

A Noose for the Desperado

**By
Clifton Adams**

***Free*editorial** 

A Noose For The Desperado

Chapter One

I SCOUTED THE TOWN for two full days before going into it. There hadn't been any sign of cavalry, and I figured the law wouldn't be much because nobody cared what happened to a few Mexicans. There it stood near the foothills of the Huachucas, a few shabby adobe huts and one or two frame buildings broiling in the Arizona sun. But to me it looked like Abilene, Dodge, and Ellsworth all rolled into one.

It had been a long trail from Texas, and my horse was sore-footed and needed rest and a bellyful of grain. I was beginning to grow a fuzzy beard around my chin and upper lip, and I had a second hide of trail dust that was beginning to crawl with the hundred different kinds of lice that you pick up in the desert. I was ready to take my chances on somebody recognizing me, just so I could get a bath and a shave and maybe a change of clothes.

So that was how I came to ride into this little place of Ocotillo, on that big black horse that used to belong to my pal Pappy Garret. I had Pappy's rifle in the saddle boot and Pappy's guns tied down on my thighs. But that was all right. Pappy didn't have any use for them. The last time I saw him had been on a lonely hilltop in Texas. He had died the way most men like that die sooner or later, I guess, with a lawman's bullet in his guts.

It was around sundown when we hit this place of Ocotillo, and it turned out that it was on the fiesta of San Juan's Day. I didn't know that at the time, but it was clear that they were having a celebration of some kind. The men were all in various stages of drunkenness, some of them singing and pounding on heavy guitars. Some of the young bucks were dancing with their girls in the dusty street or in the cantinas. A fat old priest was grinning at everybody, and the kids were crying and shouting and singing and rattling brightly painted gourds. It was fiesta, all right. It was like riding out of death into life.

I pulled my horse up at a watering trough and let him drink while the commotion went on all around us. Three girls in bright dresses danced

around us, giggling. The big black lifted his nose out of the trough and spewed water all over them and they ran down the street screaming and laughing. Everybody seemed to be having a hell of a time.

Another girl came up and slapped the black's neck, looking at me.

"Hello, gringo!" she said.

"Hello, yourself."

"You come to fiesta, eh?" she said. Then she laughed and slapped the black again.

"Is that what it is, fiesta?"

"Sure, it's fiesta. San Juan's Day." She laughed again. "Where you come from, gringo? Long way, maybe. You plenty dirty."

"Maybe," I said. "Can I find anybody sober enough to give me a shave and fix a bath?"

"Sure, gringo," she grinned. "You come with me."

I had been looking around, not paying much attention to the girl. But now I looked at her. She was young, about eighteen or nineteen, but she wasn't any kid. Her dark eyes were full of hell, and when she flashed her white teeth in a grin you got the idea that she would like to sink them into your throat. She wore the usual loud skirt and fancy blouse with a lot of needlework on it that Mexicans like to deck themselves out in on their holidays.

"Look!" she yelled. Then she started jumping up and down and laughing like a kid.

Somebody had turned an old mossy-horn loose in the street and everybody was scattering and screaming as if a stampede was bearing down on them. The old range cow shook its head, bewildered; then some kids came up and began prodding it down the street. The yelling and screaming kept up until the cow disappeared down at the other end. That seemed to be a signal for everybody to have another drink, so all the menfolks started crowding into the cantinas.

"Does that end the fiesta?" I asked.

"Just beginning," she said. "At night they go to church and burn candles and pray to San Juan that their souls may be saved." She laughed again. "Then they drink some more. Tomorrow they go back to the fields and work until next San Juan's Day."

"How about that bath and shave?" I said.

"Sure, gringo. Come with me."

I left my horse at the hitching rack, but I took the rifle out of the saddle boot. The girl led me between two adobe huts, then through a gate in a high adobe wall. The wall completely surrounded a little plot at the back of the hut. A dog slept and some chickens scratched under a blackjack tree.

"This is a hell of a place for a barbershop," I said.

"No barber," the girl grinned. "I shave." She cut the air with her hand, as if slicing someone's throat with a razor.

"No, thanks," I said.

She laughed. "No worry, gringo. I fix."

She took my arm and led me into the house. The thick adobe walls made the room cool, and there was a pleasant smell of wine and garlic. It was like walking into another world. There was nothing there to remind me of the fiesta, or of the lonesome desert, or Pappy Garret. In this house I could even forget myself. I felt a little ridiculous wearing two pistols and carrying a rifle.

