent, then lifted his hand and tore it away. Again he read the words, the shine of his eyes becoming fierce.

This is warning of what will happen
to any man butchering Roman Two beef.

He folded the paper precisely, slipped it into his jacket. Coming back to the ledge trail he looked down on Lana. She was sitting quietly in her saddle, her hands pressed against the pommel. The weakness had passed completely and so he knew she had prepared herself for what was coming. She said at the end of a long-held breath:

"Are they both dead?" He nodded and then she added, "Brandon, please come down. I'd rather have you beside me."

He came down off the smoothly worn bedrock, the narrow trail men's boots had worn in searching for their metal. When he reached the lower level he handed her the warning he had taken from the tent flap. He watched her shrewdly, finding no change in her expression. He thought: she's seen this working out. It's no surprise to her. And he considered again their talk at the landing. He recalled there had been fear in her then that Madrid would turn against her father. She held an insight, a keen knowledge of men and the urges that drove them. Long 7 would be Madrid's next move.

She refolded the paper, returned it. Her voice held a deadly calm. "Madrid! Who else could have done it? You're going to carry the fight from here?"

He said, "This is why they didn't wipe us out last night. Their raid was merely a feint—they didn't have to fight, since the gold seekers will do their work for them."

She shook her head. "Sam has gone completely out of bounds! He'll do anything to arouse the miners against you, to destroy you or drive you away. After you're gone—afterwards, Long 7 will feel the weight of his will. Unless—unless I change my mind about him."

He said quietly, "You have your choice, Lana."

"No, there is no choice! I'll never marry him!"

His eyes were on her hunting the first trace of weakness. But there was nothing except determination and he took her hand. "Lana, ride back to Long 7. Wait for your father. Tell him this."

"And you're riding to Bell-M?"

He considered her question, knew there was something in this beyond Sam Madrid's scheming. The whole pattern of this butchery did credit to a brain that had invited redmen to a friendly campfire, slaughtered them as they sat filling themselves on white man's food! Slaughtered them with a cannon from behind a white man's wagon! To collect Apache scalp money. For the sheer joy of seeing men squirm while they died!

He remembered Van Caslin had not been with Madrid this morning. Slowly he shook his head. The man Sid had been returning from this scene of killing, and Van Caslin had not been with Sid. The thought set Brandon's course for him; he explained his hunch to Lana.

"I'm heading to Jasmine after Van Caslin. I believe he went there to talk the miners against us. Sam Madrid can wait."

Her eyes were very wide and she said tensely, "You still have it in your head the thing he did to Bishop?" She saw the lurking anger awake in him and knew her words had struck the core.

They rode together as far as the south rim where Brandon left her, heading for Whiskey Pass. There had been an urgency in her to ride with him, to ride into Jasmine and see whether his hunch about Van Caslin had been right. But this she could not do without leaving Long 7 for too long a time, especially since Harrel had not returned, and she meant to gather her Long 7 riders about her.

She watched Brandon ascending the deep cut leading into Whiskey Pass, until he became a blur against the gray canyon walls. The past hour had taken its drain from her and she wanted his kiss, to lose herself in his arms, but Brandon had become grave and naked anger had shown through him. The roughness of McPhee draw was still against his mind, making him speak his good-by simply, their eyes alone holding a pressure that was thick with promise. . . .

Brandon threw his stallion into Whiskey Pass at a fast jog. He had demanded more of this bay within the past twelve hours than a man should ask of any horse, and the bay had responded with always a reserve to be called upon from some hidden storage plant of power. And in this, he remembered, he owed Honest Lavinsky a great deal for putting him next to the animal.

Ever since this morning, when he had first seen the vultures, a miserable vision had been taking form in his mind. A vision of Ben Bishop lying on the acrid wasteland stripped of his clothing, with the buzzards hovering above, desecrating his body. Perhaps the Apaches had put Bishop to torture before the end came. He fervently prayed a bullet had taken Bishop beyond their power before this happened.

And for these visions, the horror that had come unfairly to Bishop, Van Caslin must pay the penalty. Brandon knew now there could be no hope for the Jasmynes, no peace for himself, until he brought justice to the hills. All through that long ride up-canyon anger kept boiling from remote corners inside. The two miners at McPhee draw would never mean much to him personally but he had been stung by the horror reflected in Lana's face; somewhere against their background hung love, anxiety and hope; a wife some place or a mother who would

go on praying through the years. But the greatest portion of his thoughts were on this land; he could never rest until the predatory hills were subdued. . . .

The climb was longer than he remembered in coming in. He pulled into a walk occasionally to give his bay a breathing spell, begrudging the time lost and knowing that in Jasmine Van Caslin was spreading his poison. Impatience ground him until he labored his bay, pushing him until the big animal had no more to give. Reluctantly, then, he let the stallion choose his own gait. His thoughts of Bishop dragged through him all the while. Sharpest of all were his fears for Lana.

At long length he rested the bay on the trail-slope above Jasmine and looked down into the row of pine-board shacks. The dust of the crooked trail made a yellow furrow between them. As he watched a pack train from Lavinsky trudged into the street's head. Men spilled out from a few of the buildings greeting the tired freighters in their raucous way. He scanned the new faces curiously, found them generally covered by a matting of whiskers. He found no one whom he recognized.

He rode downslope headed directly into the heart of the camp, feeling its unfriendliness even before his bay set hoof into the yellow street. The first building he approached had a hitchrail in front and here he left his animal. A paint pony drowsed with lowered head at another rack fifty yards yonder. Brandon moved toward it reading the pony as one belonging to the cattle outfits. Behind him he sensed the still town's lack of welcome through the solid walls, its antagonism. He came to the near building, moved in beside it with his hand spreading over its rough corner planks, waiting. He unbuttoned the top fastenings of his coat so he might get easily to his Colt, stood there waiting for the challenge he now expected. But there was no one to interfere. He rounded the corner, walked up to the pony.

It was a Long 7 animal with trail pack strung to saddle, very nearly done in from punishment, and he fell to speculating about it. Who could have driven one of Harrel's animals to this condition, and for what reason? In a race with his own bay this horse would stand no chance at all against his tired

stallion. Brandon thought soberly: he's come across from the landing, been pushed unmercifully across the desert.

Now his eye lifted to the string of freight animals unloading before a long building that served as warehouse. The freighters watched him closely and he knew there was talk about his coming. But whatever went on in Jasmine, these men would keep about their own business.

His glance slipped over the camp. Most of the cabins were simply living quarters to which the miners returned from their hills; a few had boards nailed to their windows and were padlocked. Already men were turning their backs on the hard work of mining, already some were moving to other places. Several of the buildings had been turned into stores and places of amusement, and the ragged boulders had rolled from the hillslopes into the gulch and stood in every space between the buildings.

He saw a slim figure step through the doorway of one shop, stand rooted beside an iron-bracketed lantern. The man's intense gaze reached him causing little ripples to run across his spine. As the man returned into the shop Brandon identified him. The kid, Malpais, whom he had whipped at the landing!

There had been hate in Malpais' face, a storm that raced behind his crystal-hard gaze. He would never forget that Brandon had hurt him, had left him senseless on the warehouse floor and escaped. Brandon leaped across the road's dry wheel-ruts remembering other things Lana had told him. How Malpais had raided Honest's store and burned it; then striking the trail with the landing yelling for blood. Why had Malpais returned to Jasmine? Like a shaft of light Brandon perceived the answer: other men were on Malpais' trail, and he had lost his nerve and chosen the hills as his sanctuary. He counted on Bell-M for protection. Not essentially Madrid's help, Brandon corrected; in sheer desperation Malpais had thrown in with Van Caslin knowing him as one man absolutely heartless in the manner of his fighting.

Reasoning along this channel brought the truth home to Brandon. Malpais was leading him directly to Van Caslin.

The whole thing, of Malpais appearing on the street, had been a bait, a lure, and now Brandon knew they meant to down him in a way of their own choosing. He plunged on, knowing he stood between their guns.

The shop into which Malpais had disappeared had a small window displaying on either side twin cylindrical apothecary jars. The window floor between was covered with dried roots and herbs, the background a solid row of whiskey jugs. Brandon glanced at this briefly as his boots pounded the walk. Above the door appeared a man's name. DUNLEAVY'S.