"Whose house is this?" I said.

She stabbed herself with a finger. "My house." Then she yelled, "Papacito!" When she got no answer, she shrugged. "Come with me."

The house had only two rooms. The first room had a fireplace and a charcoal brazier for cooking and a plank table and three leather-bottom chairs. In one corner there were some blankets rolled up, and I figured that was where Papacito slept when he was home. The other room had a mound of clay shaped up against one wall with some blankets on it, and

that was the bed. A rough plank wardrobe and another leather-bottom chair completed the furniture.

"Wait here," the girl said.

She went out and I heard her shaking up the coals in the fireplace, and pretty soon she came back lugging a big wooden tub. "For bath," she said. On the next trip she brought a razor and a small piece of yellow lye soap. "For shave."

I grinned. "I can't complain about the service."

"You wait," she said.

I was too tired to try to understand why she was going to so much trouble. Maybe that's the way Mexicans were. Maybe they liked to wait on the gringos. I was beginning to feel easy and comfortable for the first time since I had left Texas. I pulled off my boots, sat in the chair, and put my feet on the clay bed. I was beginning to like Arizona just fine.

"Say," I called, "have you got anything to drink?"

She came in with a crock jug and handed it to me. "Wine," she said.

I swigged from the neck and the stuff was sweet and warm as it hit my stomach. "Thanks," I said. Then I had another go at the jug, and that was enough. I never took more than two drinks of anything.

That was partly Pappy Garret's teaching, but mostly it came from seeing foothills filled with gunmen who could shoot like forked lightning when they were sober, but when they forgot to set the bottle down they were just another notch in some ambitious punk's gun butt.

The girl came in with a crock bowl of hot water. I got up and she put the water on the chair and a broken mirror on the wardrobe.

"Bath before long," she said, and went back into the other room.

She had a way of knocking out all the words except the most essential ones, but she spoke pretty good English.

I went over to the wardrobe and inspected my face in the mirror. It gave me quite a shock at first, partly because I hadn't seen my face in quite a

while, and partly because of the dirt and beard and the sunken places around the cheeks and eyes. It didn't look like my face at all.

It didn't look like the face of a kid who still wasn't quite twenty years old. The eyes had something to do with it, and the tightness around the mouth. I studied those eyes carefully because they reminded me of some other eyes I had seen, but I couldn't place them at first.

They had a quick look about them, even when they weren't moving. They didn't seem to focus completely on anything.

Then I remembered one time when I was just a sprout in Texas. I had been hunting and the dogs had jumped a wolf near the arroyo on our place, and after a long chase they had cornered him in the bend of a dry wash. As I came up to where the dogs were barking I could see the wolf snarling and snapping at them, but all the time those eyes of his were casting around to find a way to get out of there.

And he did get out, finally. He was a big gray lobo, as vicious as they come. He ripped the throat of one of my dogs and blasted his way out and disappeared down the arroyo. But I heard later that another pack of dogs caught him and killed him.

"What's wrong?"

The girl came in with a kettle of hot water and poured it into the tub.

"Nothing," I said, and began lathering my face.

I started to leave my mustache on, thinking that it might keep people from recognizing me, but when I got the rest of my face shaved my upper lip looked like hell. It was just some scraggly pink fuzz and I couldn't fool anybody with that. The girl poured some cold water in the tub on top of the hot, and filled it about halfway to the top.

"Ready," she said. "Give me clothes."

"Nothing doing. I take a bath in private or I don't take one at all."

"To wash," she added.

These Mexicans must be crazy, I thought. Why anybody would want to take a saddle tramp in and take care of him I didn't know. But it was all right with me, if that was the way she wanted it.

"All right," I said. "You get in the other room and I'll throw them through the door."

She stood with her hands on her hips, grinning. "Gringos!" But she went in the other room and I began to strip off. When I threw the things in the other room she picked them up and went outside.

I must have soaked for an hour or more there in the tub, twisting and turning and scrubbing every inch of myself that I could reach. It was dark outside, and the only light in the house came from the fireplace in the other room.

"Say," I called, "are those clothes dry yet?"

"Pretty soon," she said. Her voice was so close it made me jump. Instinctively, I made a grab for my pistols, which I had put on the chair and pulled up beside the tub, but she laughed and I stopped the grab in mid-air.

"Get the hell out of here," I said.