He broke into the shop facing a counter that ran the length of the room. At the far end miners were bellied to the bar, whiskey before them. They were a rough-garbed lot, with tawny jackets and boots and exposure-darkened faces. He let his look slide over them rapidly seeing at once that the men he sought were not here.

The dark rectangle of a second doorway stood at the room's end. As he strode toward this the bartender's voice struck him. "What do you want?"

"Van Caslin. Where is he?"

Dunleavy stood solidly and stared, hands spread tight to the bar's soiled top. In a quick glance he was a tall, swarthy, iron-hard man who was lacking even the redeeming grace of occasional humor. He shook his head firmly. "Not here," he said shortly. Then, when Brandon reached the far door, his voice lifted hoarsely.

"You don't go in there, friend!"

But Brandon was already into the other room. In one corner stood an unmade bed, a nightstand with a used slop-bucket filled to overflowing on the floor beside it. Obviously, Dunleavy was too lazy to leave his bedroom at nights; too untidy to clear away his mess after he made it. The edge of Brandon's eye picked out Van Caslin leaving the room by an exit near the nightstand. His hand sprang after his Colt as he leaped across the flooring.

Coming to the exit Brandon flattened his back to the siding. He could hear running footsteps beating their retreat across the yard. It was a well staged trap; if he went outside after

Van Caslin, Malpais would gun him as soon as he appeared. At the same time, he heard the commotion rising from the barroom. Dunleavy was cursing something undistinguishable through the partition; soon he would be entering with his shotgun. They were playing a no-limit game in which Brandon had drawn the joker! He had no desire to fight with Dunleavy, no purpose. His reflexes drew him suddenly forward and he threw himself between the doorjamb, his Colt leveled in front.

No shot came searching him as he had expected, no sign of his enemies in the yard. Thirty yards behind the store stood an awkward stable made sway-backed by the incessant hill winds. He ran toward this remembering in a quick-fleeting pattern all the talk he had heard of Van Caslin, the misery and trouble the man caused. At heart and core Sam Madrid was very nearly of equal black stamp, to have brought the scalp hunter into the Jasmies.

He came to the tall archway of Dunleavy's stable, drew aside the door a few inches and slipped inside. Immediately murky darkness fell before his eyes, a thick blanket that muffled and lost a man's direction. The smell of discarded things, of dry mould and hay stirred his senses. He felt his blood turn cold and knew strain was grinding away his nerves.

"MacRae!" Van Caslin called. "Don't try to reopen the door. Malpais has you covered with his gun!"

Were they trying to force him to answer, to give his position away in order to concentrate their fire? Van Caslin's voice had sounded with a strange echo, as though he spoke into a wooden box or through a partition. Brandon stared into the blackness, a line of water flattening black hair against his temples. He laid his back to the wall, spoke clearly.

"I don't want Malpais. I want you for what you did to Bishop. Malpais can ride off."

Van Caslin laughed, a devilish sound that came from no place Brandon could point to. He said thickly, "Malpais won't ride anywhere. Neither will you. Life's a game, MacRae, and you got to be big enough to lick it. Bishop knew too much of

what happened in Yuma. Still he took his chances by coming aboard the *General Heath*."

Brandon considered rapidly. "You're trying to tell me he knew you killed Francher's brother. He stumbled into you when you threw the body into the river!"

"Maybe," Van Caslin admitted dryly. "And maybe you've come to the same point where Bishop stood. This is where you walk out the last few feet of your trail!"

There was a distinct sound of metal striking wood, as though a saddle stirrup had slapped the wall. Brandon felt a knifing dread that Van Caslin was running out. The man had talked too freely, sparring for time. There was a reason Van Caslin might be ready to run out. He had done his work with the miners of Jasmine and was ready to rejoin Madrid at Bell-M. The shooting here in the stable would be up to Malpais. Malpais, who up until now had remained silent and might be hidden in any of the four corners or directly ahead—anywhere. . . .

Brandon stepped deeper into the stable, his gun ready. Weight was shifting in the darkness, men moving about. A faint drifting of fine particles began dusting his cheeks. The stench of hay and powdered manure dust falling against him light as snow. "Van Caslin!" he called sharply.

He was answered by a gun's quaking thunder. It came very nearly from the spot where he calculated Van Caslin had been, its flame leaping at Brandon, its bullet lifting a draft against his neck.

Quickly he threw himself to one side, pulling his Navy into line with the gunman. He fired twice into the rank blackness, dropped to the stable's damp floor and fired again, rolling rapidly away while the crash of his Navy still clung to echoing walls. At once the stable became alive with searching muzzle-fire. He felt the solid impact of balls splintering the planks directly behind him. The bare edge of his consciousness told him a horse was being led from another part of the stable. But his full concentration lay in the guns.

Malpais heard the horse sounds and lifted his voice fran-

tically. "Van! Van—that you?" There was sick despair in Malpais' cry.

"Too late, kid!" Brandon said. "Toss out your gun. He's gone."

Malpais' answer was a shot that lifted stable manure into Brandon's face. Brandon threw his Colt point blank against the pistol flash. He felt the gun buck hard against his hand. There was a dull sob, the sound of lifeless flesh dropping and then Malpais lay in the space that separated them. Brandon leaped toward the stable's rear. A black rectangle loomed in the dark room and he went headlong into this, sensing a passageway. He struck a canvas drop, went on through; his boots caught a high sill that sent him sprawling face down on a foully littered floor.

When his sense of direction returned he went first to the wall where light seeped between the cracks of a double door. He swung the half-door outward illuminating a low lean-to shed in which he stood. Here Van Caslin had held his horse. The empty stall sent his heart dipping and he knew the scalp hunter was making a getaway. His own stallion would be too weary to give chase.

While they had stood talking in the main stable Van Caslin had been pulling his cinches down in this shed, making ready for flight. Too late he had seen through the other's scheme.

He went back into the center of the lean-to, finding his Navy on the littered floor where he had fallen. With a quick swipe he tore the canvas barrier from between the stables, saw the hazy outlines of stalls take shape in the main room. Chagrin rode him heavily as he entered.

The kid was dead. He lay face downward in the center of the floor, his yellow hair fouled in the manure. A deep coloring seeped outward in a pool beside his body. Brandon had come in here not hunting Malpais, not wanting to fight him, and now bitter dejection struck him. It was a reaction that went with every battle, that was part and parcel of the rolling gunsmoke, of the corpse lying on blood stained earth. Some men became calloused to the reaction if they survived enough battles. Some men—and others never did!

CHAPTER 14

Brandon recharged his Navy. Under the smoky glow of a bulls-eye lantern he took his look at Malpais. The kid's teeth were bared in a last painful grimace, his eyes full open and staring with a ghastly wall-eyed terror. With it all, actually, Malpais retained a look of youth, and of innocence. A shudder caught Brandon as he recalled a few words Lana's father had spoken.

What hopes came to a woman as she lay in her bed of birth-giving? The world had suddenly become none-too-good for her new-born; his skin to be bathed and dusted with scented powder, then rolled into the finest cloth her purse could afford. There were no ends to the dreams and plans that grew with him into manhood, while he in turn made his thin try at returning some of the joy he owed her. Reginald, this one's mother had named him, and the name gave Brandon a queer start. Here lay Reginald in a reeking, horse-fouled stable rankened still further by his own gore. The end of all the fine hopes.

Sounds of others crowding against the doors gave Brandon his cue he was no longer alone in the backyard. The fight had held them away but now Dunleavy was about to lead the miners into the stable. A voice called, "Hello, inside!"

"All right," Brandon answered. "I'm coming out."

He swung the door, stepping into late afternoon sunlight. About him faces showed their surprise, then settled into sullen brooding. Dunleavy glared at him with his frosty eyes. Brandon said, "Put up the gun." Then, when Dunleavy continued holding the shotgun halfway on him, he added, "The fight's over. Put up the gun! Van Caslin got away, the other one's inside."

A man went in for his look and came out with the green color of sickness pasted over his face. The others were crowd-

ing around Brandon, Dunleavy in front, and trouble was mounting. In that closing circle Brandon read how well Van Caslin had bought these men.

"You can't get away with this," Dunleavy growled.

Brandon lifted a shoulder. "Those two inside both made their try. We fought it out along their terms. A man puts his own value on his life."

"You don't come into Jasmine stamping on others," Dunleavy shook his head stubbornly.

"I asked if you'd seen Van Caslin. You lied."

"You had no call running through my place. We don't want your kind in this camp."

A broad shouldered miner standing beside Dunleavy asked his own question. "What about a man who's hungry? What'll you do if somebody kills a beef?"

Brandon answered immediately. "Sell it to him if he's got the money." The fight inside had given him heat and now as the crowd pressed him his temper flared. "Roman Two beef can always be bought. We don't do as Madrid does. Out there in McPhee draw you'll find a pair Van Caslin took care of. I rode here to tell you about those fellows. You should send somebody out who knows them—they'll have to be buried."

The crowd paused while the news he brought had its effect. He saw faces take on a harder cast. The ulcer Van Caslin had planted, combined with the unfortunate shooting within the stable, had sealed Brandon's case. They moved around closing off their circle and he realized they had no intention of allowing him to go free. The insistent miner questioned again. "How do we know Madrid done it?"

Dunleavy stood nearest to Brandon. He said in a gritty voice, "Hell, he's lying! We got him to blame for any killing!"

It tore the patience from Brandon, broke him down to the level of these others holding him within their circle. The hoary faces were all of one accord. They would tear him to the ground and stamp him.

Without warning his hands sprang forward until he had Dunleavy and the insistent miner by the throat. He slammed their heads together with all the power of his arms. There was

no restraint in him, no pausing. All the ugliness of death in the stable had come back to him, goading him, giving no peace.

He cracked their skulls repeatedly until Dunleavy's tough face turned slack. When he sagged about the knees Brandon let him drop. He pulled back his right fist and sent it driving into the other man's face. The miner let go a low grunt and dropped beside Dunleavy. Brandon's hand lay ready against the butt of his Navy.

"Now we'll talk," he said thickly. "What I said about McPhee draw was true. Are there any more here ready to call me liar?"

Their eyes skipped around and none answered. He took a step forward and the circle opened to permit his way through. He went beyond them, paused with an unhealthy feeling inside. His voice was thick with its warning.

"Don't be fools! Bell-M's out to let you do their filthy work for them!"

They had been stunned by his quick handling of Dunleavy and this other man, by the shooting inside the stable, but they were not yet finished with him. Men believed what they wanted to believe, and in their excited mood they wouldn't worry if they chose the unwise course. He knew the poison Van Caslin had planted would work its unruly way. But the time was not yet because none had come forward as leader. They let him reach his stallion, and they were still scowling in their broken group while he turned the bay and put him over the return trail to Whiskey Pass.

Honest Lavinsky, having followed a man north into the bitter breaks of the river country, had seen his man crack and swing eastward to rejoin others of his predatory kind in the mountains. The raw Indian frontier, the knowledge that Honest held fast to his trail, had been too much for Malpais.

On the edge of the desert Honest had come upon the gelding Malpais had taken from his stable and ridden to death. Malpais had driven on with the Long 7 pony leaving this evidence behind that he was breaking. More slowly, then,

Honest had followed his man, giving his liveried mount plenty of time for rest, knowing that in his relentless pursuit Malpais was doomed.

He entered the camp of Jasmine passing the string of freighters who had three days before taken their loads from his supply depot. Three days ago Honest had been a rich man with the world much as he wished it. A stepping stone to still greater things, this was what his holdings in Lavinsky represented. Now that he was somewhat poorer, the future had receded a little further from his grasp. This was all the loss meant to Honest: six months more of labor. In this life a man traded his useful days for a stake in the scheme of easier living. He could almost have forgiven Malpais his monetary loss.

Here rode a philosopher who urged his weary horse through the rutted trail, who had mulled over these truths many times before. . . . The other thing, the personal injury sustained at the hands of Malpais, was something else again. Something that evoked the ancient code of an eye for an eye.

The freighters waved as he plodded on, chin resting nearly on his shirt front. The reek of Jasmine's unflushed waste lay in her gutters, a slime that trickled from her rear doorways, from her several unclean deadfalls. In her nakedness she was unsavory and unclean, like a dirty woman. Honest was tired, he was galled between his legs and weary in spirit. But he drove himself on knowing retribution was near.

A tight-packed group of miners assembled before Dunleavy's deadfall called his attention and he swung toward them. It was unusual to find so many able bodied men away from their diggings. As he closed on the group he glimpsed a body lying before the shop. He caught an angry excitement lacing through the group but he paid it no attention. The inert figure on the ground brought him up short. He stared at the unpleasant face of Malpais and the tension ran suddenly out of his body.

"Who did this?" he demanded sharply. When the miners failed to reply he grasped an arm and repeated, "Who shot this boy? Why was it?"

The miner glanced at him briefly before answering. "Mac-

Rae. They fought in the stable." Then the miner returned to his argument with the others.

"So," said Honest. This was all, but he sat his horse motionless while brief shadings of thought revealed themselves on his broad face. There had been something about this MacRae that commanded attention. A cool, implacable will that Honest had recognized. But with it a definite level of justice. Honest conceded readily to that. Unknowingly his right hand gently massaged the shoulder Malpais' bullet had smashed. Presently he got down from his saddle, noticed a younger man standing apart from the group. He led his animal toward this man, handed over the reins.

"Take him to the stable. See that he is rubbed down, fed. A very little water, please. He has been through a very hard chase."

The man nodded, taking the reins. Then Honest dipped his fingers into his pocket, brought forth a coin. The man shook his head, mild embarrassment crossing his face. "You done me some favors when I came to this country. You don't remember but I do."

"Take it," Honest insisted. "Never turn away an honest dollar. It is so much of your life. It is so much that you have given of your strength."

The man smiled, taking Honest's silver, and led the horse toward a stable. Honest's feet ached as he walked back to the group. He had very little sweat left inside him, but he was sweating. He returned his attention to the dead man lying before Dunleavy's. Fragments of the miners' talk broke into his consciousness. For the first time he listened.

"They're both dead in McPhee draw. Neither of them had a chance to know what struck them. I came quick so I could tell you."

"Madrid said it would happen," a man answered. "Now that they've started this thing, what do we do?"

"It wasn't Madrid, damn it!" This was Dunleavy's voice, thick with anger. "We know it was MacRae!"

Honest's tongue made a deliberate smacking sound within

his mouth. "Just so I will not believe. MacRae would not do this!"

"Who asks what you think?" Dunleavy snarled. His eyes turned suddenly vicious, his tone menacing. "You little Jew! More of that talk and we'll take our business away from the landing!"

Honest's gaze hung on him in silence, the sensitive part of his nature stung by Dunleavy's lash of words. He heard another say, "MacRae was here. He told us about it first hand."

"Maybe it was Bell-M," another added thoughtfully. "MacRae said it was."

Dunleavy threw the speaker his bitter stare. He had made up his mind and refused to change his tune. "I say it was MacRae! We'll wait till the rest of the men come in from the hills. Tonight we'll pay MacRae a visit."

When miners rode together on this sort of mission they became a mob. What would happen at Francher's former headquarters when they confronted MacRae? Years ago in that past of which Honest never spoke he had seen a thing happen such as these men proposed. It was a door always open which led him back mentally to a great wrong. It touched a chill against his backbone, it made him inwardly tremble. Which did not mean that Honest was a coward. Brave men still feared the fury of those scenes he had witnessed.

During the war Honest had seen the Conscription riots that swept from the Battery to Central Park and overnight had turned his native New York City into flaming funeral pyres. He had seen the Bowery boys fling their cobblestones and brickbats, had seen them march steadily up his block tossing furniture, clothing, merchandise into the street and touch them with firebrands. He had stood helpless while the mobs ruined everything he owned under the pretense that it was war shoddy. Worst of all, a dead Negro swayed from a lamp-post during the gray, smoke-filled dawn hours. Those desperate visions still troubled him by day and gave him sleepless nights—those scenes while the mobs held off firemen and police and the red glow crossed the city and grew brighter across the housetops.

Honest's loss had taken much less stamina from him than others might have suffered. His race had endured persecution from the beginning, and Honest was inured to these things. But they gave him a hatred for violence that knew no limit. His eyes now dropped to thin slits behind his fat lenses. He repeated:

"You are making a mistake. You should not do this."