She was leaning against the wardrobe laughing at me, and with the red light from the fireplace playing on her face. She must have found my tobacco and corn-shuck papers in my shirt, because there was a thin brown cigarette dangling from one corner of her mouth. That shook me, because I had never seen a woman smoke before, except for the fancy girls in Abilene or Dodge or one of the other trail towns.

I saw that she wasn't going to get out until she got good and ready. I couldn't figure her out. One minute she seemed to be a simple Mexican girl, almost a child, with a straightforward eagerness to help a stranger out; and the next minute she was voluptuous and cynical and as wise as Eve. I didn't know enough about women to know what to do with her. I had looked into big-eyed muzzles of .44's without feeling as helpless as I did when I looked at her.

"All right," I said, "you've looked. Now how about getting my clothes?"

She dragged deep on the cigarette and let it drop to the packed clay floor.

"Sure, gringo."

She went into the other room and threw my pants through the doorway. They were still damp, but I didn't care. I put them on. She came in with my shirt, threw it at me, and leaned against the wardrobe again.

"You look better after shave."

"I feel better."

She must have brushed her hair or combed it while I was taking the bath. It shone as black as the devil's heart in the red light of the fire, and it was pulled back tight away from her face and rolled in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her mouth was ripe and red and those eyes of hers seemed to be laughing at something.

"What are you looking at?" I said.

"I thought you was man," she said. "With beard gone you're just boy."

I thought quickly that maybe I should have left the mustache on. Maybe I should have left the beard on too. "I'll grow up," I said. I fished in my pocket and found a silver dollar and flipped it at her. "That's for the bath and shave."

I had my shirt and boots on now, and was buckling on my guns. I didn't know where I was going exactly. I just wanted to go out and look at people and see if I couldn't get to feel like a human being again. I picked up my rifle and got as far as the door. "Adios," she said. "Adios."

"I hope you shoot good," she said. "It is bad to die young."

That stopped me. "What are you talking about?"

"The man in the street, by your horse," she said calmly. "I think maybe he shoot you. If you don't shoot first."

I felt my stomach flip over. Could it be possible that the federal marshals had trailed me all the way from Texas? I went out the back door, across the walled-in yard, and through the gate. There was a lot of singing

somewhere, and some drunken yelling and laughing. Fiesta was still going on. The adobe huts seemed jammed closer together in the darkness, but the Mexicans had a bonfire going out in the street, so I could see enough to pick my way between them. A dog barked. Somewhere in the night a girl giggled and a man made soft crooning noises. After a while I could stand in the shadows and see my horse across the street. Sure enough, a man was there.

He wasn't Mexican and he wasn't anybody I had ever seen before. He was a big man with flabby features and he didn't seem to be much interested in the fiesta or anything else, except that big black horse of mine. Then somebody came up behind me. It was the girl. "Who is he?" I said. "I never saw him before." She seemed surprised. She seemed suddenly to scrap all the opinions that she had formed about me and start making brand-new ones. "You sure?" she asked after a pause.

"I tell you I never laid eyes on him before. What is he, somebody's hired gunny?"

She did some quick thinking. "I think Marta make big mistake," she said.

"Are you Marta?"

"Si. You come with me, gringo."

She stepped out into the street, in the dancing firelight, but I didn't move. She crossed the street, waving her arms and yelling something to the big guy. I saw the man nod. Then she motioned for me to come on.

The man didn't look very dangerous to me. He had the usual pistol on his hip, but I figured that he was too old and too fat to be very fast with it. Anyway, I was curious, so I walked across the street.

The man didn't miss a thing, not even a flick of an eyelash, as I came toward him. As I got closer I began to change my estimate of him—he could be dangerous, plenty dangerous. It showed in his flat eyes, the aggressive way he stood. It showed on the well-worn butt of his .44. He wore a battered, wide-brimmed Texas hat with a rawhide thong under his chin to keep it on. His shirt was buckskin and had been pretty fancy in its day, but now it was almost black and slick with dirt and wear. He kept his

hand well away from his pistol to show that he wasn't asking for trouble. I did the same.

The girl was standing spraddle-legged, hands on hips, grinning at us, but under that grin I had a feeling that there was disappointment. The man jerked his head, dismissing her, as I stepped up to the dirt walk. She melted away in the darkness somewhere.

"This your horse?" the man said, nodding his head at the black.

"That's right."

"I was thinking maybe I'd seen him somewhere before. Texas, maybe."

"You've had time to make up your mind, the way you've been standing here gawking at him."

He blinked his eyes. He was used to getting more respect than that, especially from boys not out of their teens yet. "A tough punk," he said flatly. "If there's anything I can't stand it's a tough punk."

The way he said it went all over me. It was like cursing a man, knowing that he was listening and not having enough respect for him to lower your voice. Before he knew what hit him I had the barrel of my pistol rammed in his belly almost up to the cylinder. "Goddamn you," I said. "I don't know who you are, but if you use that word again I'll kill you. That's one thing in this world you can depend on."

I had knocked the wind out of him and he sagged against the hitching rack gasping. His flat eyes became startled eyes, then they became hate-filled eyes. I should have killed him right then and got it over with, because I knew that he would never quite get over it, being thrown down on by a kid, and someday he would try to even it up. Pappy Garret would have killed him without batting an eye, if he had been in my place. But like a damn fool, I didn't.

"Jesus Christ!" he gulped. "Get that pistol out of my stomach. I didn't mean anything."

"Not until I find out why you were sucking around my horse. You were waiting for me to come out, weren't you? All right, why?"

"Sure, sure, I was waitin' for you to come out," he said. "Word got around that a stranger was in town, and we don't go much for strangers here in Ocotillo. Basset sent me down to have a look. He figured maybe you was a government marshal, or maybe one of them Cavalry intelligence men."

"What gave him a smart idea like that?"

"That girl you was with. She come around a while ago and told Basset she was holdin' you at her house. It was her idea that you was a government marshal."

That was fine. While I had been taking a bath and thinking that she was quite a girl, she had been working up a scheme to get me killed. "Who is Basset?"

"You haven't been in Arizona long if you don't know who Basset is. He about runs things in this part of the territory."

"What does the Cavalry do while Basset runs Arizona?"

"Hell, the Cavalry's too busy with the Apaches to worry about us. Now will you take that pistol out of my stomach?"

I pulled the pistol out enough to let him breathe. I hadn't bargained for anything like this. What looked to be just another little Mexican town was turning out to be a hole-up for the territory's badmen.

"What do you think about me now?" I said, "Do you still think I'm a government man?"

"Hell, no. I spotted that horse of yours right off. The last time I saw that animal was in Texas, about two years ago, and Pappy Garret was ridin' him. We heard Pappy was killed not long ago, but the" – he almost said "punk" – "the kid that was ridin' with him got away."

"Did the kid have a name?" I said.

"Talbert Cameron, according to the 'Wanted' posters. Jesus, I never saw anybody pull a gun like that, unless maybe it was Pappy himself."

Well, that settled it. I couldn't outride my reputation, so I might as well try to live with it. At least until I thought of something better. I holstered my

pistol because it looked like the fuss was over for the present. The big man pulled himself together and tried to pretend that everything was just fine. But no matter what he did, he couldn't hide the smoky hate in the back of his eyes.

"Let's go," I said.

"Where?"

"I want to see the man that runs things around here, Basset."

He didn't put up any argument, as I expected. He merely shrugged. And I unhitched the black.

The fiesta had left the streets and had gone into the native saloons, or maybe the church, wherever it was. The bonfire was dying down and the night was getting darker. The street was almost deserted as we went up to the far end, and the ragged Huachucas looked down on the desert and on the town, and I had a feeling that those high, sad mountains were a little disgusted with what they saw.

After a minute I got to thinking about that girl, Marta. What was she up to, anyway? First she tells a gang of outlaws that I'm a government marshal, and then she tells me that there's somebody waiting to kill me.

I said, "What about that Mexican girl back there, the one called Marta? What was her cut for going to Basset and telling him I was a government man?"

The big man darted a glance at me and kept walking. "She's crazy," he said. "Let her alone. If you want to get along in Ocotillo, let that girl alone."

He said it as if he meant it.

At the end of the street there was a two-story frame building that was all out of place here in a village of squat adobe huts. From the sound of the place I could tell that it was a saloon of some kind – one with a pretty good business, if the noise was any indication. On the other side of the saloon there was a circle corral and another frame building that I took to be a livery barn.

"My horse needs grain and a rubdown," I said.

My partner shouldered through the doors of the saloon and picked out a Mexican with a jerk of his head. "Take care of the horse outside," he said. Then to me, "Wait here. I'll see if Basset wants to see you."