Dunleavy took a step closer, his fist balled tight in front. "One more crack out of you does it!" And miners beside Honest set up a steady growl.

Honest became aware of a tugging at his arm, tried to evade it. The pull was steadily drawing the storekeeper away from the group. He murmured again, "It is a mistake!" But none heard him. Already Dunleavy was disclosing plans for tonight. Honest lifted his glance and found himself looking into Andre Ude's wry face.

"So it is you," Honest said.

Ude murmured, "Our friend Malpais seems to be quite dead."

"I did not kill him!" Honest removed his hat, rubbed a hand across his bare scalp. "Come away from here so we can talk. This was MacRae, who got to him before I."

"MacRae? So there's a fellow! I came after you fast. You shouldn't buy into a fight this way."

"I cannot let them take their hate on an innocent man."

"Nor I. Fernando is taking care of my cocks, along with the hotel. With things the way they are Miss Harrel may need us."

"They will all need us," Honest repeated. "Tonight we are going with these miners and keep them in hand."

Andre let a moment of stillness lay knowing there was no way in which he might restrain Honest. In the final analysis this was the reason he had ridden the desert trail. There would be no returning to the landing until the fight in the Jasmines was over. He placed his hand lightly against Honest. "I have some news. Before I left Lavinsky the men had begun rebuilding your store. They have sorted the undamaged goods and those who can handle tools are rebuilding your roof. An-

other gang has gone upriver on Crotch's boat to cut timber."

Honest's eyes filled with wonder. "Why do they do this? They do not know whether I have the means to repay!"

"They don't do this sort of thing for money. In the West they have a way of telling a man when he's not wanted. At the same time they can tell him just as readily when they can't get along without him. Lavinsky needs you, it wouldn't be much of a landing without you. No business, no honesty among men, just the scouring of the river dropped off beside the barrooms. We can't afford to lose you and don't want you moving on."

"So this is why they rebuild my place?" his voice had trailed off very low.

"That's it. I have another message from Crotch. The Captain says the next full lading you have will be brought up from Yuma at half fare."

To this Honest could make no reply. He stared into the thickening twilight, hand nervously playing with his fat chin. Never, he decided, had he encountered such generosity in Crotch. Never during all his time on the river had red-bearded, fiery-eyed Crotch volunteered such a thing. The slow realization of what it meant put a deep flush across his face. He found himself inwardly very much elated; he felt himself at peace graciously with mankind. . . .

CHAPTER 15

Tension still rode Brandon as he climbed higher with the pass. Tiredness had gone into his bones, he had had no food since morning and emptiness gnawed at his belly. But now since leaving Jasmine he had made his decision.

He would break up Madrid's power, for now and all time Bell-M must be destroyed. He would wait only until Dupere and Jeffries rode in and made their reports. They had been separated since morning and he realized a great deal might

have happened with either of them. Nevertheless, he would ride—alone or with help, it made no difference. From the lift behind Madrid's layout he would send down his rifle shots stopping Bell-M as they came out of headquarters. When Madrid reached him it would be over. It didn't matter if he survived, so long as the job was done.

He rode steadily with the trail, dark pine and black rim-rock lifting above his head. Night's chill came to the air, a heavy stillness which clung to the summit. The stallion passed over into the downslope walking easier and with his hoofs ringing sparks. He pictured mentally the cabin at the far end of the canyon, with John Dupere and Jeffries sitting beside the table while Anne poured coffee into their cups.

Now from the side of the trail he caught the ripple of the stream where he had first met Jeffries and Slim. The water glistened softly under the pale starlight. He made out a horse standing riderless between the trees. He had never seen Van Caslin's animal but the man thrust across his consciousness and Brandon drew in the bay.

Regret lashed him, for he knew this was Van Caslin, and he knew it would be another violent scene. He knew regret that it must be this way, for he had killed Malpais so shortly before and no specific good could come of Malpais' death. There should be other means, saner ways that a man might reach another. Ways that would settle things for the benefit of both. But what were the ways? Van Caslin had lived by the gun and knew no other method. It had seen him through every crisis of his life and he would have no understanding, no confidence in the finality of any other settlement. With it he had earned his daily bread as scalp hunter, had stopped babbling tongues and covered his dark secrets. Now, at the end, he would either win over Brandon or die by the Colt.

He sat lax in saddle scanning the dark contours. A voice reached him from dead ahead and he made out Van Caslin between an aisle of thin timber. He stepped from his saddle, let the stallion's lines drop over a limb.

Van Caslin leaned his shoulder point against a pine, his arms folded before his chest. His face was in shadow but

Brandon thought it was smiling, a devil's-mask that blanked every expression. Brandon walked toward him steadily, the strain at once crowding his nerves.

"You were waiting for me," Brandon murmured. "I thought you shot first and let talking to others."

"Surprised?" Van Caslin asked, and Brandon was sure now of the devilish smile. "I don't always shoot a man from the dark. As a matter of fact, Francher was an exception. His brother had an even break, and Malpais had his chance with you. I take it he's dead?"

"Malpais is dead," Brandon answered.

"Don't get ideas about my running from that. I had my reasons, and maybe the kid's being washed up was one. If you killed him you made it worse with yourself with the miners. When I meet a man it's done in the open. Chris Lake was in the army with me and he knows the way I shoot. If I pull a gun, the other fellow is done. That's the way it'll be with Harrel. Lake don't stand a show with him."

Neither man was aware of what had happened on Bell-M; neither knew that Henry Harrel had died on his way to Long 7 before noon. Brandon said slowly, "So they brought you in to take care of Harrel?"

"Harrel—you—anyone who gets their back up."

Brandon waited a long moment, then said quietly, "Are you finished with what you have to say?"

Van Caslin nodded. "You had to know I'm not afraid to face a gun. You had to know first which one of us stopped you."

His hand dipped after his Colt and Brandon reached to his holstered Navy. There was a wicked pride in Van Caslin, a sure knowledge that when he fired he would kill his man. The frontier had been his long proving ground, and the men who had gone down before had given him confidence that knew no bounds. Brandon saw his hand reach his pistol's curved butt long before his own fingers lay on his gun. A flash of light struck before his eyes, he was going backward under the force of a blow he still couldn't feel.

Flame searched him again, and he was tilting and falling

through space and then the stony trail came up hard against his spine. He let drive his first shot at Van Caslin from prone in the trail, saw the towering bulk stagger backward. He returned the hammer to firing position, revolving the cylinder. A gasp had come from the other man, a muffled, startled exhalation of breath. He caught the sickening thud of the next shot. It knocked Van Caslin to his knees before he fell to the ground.

Brandon lay still trying to gain the upper hand on his senses. So far as he knew a lead ball had gone through his left shoulder, though there was still no pain from that. Only a cold dullness, a shock that was trying to pull the consciousness from his brain. He rolled over on his stomach, gun still in front. Van Caslin failed to move.

Afterwards he climbed to his feet moving directly over Van Caslin. The Colt that had destroyed its uncounted Apaches lay three feet away, it would never be used again, never drawn with such perfection by this master executioner. There was a dark stain on Van Caslin's shirt and he was no longer breathing. Brandon stood above him knowing no emotion except the dullness that was slowly reaping in his senses. Blood was running over his back and he knew he must reach his cabin before his awareness blanked out. On the spur of the moment he stooped for Van Caslin's Colt, thrust it inside his belt.

The horse was still standing where Van Caslin had tied it, a tall gray with broad chest and solid legs. Brandon would ride it from this point on and let his bay take its rest. He adjusted the stirrups, quieted the animal with strokes on the neck. He led the bone-weary stallion up and mounted the gray. The animal made an attempt to throw him; it brought him fierce pain and great globes of sweat sprang out on his forehead. With a twist of the reins he brought the horse down, knowing the pain had come to stay in his shoulder. At the same time he felt stronger, his mind was clearer and he knew his weakness was passing.

He put the animal downslope still trailing the bay. A long time later he made out another horseman coming toward him.

The rider drew close to the shadows for a time, then moved in fast.

"MacRae, that you?"

It was Slim. His drooping eyes took in the gray gelding, the gun thrust into Brandon's waistband. "Looks like you knocked one of 'em out of leather." And then he caught the position of Brandon's arm, the stain darkening his coat. He kneeed instantly closer. "Let me look at you. You hurt bad?"

"Keep away, I'm all right. But only because the trail was so rough I slipped and fell away from his bullet."

"I don't recognize that horse. Which one was it?"

"Van Caslin—he's dead. How's Rusty—Jeffries?"

"They're in the cabin waitin'," Slim replied. "They're startin' to get worried as hell about you." There were many things he could tell Brandon, a great deal that had happened to Jeffries and Harrel, and Rusty John, but he held his silence not knowing how badly Brandon had been hurt. They emerged from the canyon in silence and rounded the talus shoulders and at length rode into Roman Two still without talking.

Anne was standing in the open door holding the coffee pot in her hand; behind her John Dupere was coming into the opening carrying his rifle. Slim called out, "Help him outa saddle. He's hurt some, I guess."

Anne gave a faint cry as she set down her coffee pot. Her father had reached the gray's side by the time she got into the yard. Brandon came out of saddle without their aid, giving them each a look. Anne was bringing him fresh recollections of the other woman. He hadn't been given much time to think of Lana, of the promise she had built up for him and the great wanting he felt. He didn't want to think of that now. He needed his faculties clear. He evaded John Dupere's grasp.

"There's nothing wrong with me. Only a small nick on the shoulder."

"Inside and take that coat off," Dupere said. "Anne, bring out the bottle!"

There were dishes on the long table and Brandon knew they had already had their meal. Jeffries and Anne helped take his shirt off. Jeffries had a pallor across his face that

seemed strange to Brandon. His senses were clearing every minute and he saw there was something wrong here. Something was wrong with Jeffries, and Anne had had some kind of shock since he'd seen her. Dupere's fingers were probing around his shoulder starting darts of pain lacing into his brain. He glanced sideways and saw the red hole where Van Caslin's bullet had entered. It had gone through the fleshy part and a trickle of blood flowed down his side. "No bones smashed bad," Dupere said. "Lucky!"

Anne said, "Brandon, drink this."

He tilted the bottle and let Rusty John's hot liquor flow into his throat. It brought him a jolt as it hit his empty stomach. But it put fresh strength into him almost from the beginning. He gritted his teeth against the pain Dupere was bringing him. He leaned his head against the chair back, said harshly:

"World's all wrong, John. They bring us into it clean and innocent, and then we grow up and find out it's all rank filth and corruption. The evil that's in men's minds, and in their souls, will be the end of things. Some day it'll storm and be all over. It'll sweep away all the bad, and then maybe the world can start anew."

There was anger in Brandon and Dupere read it, plumbing its cause. Killing Van Caslin had stirred him to the depths. Everything in him was revolting against Madrid and the violence he had begun. Dupere asked dryly:

"Anything you think you can do about it?"

The anger drained out from Brandon like a gust of air. He was still gritting his teeth against the pain. "Nothing. Just march through the rank filth and muddy rottenness. Die some day and we come to the end of it all. Maybe I'll die before I get anything done. Maybe I'll die long after I should have died. Man can't control that part of it. But he should."

John Dupere laughed but there was no humor in the sound. "Take another drink. I'll get a pad in front and another in back of you and bind it up. Best a doctor could do. After I'm done you can start marching or riding through the rank

mud, if you're fool enough. I figure you'll ride, after what Jeffries tells you."

Jeffries had been silent through this, his gaze on the floor. He looked up now and Brandon was struck anew by the strain in his face.

"I was with Harrel when he died," he said morosely. "Maybe I could have killed Madrid, I don't know. But it wouldn't have saved Harrel. Nothing could have saved his life. Lake moved too fast. When Harrel rode out of Bell-M he was shot to pieces. Holding fast to his saddle. I don't know what kept him on his horse. I got to him about a half hour later, and he was still sitting his horse. When I got him on the grass he didn't know me. I talked but he couldn't answer. Rusty came along a little while later and we stayed beside him till he died."

There was a heavy stillness until Dupere said, "We took him into Long 7. Miss Lana wasn't around and we waited. After awhile one of the hands came in and we sent him after the crew. When she rode in she was pretty much broke up. But she's going out to smash Madrid. Sometime tonight she's taking her crew to war on Madrid."

"But we'll get there first!" Brandon said. "I've got Van Caslin's horse and gun and I'll get Madrid."

Dupere nodded. "So I figured you."

From in front of the fireplace Anne spoke swiftly. "But not until you've eaten, Brandon. I can't stop you, and I don't know as I want to. But you must eat first."

Brandon agreed and then let his eyes range over the room. "None of you needs to go with me if he'd rather not. But I could use you if you're willing. Slim?—Rusty?—Jeff?"

They all nodded except Jeffries. His face was grave, still, and he answered quietly. "I ride with you. But I don't want it. Watching Harrel die has been something. It will be my last fight."

"Man never gets done fighting," Dupere murmured, and his words made Brandon puzzle at the contrast in him as against the disheartened way he had lain in bed on their first meeting.

Holding Harrel during his final moments had got into Jeff-

ries, dimming the unrest. Death had come suddenly very close and personal. The wildness had died in him, his streak of sullenness, and a soberness was taking its place. It would make him a steadier man and Brandon was strangely glad. . . .

Before he finished eating, the others left the room. Slim and Jeffries walked to the bunkhouse and returned shortly, their pockets fattened. They had gone after the last of the Spencer cartridges, though there was nothing said between them. Dupere rose from the table and drew the needle gun from its slings. His face was dark, emotionless. He said in a wholly aroused voice:

"Back there in the hills I had as nice a cabin as we needed. Good grass, water, and the things we hauled from Texas. Some of that stuff we got when we were first married and Margaret was mighty proud of it. I can remember my daughter climbing over it when she was a baby. They burned all that for us." He shook his bushy head and was silent a long moment. "This night will go a long way toward wiping that out. But what to do with Anne? She don't stay here alone."

"I thought she might ride to Harrel's," Brandon said and caught Anne's grimace. It was almost as though he'd struck her mentally, and he was puzzled about that.

Anne said caustically, "You men have been doing a lot of talking, sometimes about things that haven't made much sense. Now let me ask you something. Jeff doesn't want to ride against Bell-M—is it necessary?"

Dupere lifted his shaggy brows. "What else would you expect?"

"It is necessary," Brandon told her. "The valley will always be a dark and dangerous ground unless we clean out Madrid."

She lifted her shoulders, resigned; and Dupere said again, "She don't stay here alone."

"I'm going up on the rim," Anne told them. "I'll take along Francher's rifle."

"She'll be all right there," Jeffries said. His eyes were lowered to the floor and he said in a tired tone, "There's only one

reason I hold back from this. It's Harrel, the way he died. I wish I might have treated him different while he lived."

Brandon saw shock cross the planes of Rusty John's face. He gripped the table with his hands and the big arm muscles stood out. "I guess I feel that way. There were a few times I ordered them to stay off my grass. Maybe I was wrong."

Anne had been staring at her father, now she advanced nearer to him. "Who did you ask to stay away from us, Dad? Which one?"

"Both of them. Henry Harrel, his girl and their crew."

"When did you tell them this?"

"After Ma died."

"So you told—Lana to stay away?"

"Yes, I guess I did. I didn't want to see any of them."

She took a backward step, her skin blanched white. She was conscious of Jeffries watching with a great yearning. For the first time that she knew he appeared to want more of her than her body. He wanted to share her thoughts, to know her comfort and share his own with her. But the cabin containing its men geared to ride was no place for affection.

There were two conflicting stimulants at work within her; her flesh was ablaze with desire for Jeffries and she feared for his safety; and this news her father had let slip of Lana. She understood now why she had been alone during that period of her mother's funeral. She remembered her unkindness to Lana and it brought an ache to her breast.

Now Slim thrust his head into the doorway. "Horses ready," he said. "Let's ride!"

Dupere first turned to his daughter, saw the grave paleness of her cheeks and dropped a hand onto her shoulder. Then he went through the doorway carrying his needle gun. Brandon went out next climbing onto the tall gray. Slim had transferred the rifle boot from his own saddle and the Sharps' rode comfortably close at his knee. . . . Jeffries came last from the cabin. They waited until he climbed into leather and then their eyes drifted to Brandon. He lifted his hand slightly, a mute gesture, and they filed along the corral fence beneath the fringes of the trees.