He marched down to the far end of the saloon, opened an unmarked door, and disappeared.

It was quite a place, this saloon. There were big mirrors and glass chandeliers that must have come all the way around the Horn and then been freighted across the desert from San Francisco. Part of the place was done in fancy oak paneling and the rest of it finished out in rough planking, as if the owner had got disgusted after the first burst of enthusiasm and decided that it was a waste of money in Ocotillo. What surprised me was that anybody could have been so ambitious in the first place.

About half the customers were Mexicans, which was about right, since the Mexican border wasn't more than a day's ride to the south. There were four or five saloon girls sitting at tables in the back of the place, near the roulette wheels, chuck-a-luck, and card tables. There was even a pool table back there, and I hadn't seen one of them since Abilene.

It was a crazy, gaudy kind of place to be stuck out here in the desert, off all beaten trails and a hundred miles away from anything like civilization. I went over to the bar and ordered beer. The Mexican bartender served it up in a big crock mug and I pushed my face into the foam.

From the minute I walked into the place I became the main attraction, but I figured that wasn't unusual, considering what Basset's hired man had said about strangers. The customers all made a big to-do about carrying on with their talking and drinking as usual, but from the corners of their eyes they were cutting me up and down. They studied my two guns. They noticed that I used my left hand to drink, leaving my right one free. They didn't like me much, what they could see of me. They were thinking that I was damn young to tote so much iron.

They were thinking that somebody ought to get up and slap hell out of me just to teach me not to show off – but nobody got up.

I finished my beer and let the customers gawk until my friend with the dangerous eyes came back.

“Basset says come on in,” he grunted, and he went on out the front door without waiting to see if I had anything to say about it.

Chapter Two

I DON'T KNOW WHAT kind of man I expected Basset to be but I never would have figured him as the man he really was. Basset, it turned out, was a greasy-looking man not much over five feet tall and weighing not much under three hundred pounds. He was sprawled out in a tilt-back chair, in front of a roll-top desk, as I came in. He peered at me with dark little eyes that were almost squeezed out between enormous rolls of fat.

"Sit down, sit down," he said, panting as if he had just finished a long run.

He was alone in the room. He looked completely harmless, but I shied away from him like a horse shying away from a snake.

"My man Kreyler says you're the Cameron kid," he wheezed. "Says you used to ride with Pappy Garret. Hell with guns."

"That's what your man Kreyler says," I said.

"What do you say?"

I took a cane-bottom chair, the only other chair in the room. "Maybe."

Basset shifted abruptly and sprawled in the other direction. "What did you want to see me about?"

I wasn't sure why I had wanted to see him. So I said, "I'm not sure. Maybe I just wanted to see what the boss of Arizona looks like."

"Ha-ha," he said, panting. He just spoke the words, he wasn't laughing.

"All right, out with it, do you want a job?"

"That depends on what I have to do."

"Have you got any money?"

"Twelve dollars," I said. That was left from a job of trail driving I had done almost six months ago. I hadn't had a chance to spend it.

"Ha-ha," Basset said again. "Let me tell you something, Cameron. I knew Pappy Garret. If you can handle guns the way he could, I'll make a rich man out of you. A rich man."

"I don't hire my guns," I said.

I'd had about enough of Basset. Watching his enormous, shaking belly made my skin crawl. I made a move to get up, but he waved me down.

"Just a minute," he wheezed. "Let me tell you about our charming little village here, Ocotillo." He settled back, smiling and breathing through his mouth. His lips were red and wet and raw-looking, like an incision in a piece of liver. "Ocotillo," he said again. "It was just a little village of Mexican farmers, a few sheep herders, until a few years ago, when some sourdough thought he had discovered a vein of silver up in the foothills. Overnight, you might say, civilization came to Ocotillo. You wouldn't believe it, but two years ago this whole area was covered with tents and shacks and wagons, and fortune hunters crawled over the hills as thick as sand lice."

He chuckled for a minute, remembering.

"Well, it turned out there wasn't any silver there after all, except some 'fool's silver,' traces of lead ore and zinc. Before you knew it Ocotillo was as empty as a frontier church. The fortune hunters all moved on, and for a while I'll admit I was worried. You saw the wood in my bar out there? Redwood from California. My wheels, pool table, gambling equipment, shipped clean from New York around the Horn and freighted across the desert. Cost thousands of dollars, this saloon, and for a while it looked like it wouldn't bring a penny."