Anne outened the bracket lamp above the table. She leaned her back to the rough wall hearing the hoof sound grow softer and die. The past hour had been difficult and now the letdown left her drained and weak. Jeffries had left the mark of his kiss against her mouth. There had been a gentleness about him she had never known before. It gave her courage, and at the same time his new found tranquillity brought her great emptiness. When her thoughts returned to Lana she was torn by conflicting emotions.

A great futility worked at her heart. She brought up her hand, dropping her face into her palm, and tried to let go. Her flesh trembled slightly and her lips moved silently: "Never—never—I shouldn't have talked to her the way I did." She seemed to be crying and yet her cheeks remained dry. The tears failed to run. . . .

She caught the heavy thunder of their hoofs from the canyon's throat and withdrew into the cabin's outer shadows. Francher's rifle came up against her chest; she gripped the cold steel fiercely in her fright. At first she took them for Madrid's riders and blamed herself terribly for her delay in ascending the rim. But they weren't cowmen who burst from the filtered sky-light beneath the trees. They were miners from Jasmine—lusting after excitement, some drunken, all of them willing to sow a terrible justice.

Hot light whipped her eyes as the foremost riders flung from their saddles. They went clamoring into the cabin where their voices rose in angry protest at its vacancy. She saw light flicker before the window, then a sudden flood of yellow as the lamp lighted. She heard someone shout:

"They're not here. He's gone!"

To her horror her pots and kettles came hurtling from the entrance. Next came the benches Aaron Francher had carved from pine timber. The first struck on end, legs crumbling, and went smashing over. Two dark clad miners were bringing the long table into the yard. They threw it on top of the benches. Another had torn her simple curtains from the windows and tossed them mockingly onto the pile. A man called:

"Bring the lamp. Set it afire!"

Heat continued to leap from her eyes as she lifted her rifle. Fully two dozen hoarse-voiced men had filled her yard by now, and she chose the one who had torn her curtains. Her voice was a brittle command.

"Get away from there!"

The men fell away, startled. She advanced with her gun barrel levelled while the thick-lunged miner stood before her. She heard a man cry, "Grab her! Knock that gun away!" She recognized him from his voice as Dunleavy.

But the group closest by her had grown quiet. Riding after a man whom they believed a killer was one thing; molesting a woman, even though she shouldered a rifle, was another matter. She saw uncertainty break across their features and she took heart, advancing on her victim. She said angrily,

"Where were you brought up? A hog pen was too good!"

By now Dunleavy stood beside her. She tipped the rifle barrel, caught him against the side of the head. He fell back with a cry. Others were coming in now and grasping her arms, her shoulders. There was no longer threat in their action, they held her merely to prevent violence, but she found herself helpless in their grasp. Where would they be if either Jeffries or Brandon found them holding her like this, she wondered. Brandon MacRae with his steel-sharp gaze, his Windsor tie and the deadly Navy beneath his arm. All at once his mental image made her shudder and she was thankful for Jeffries.

From the edge of her glance she saw Honest Lavinsky lift in his stirrups, beginning an angry protest. Another man swung the back of his hand, a great sweeping blow that knocked Honest from his saddle. She felt her heart turn to stone. Now Dunleavy's words beat against her consciousness.

"Where is he? Where's MacRae?"

"Gone out after Madrid." Again anger drove up from her deepest parts and she flung at him, "He's the one you should be after. Why do you hunt an innocent man? You who know the men Madrid has ruined—the cabins he has burned—" she stopped and the tears that had failed her before now brimmed from her eyes. The miners fell away completely sobered by her

crying. A good woman's tears were something they all remembered from far behind in their lives; it was something they hadn't looked for. Even Dunleavy was powerless to face her weakness. His eyes dropped as he moved away.

As he turned, his shoulder collided against a horse and he lost balance, nearly falling. The steel hook at the end of Ude's arm caught him under the chin, holding him. Slowly he fought his way to his feet. But he was unable to shake loose Ude's hook. It dug into his windpipe cutting his air. Dead stillness had fallen in the yard and into this Andre dropped his words.

"Miss Dupere, tell us again why MacRae is after Madrid."

"Because Madrid has been behind our trouble. He wants the miners driven out, the cowmen scattered—he wants all the Jasmynes!"

"Do you know what happened at McPhee draw?"

She nodded. "Brandon found the men murdered in their tent. There was a butchered Roman Two cow in the draw. But we didn't kill those men on their ledge. Brandon's not that kind."

Ude returned his attention to Dunleavy, drawn in close to his horse. "Who told you about McPhee draw?" he demanded. He released the pressure of his hook slightly.

Dunleavy gasped for air, his eyes ringed by fear. "It was Van Caslin who made the talk of what MacRae would do. When we heard about the McPhee business we naturally figured he did it. I may have been wrong."

"You were never more wrong in your life," Ude said harshly and whipped his eyes over the gold miners. "You men have made a mistake. I say to you now get back to Jasmine. But before you go get down and crawl in front of this woman."

From the edge of the group a man spoke querulously. "What's the matter with riding to Bell-M? If we made a mistake we can still get it straight."

Men were moving after their horses. A few others began lifting the table and carrying it into the cabin. The man who had torn down the curtains gathered them together, found them covered with dirt and wiped them against his trousers. Now from the center of the group sounded Honest's warning.

He had regained his saddle and his hand was lifted, his thick fingers spread above his head.

"Before you break apart, gentlemen," he told them, "there will be no more beef slaughtered until it is paid for! You will resolve on this point before you ride away from here!"

Andre Ude had come out of saddle and was talking gently with Anne. The scene in the ranch yard had greatly shocked his sense of propriety. In his politeness born of gentler days he was asking Anne Dupere's forgiveness for the miners. . . .

CHAPTER 16

Brandon frowned at the jingle of bit chains and wondered how often the scraping of iron shod hoofs had carried to a Bell-M man. Madrid must have sentry posts thrown widely about the range, a system by which they could communicate with each other, join forces and rout trouble before it reached their main headquarters. They were now half way across the valley and thus far the moon had not swept from behind its cloud-bank. With more luck they should reach the first lifts in virtual darkness—if luck continued the moon would slip out later when they reached headquarters, and they would have a lighted target.

All this if they succeeded in working past Madrid's sentries. They were letting them come through, but was their rear, their route of escape being closed off behind them? Brandon rode with constant pain lacing his shoulder. Tiredness had ground its deep lines into his face. But the others knew nothing of his discomfiture. This was part of an ancient profession—hiding the feelings—and Brandon was old in its secrets. There would be no letup now that Roman Two was gambling its scant weight against Madrid's might.

Small squares of lantern light stood out a long way across the valley revealing windows at Bell-M. They brought him a sense of immeasurable relief, for they signified Lana Harrel

had not yet thrown her Long 7 riders into action. Above all else he must get to Madrid before Lana arrived; he must get there with a minimum of warning. The sudden thrust of her passage across his mind brought him an agony far greater than his shoulder. He was filled with loathing for the chore that remained, but if Madrid won this hand he would force his will and his lusting over Lana.

The first rise of the Jasmines imposed itself between them. Dupere drew in, swinging his bushy brows to Brandon. "I guess it's time for talk. How do you want it done?"

Brandon made his decision. "We ride to the high slope above their layout. When we start shooting his men will come out. We'll drop them as they make a try for horses."

"If they stay fortified inside their buildings?"

"They won't. They know how few we are, and they'll count on a quick battle and wiping us out."

"Could be they're not here?"

"Where else would they go? He counts Long 7 already out of the fight. Van Caslin was given the job of turning the miners against us—he doesn't know yet Van Caslin's dead and he'll wait until the gold hunters make their try."

"Which they'll do. Maybe tonight," Dupere warned gruffly.

Brandon nodded. "Anne's on the rim so they can't hurt her. We'll lose the cabin, the sheds. But what else is there for us to lose? Our fight isn't with the gold hunters—we'll straighten with them later."

Dupere mulled it over. He offered one more objection, glancing to the cloud-banked sky. "Suppose we can't make them out in the dark? Might easily get ourselves separated in a chase and shoot each other."