I rolled a cigarette while he talked. As I held a match to the corn-shuck cylinder, Basset smiled and nodded.

"I remember Pappy used to smoke his cigarettes Mexican style like that. Anyway, here I was with this saloon and nobody for customers except a few poor Mexicans. Then one day I got another customer."

He slouched back in the chair, smiling, waiting for me to ask the question. "And this customer was..." I said.

"Black Joseph," he said with satisfaction.

I wasn't particularly surprised. I hadn't heard of the famous Indian gunman for a year or more, so I knew that if he wasn't making buzzard food of himself he had to be in New Mexico or Arizona. I had never seen

him, but I knew him by reputation. The artists' drawings on "Wanted" posters always showed him as a hungry-eyed, hawk-nosed, Osage, with a battered flat-crowned hat pushed down over his black, braided hair. He had been a scout for the Union Army during the war, but it seemed that even the bloody battles of Shiloh and Chickamauga hadn't blunted his craving to kill. He was supposed to be fast with a gun. According to some men who ought to know he was the fastest. I didn't know about that, and I didn't care. Black Joseph didn't have anything against me, and I had nothing against him.

Basset seemed to think that the Indian's name should have done something to me. Maybe I should have started sweating, or loosened my guns, or something. When I didn't, the fat man seemed slightly annoyed.

"You've heard of Black Joseph, haven't you?" he panted.

"I've heard of him," I said.

That seemed to make him feel a little better. "Well," he said, "I began to get an idea the minute that Indian murderer rode into Ocotillo—not that I've got anything against him," he added quickly. "It's just that he doesn't bother to think before he shoots. Anyway, I figured maybe there were a lot of boys like him, things getting too hot for them back in Texas."

He smiled that damp smile, as if to say, "You ought to know, Cameron."

I said, "Has all this got anything to do with me?"

"That depends on you," Basset said carelessly. "Now, you look like a man on the run. Would you like to have a place to settle down for a while and give the United States marshals a chance to forget about you? Would you like to be sure that you won't run into my cavalymen? Would you like to have some insurance like that?"

"You can't get insurance from a United States marshal," I said, "or the Cavalry, either."

Basset lurched forward in his chair, got a cigar from a box on his desk, and rolled it between his wet lips. "You just don't know the right man, son," he said, breathing heavily. "The Cavalry—no. But, then, the Cavalry is busy

up north with the Apache uprising. There's no call for them to come down here unless somebody like a federal marshal put them up to it."

And what makes you think that some deputy marshal won't do just that?"

He went on smiling, holding a match to his cigar, puffing until it was burning to suit him. Then he threw the match on the floor and shouted, "Kreyler!"

The door opened and the big, slab-faced man came in. The last time I saw him he had been headed out of the saloon – but when Basset called, he was there.

"Yeah?"

"Show this boy who you are, Kreyler," Basset said.

Kreyler frowned. He didn't like me, and whatever it was that Basset had on his mind, he didn't like that either. But he didn't have the guts to look at the fat man and tell him so. Reluctantly he went into his pocket and came out with a badge – a deputy United States marshal's badge.

"That will be your insurance," Basset said, as Kreyler went out, "if you choose to stay with us here in Ocotillo."

The whole thing had kind of taken my breath away. I had only known one United States marshal before. He lived, breathed, and thought nothing but the law. I hadn't known that a man like Kreyler could worm his way into an office like that.

Suddenly I began to appreciate the kind of setup Basset had here. In Ocotillo a man could live in safety, protected from the law, his identity hidden from the outside world. I thought of the long days and nights of running, afraid to sleep, afraid to rest, forever looking over my shoulder and expecting to see the man who would finally kill me. Here in Ocotillo I could forget all that – if I wanted to pay the fat man's price.

Basset smiled, puffing lazily on his cigar.

I said finally, "Insurance like that must come pretty high."

“Not for the right men, like yourself.” He bent forward, his jowls shaking. “Have you ever heard of the Mexican smuggling trains?”

I shook my head.

“There are dozens of them,” he said. “They come across the international line, taking one of the remote canyons of the Huachucas. Thousands of dollars in gold or silver some of these trains carry. They trade in Tucson for merchandise that they smuggle back across the border, without paying the heavy duty, and sell at fat profits. In a way,” Basset smiled, “you might say that Kreyler is upholding his oath to the United States, for he is a great help to us in stopping this unlawful smuggling of the Mexicans.”