The conviction had already come to Brandon there would be no aid from the moon tonight and he had altered his plans. He said slowly, "I'll take care of that when the time comes. You'll have light."

Dupere turned his face toward the lifts wondering but not questioning Brandon. "We'll make a clean sweep of it, then," he said.

"They can always call it off," Brandon reminded them. "But Madrid's not like that. He won't quit."

No, Madrid would never quit. Brandon knew Roman Two had not yet borne the fury of Madrid's power. They had been slowly grinding away at his outer defenses—and they had made progress with the aid of some luck—but the impregnable bastion, the cunning and tenacity of the man himself had yet to be stormed. . . .

Ten minutes later Bell-M had still not challenged them. Brandon drew in where the mouth of one draw emptied into the valley. He had a clear vision from here to Madrid's quarters and there were no sentries visible. It seemed to him quite feasible to ride directly to headquarters; he was topping Van Caslin's horse, they were looking expectantly for Van Caslin's return, and under the cloak of night a guard might let him in. He spoke softly to his small closely-held crew.

"You three take position the way we planned. I'm riding the gray directly to headquarters, they'll probably take me for the scalp hunter. Hold your fire until the first haymound's ablaze. I may not have chance to light another, but one fire behind Madrid's quarters will outline his layout. One other thing. Keep your lead off Madrid's main house. I'll be there after the fire."

They sat reading him mutely with their glances. Brandon could feel the force of their thoughts, their unspoken condemnation of his brashness. He reached over, slipped his Sharp's into the empty boot beneath Dupere's knee. The heavy gun might come in useful from the heights and he had no use for it at close range. He transferred to Dupere a handful of lead balls, said at last: "Is all this clear?"

Dupere replied brusquely, "You damn, ringy fool! You know we can't get down there fast enough if they catch you!"

"But you have got fourteen shots in those two Spencers. Make them count." He turned the gray, slipped softly down-slope. Behind, he heard Jeffries say:

"Good luck!"

Then Slim's voice, "Well, let's ride!"

The way was smooth across the hard-baked valley floor with a smell of dust and dry grasses raised by a faint wind. Here and there stood scrub timber, a slice of shelf rock that had eroded centuries before and rolled down into the valley. They made excellent nests for Madrid's sentrymen, and Brandon rode slowly on expecting any moment to hear the challenge. When the man came he rode in from the left on a rangy horse, carbine levelled across the saddle. Brandon called out softly, "Van Caslin. Coming in," and rode steadily forward.

As he hoped, the man had never met Van Caslin and was going solely by description. He said begrudgingly, "You took your time comin' back."

"I played hell in Jasmine. The miners are ready to ride. You'll catch a fire at Roman Two any minute."

The man laughed in a throaty way. "Madrid heard about it. We've had trouble with Harrel since you pulled out. He's dead, but Madrid's waiting for the girl to bring in her crew. He expects to teach her a few things before tonight's gone!"

Brandon rode on beyond the sentry. Chill had suddenly struck his spine and he knew a racing dread for Lana. So Madrid had laid his plans for an ambush of Long 7! He would dearly have liked to question the sentry. But any further talk would have aroused the guard's suspicions. He pressed on, pushing the gray harder, now, and carrying Van Caslin's Colt openly in his hand.

He approached as near to Bell-M's light as he dared, quartered the gray toward the haymounds behind headquarters. When he struck rougher country he quit his saddle, going forward afoot and lifting steadily with the ranch slope. His mouth had run dry, his thoughts bitter.

Lana had refused her love to Madrid, and Madrid was a tenacious man with his lust coursing deep. It was his time now to bring pressure against Lana; it would be a pressure like the torture-screws that set men whimpering, but it would be used against a woman's soul. Lana was clearly before him; he saw the tilt of her head in the sunlight, the tantalizing fullness of her body. Her throaty voice came back to him promising all the things Madrid would die without possessing. *No*,

Brandon thought. He'll not use her! He'll not use her in hell!

He traveled widely around the ranch buildings taking his chance on a guard close in to quarters. A slip now, a shot prematurely, would be fatal. But he achieved a position behind quarters without trouble. Fifty yards beyond stood the first mound. He wondered whether Dupere and his crew were in position. As soon as the fire lighted the yard he would know.

He knelt on one knee, rubbed his match across his boot. Now he paused with his ear close by the ground. He could hear the dull beat of horses running in the night. They were drawing nearer to Bell-M. Would it be Lana bringing her men? Rank sweat moistened his brow as he dropped his match in the hay. It caught instantly sweeping the back of the mound in a sheet of flame. There was no time for a second try, and he sprang from the fire and ran low over the ground. He raced toward Madrid's main house expecting any moment to hear the whine of Bell-M's lead, expecting the crash of his own guns answering the fire from the mounds. But there were no shots from either quarter. Obviously Madrid's men had not yet spied him, and his own crew was giving him time to reach cover.

When he was close to the main cabin his boots clashed hopelessly against an unyielding trap. He was thrown across space head foremost and came down with a jolt. The pain in his shoulder was so violent his senses blanked out momentarily. But it could not have been for long, for when he came to he heard the bell; a frantic, persistent tinkling that set him to cursing. Sam Madrid had strung taut baling wire a few inches above the ground and tied a mare-bell somewhere along the line. When his foot tangled with the baling wire he had given Bell-M all the warning they needed. He had lost Van Caslin's pistol during his fall and it was nowhere in sight.

Shouts now came from the side of the bunkhouse, the Bell-M hands crowding the yard. It took all his will to withdraw his Navy from its holster beneath his injured shoulder. With it thrust before him he waited flat to the ground.

They came forward in a wild bunch. Eight men he judged,

and he drove his first shot at the leader. His own crew had seen these hands from the hill; Dupere and his men opened up a vicious rattle of shots that caught Bell-M in a crossfire. The Spencers kept going long after the heavy crack of the needle gun. The lighted haymound gave them a good target, for Bell-M left one man on the ground and another was howling as they dodged and twisted their way back to safety. Brandon sent in his final shot as the door swung closed on the bunkhouse.

Then came the husky roar of the Sharp's. Dupere had held on the window and Brandon heard the tinkling of glass shards, the crash of things all through the bunkhouse as the slug dug into the far wall. The bunk hands, now, would be turning their attention to the crew in the hills. It would give Brandon his chance of getting inside Madrid's cabin. He was on his feet racing for the rear wall, hoping with all his heart Madrid was here. He caught the dull sheen of metal before him and snatched for it in passing, coming up with Van Caslin's Colt. Luck again had played into his hands.

The fight had commenced now in earnest with the men in the bunkhouse emptying their handguns into the hills. Brandon heard others calling for rifles, the range was too great for Colts. Yet they continued to use them, their slobbering muzzle-fire flowering along the front windows, the dark rectangle of the door. He caught an answering fire from the hills and it, too, was pistol fire. This confused him since Dupere would waste no time with small arms. And then the truth beat against Brandon's brain and he stood with his back tight to Madrid's wall and felt the chill pass over him. There was no lead striking the bunkhouse, which meant Dupere was shooting in another direction. An explanation of this might be that after the initial volley Madrid's outriders had closed on Dupere. If this was so his crew was now on the defensive, fighting against others positioned higher on the hill.

It would mean Brandon had been left without aid in the ranch yard fight; or it could be Dupere would win a speedy victory and be able to return his fire against the bunkhouse.

Either way, the fight would be without quarter, and now Madrid would follow them to hell for this.

The rear door to the cabin was slightly ajar and there was a lamp burning on the plank table. There was no sign of Madrid in the room, no sound from inside. Brandon gripped Van Caslin's Colt tight at his side, gave the door an inward shove hard enough to jar back against the inner wall. Still he saw no one in the room. He called into the opening.

"Madrid, let's talk. You and I have got enough brains to settle this without guns. We're men—not range cattle." He waited without receiving an answer, went on doggedly determined to end this without further killing. "Madrid, I'm carrying Van Caslin's gun. His horse is in your pasture. Your props are falling from under!"

Still no reply, and Brandon sensed a reaction of defeat. He had made his try hoping Madrid might consider peace without recourse to further bloodshed. Any course which might preserve man's honor and yet do justice to mentality beyond the level of beasts. But Madrid could not understand, or he would not listen. Brandon suddenly grew cold; he understood finally he must destroy Madrid in the same manner in which Lake and Van Caslin had been destroyed.

He planted his boot on the sill, plunged into the room fully believing Madrid's shot would come from behind some blind corner. He wheeled quickly, his glance sweeping the four walls. It was a long room without definite division between living quarters and sleeping quarters; it was built solidly of logs and ornamented by animal skins and heads and coiled lariats and riding gear. But Madrid was not in the room.

The knowledge penetrated slowly into Brandon's consciousness bringing with it the fact that he had won himself a position at Bell-M that would be difficult to assail. He reached first after the table lamp outening the light, then moved swiftly to the solitary side window flanking the bunkhouse. The firing had fallen off from this quarter, the long, log wall standing in bright relief from the blazing light of the hay-mound. It seemed strange not to hear the shooting that had hammered his eardrums. He realized that under the strain of

entering Madrid's cabin he had not noticed the firing slackening off. But another fact took his attention. Lead from the hill was again smacking the bunkhouse front, the high whine of balls striking obliquely and whizzing off in the night. His crew had succeeded in reloading their rifles and were forcing the Bell-M hands to dig for cover.

When their firing slackened off there was a strange lull. Brandon could hear water splashing in the distance. His gaze ranged the yard, locating a log trough into which hill water had been piped. As he watched he caught the blue-red flare of rifle fire from a man positioned behind the trough. The bullet blasted wood from the window frame beside him, spun onward through the cabin. Brandon chopped down with his Colt. He fired twice, heard the man's rifle clatter with a drum-like sound against the full trough.

For a vague moment he caught hoof beats pounding through the yard. Once again lead began hammering against the bunkhouse, this time from another angle. Other balls were smashing into the logs of Madrid's main house. The marksmen were working a regular pattern, from front to rear, trying for a lucky shot. The timber was heavy, and yet occasional balls knocked the mud daubing loose and sent it chattering around the room. The lamp behind him went banging off the table under a direct hit. It was too vicious to stand up against and Brandon lowered to the floor. From the other house he heard a man yell, "It's Long 7!"

Lead continued to bore through the daubing between the logs. The air became heavy with the smell of dust, of his own burned powder hanging in layers. He heard men running from the direction of the bunkhouse, a continual shouting from horsemen drawing in closer about the quarters. He thought: Bell-M has been driven out to fight Harrel's men in the open. But Lana! Was she riding with her crew?

Lead was still breaking through the cracks, pinning him flat behind the massive base log. He tried to make a way toward the back door and a heavy bullet tore splinters from the floor directly in front of his head. The thought came to him that

he might be killed by Lana's men. He called loudly against the racketing gunfire:

"It's Roman Two! MacRae! Cut the shooting!"

Evidently they failed to hear, for their lead came as regularly as before. Lana's marksmen were making a sieve of Madrid's wall. He kept calling, lifting his voice in a long call as their firing fell off.

He drew himself erect against the splintered wall, holding his Colt which still carried four shots. His shoulder throbbed with a constant, pain-beating pulse. Evidently he had twisted himself more than he realized while snaking across the floor. From far off he caught the rhythm of running feet, stood fast against the wall while the runner neared the cabin's door. He felt a rush of sudden dizziness, warned sharply: "Call out!"

"Brandon!" She came up against him in a flurry, her arms hunting him out, drawing herself closer.

He said, "You shouldn't have crossed the yard. A shot might have caught you from the bunkhouse."

"The bunkhouse is empty. Bell-M is running."

"Running?"

"My men are chasing them into the hills. Those that are left will scatter. They'll never come back!"

Her news struck him like an unsolved riddle. Why would Bell-M quit under anything short of complete disaster? His own crew had hit them hard, and Lana's men had hit hard, but he gave Madrid credit for more steel than this. There was something wrong, something not according to his calculations.

Lana asked softly, "Where is Madrid?" Her eyes were drifting over the cabin drawn by a power she could not control.

"No, not in here," he told her sharply. "I didn't kill him. I haven't faced him. Lana, you stay here."

Now she had discovered the wound at his shoulder. Her words were a soft murmur of breath against his ear. "And you came here alone!" Her hands remained in his shirt, her fingers locked and denying him freedom. "Brandon, don't go! Let my men flush him out. If he meets you—Brandon, please!"

He was beyond her, headed unsteadily toward the door. "Lana, wait until I come to you."

There were two motionless forms in the yard, the man he had shot behind the water trough and another, firelight from the mound lighting them grotesquely as they lay on the ground. He found a Long 7 hand stationed at the bunkhouse door. A man with a dour, horselike face drained of color. His voice was strained in a certain weakness.

"Bad in there. Was hell while it lasted!"

Brandon nodded, pushed himself into the bunkhouse. The place was a shambles of up-ended tables and gear. Striking a match he found the lamp lying on the floor and smashed beyond using. The edge of his glance picked out something else, and he moved onward around the splintered window glass and stooped after a candle. With its light to guide him he went over the bunkhouse. A man sat in one corner, legs straight out and back against the wall. From his color Brandon could tell he had been hit. The man said,

"I already tossed them my gun. While it lasted it sure was hell. Why—oh why the hell!—did I get mixed in this?"

"You hurt bad?"

"The hip. I'll be all right, but I guess I'll never ride."

The candlelight picked out a blocky form lying on one of the bunks. Brandon went forward experiencing a strange sensation working along his back. Full candlelight fell on Madrid's face. It was in tight repose, bland of expression. A blue hole with slightly raised flesh about its thin circumference stood on his left temple. One small drop of blood had trickled down against his eyebrows. Death would have looked a good deal like sleep if it weren't for these things.

Brandon asked, "When did he get it?"

"When the fight first opened. One of them damn rifles on the hill. He never knew what struck him."

Brandon turned slowly, sight of Madrid lifting his stomach. He said, "When you're well you'll be given a horse. Hang on somehow and keep riding. Don't ever come back." The man's face fell and he laid his hands out flat and pressed on the floor.

Brandon passed outside drawing deeply of fresh air, feeling his nerves stretch and quiver. Two riders were pulling in from the long upward slant of the yard and the Long 7 man had them covered with his rifle. They kept their hands away from their guns. Brandon said quickly, "My men. Let them alone!"

Dupere said brusquely, "So your hide's in one piece?" He came out of saddle with a heavy grunt. Jeffries might not be able to stand at all if he tried to come aground at this moment, Brandon decided. His face was wan, tired, but Brandon caught the relief.

Dupere saw his eyes running searchingly to the lifts. He said quietly, "We got jumped on the hill. Three Madrid riders—I ain't just sure what became of them. Slim—he won't be ridin' down."

Brandon bowed his head, walked slowly away. Dupere's voice came after. "Where's Madrid?"

The horsefaced Long 7 man answered. "In there. It ain't a pretty sight."

It was an ugly, uncalled for devastation, Brandon decided as his feet led him onward toward the main cabin. It had been brought about by one man's search for power, by his greed and wanton lust. But some day the wind would blow the stench of powder from this land; some day the valley men would live it down, as men lived down all their bad memories. Already the night was freer, cleaner, the future brighter. . . .

He felt her hand reach him as he rounded the cabin's corner. Her voice was low against his senses. "Brandon, we have a great deal before us. Don't feel too bad." She knew he had killed men, knew his insides were churning. She fell against him, face to his chest.

He drew her in tightly, considering. "When?" he asked. "How soon is the future? You've held off too long!"

Her face was a while lifting. He read the half smile on her mouth, the impatience within her. The haymound fire was painting quick highlights against her black hair. He had made his long hard gamble, and won.

"Now, Brandon," she said very softly. "Now." And he bent to meet her lips.



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The Kid with the hawklike face covered Brandon, the hammer of his pistol drawn to half cock. Watching him, Brandon was sure the kid didn't have the stomach for what was coming. He also knew that if he moved a muscle, the kid would let him have it.

From beyond the lantern his eye caught a movement and with it he heard the crush of steel against skull. The kid collapsed and there stood Andre Ude, the man with the hook on the end of his arm.

"Did you have to strike so hard?" Brandon said. "He's only a boy."

"He's too tough to kill," Andre snapped. "And you shouldn't have joined me if you're not ready to see this town cleaned up."

Cover painting by Robert Schulz

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