I was beginning to get it now, but I wasn't sure that I liked it.

“Take your time,” the fat man said. “Make up your mind and let me know. Say tomorrow?”

“All right,” I said. “Tomorrow.”

I was glad to get out of the office. The bath that I'd had not long ago had been wasted. I felt dirtier than I had when I first rode into the place.

I stopped at the bar on my way out and had a shot of the white poison that the Mexicans were drinking. Business had picked up while I was in the office. Most of the fancy girls had found laps to sit on, and their brassy, high-pitched giggles punched holes in the general uproar like bullets going through a tub of lard. I studied the men in the place with a new interest, now that I knew who they were and what they were doing here. I didn't see anybody that I knew, yet I had a feeling that I knew all of them. Their eyes were all alike, restless, darting from one place to the other. They laughed hard with their mouths, but none of the laughter ever reached their eyes. I didn't see anybody drunk enough to be careless about the way his gun hand hung. And I knew I wouldn't. My friend Kreyler, the deputy United States marshal, wasn't around. Probably he was in some corner, waiting for Basset to yell for him.

I stood alone at the end of the bar, wondering where I was going to sleep that night and listening to three Mexicans sing a sirupy love song in Spanish, when she said:

"Hello, gringo!"

I don't know where she came from. But now she was standing next to me, grinning as if nothing had happened.

"Get away from me," I said. "When I get tired of living I can get myself killed. I don't need your help."

She didn't bat an eye. "I think you plenty fast with gun," he grinned. "You don't be killed."

"I'll be killed if you keep telling people I'm a government marshal. What the hell did you do that for, anyway? And after that, why did you bother to warn me that somebody was waiting for me? Do you just like to hear guns go off and see men get killed?"

She threw her head back and laughed, as if that was the best one she'd heard in a long time. "Maybe you buy Marta drink, eh?"

"Maybe I'll kick Marta's bottom if she doesn't leave me alone."

But I didn't mean it and she knew it. She laughed again and I poured her a drink of the white poison. She poured salt in the cup between her thumb and forefinger, licked it with her tongue and then downed her drink in one gulp. She looked more at home here in the saloon than some of the fancy girls. And she was a lot better looking than any of the doxies. But I noticed a funny thing. None of the men looked at her. They seemed to go to a great deal of trouble not to look at her.

"Another one, gringo?" she said, holding up her empty glass.

"Not for me." But I reached for the bottle and poured her another one. She downed it the same way she had the first one.

"Where you go, gringo?"

"To find a bed. There's a big desert out there and I've been a long time crossing it. I'm tired."

She took my arm and pulled me toward the door. "Come with me, I fix."

"Isn't there a hotel over the saloon here?"

"You no go there. You come with Marta."

God knows she made it clear enough, and she was the best-looking girl I had seen for longer than I liked to remember—but there was something about it that went against me. I felt a sickness that I hadn't felt in a long time, and memories popped up in my mind, sharp and clear like a magic-lantern show I had seen once. We were outside now, on the dirt walk in front of the saloon. At the end of the building there was an outside stairway that went up to the second floor, and on the corner of the building there was a sign: "Rooms." For no particular reason I began to get mad. I gave her a shove, harder than I'd intended, and she went reeling out into the dusty street.

I headed for the livery barn to get my saddlebags and she cursed me every step of the way in shrill, outraged Spanish. But I didn't hear. I was listening to other voices. And other times.

Other times and other places.... I went through the motions of looking after my horse and getting my saddlebags and going up the shaky stairs over the saloon to see if I could get a room, but they were like the motions that you go through in a dream. They didn't seem to mean anything. I remembered the big green country of the Texas Panhandle, where I was born. I remembered my pa's ranch and the little town near it, John's City. And Professor Bigloe's Academy, where I had gone to school before the war, and the frame shack at the crossroads between our place and John's City called Garner's Store where I used to listen to the bitter old veterans of the war still cursing Sherman and Lincoln and Grant, and reliving over and over the glories of the lost Confederacy. And, finally, I remembered a girl.

But she was just a name now, and I had said good-by to her for the last time. Good-by, Laurin. I had hurt her for the last time, and lied to her for the last time, and I tried to be glad that she was married now and had put me out of her life. Maybe now she would know a kind of quiet peace and happiness that she had never had while I was around. I tried, but I couldn't feel glad, or sorry, or anything else. Except for an aching emptiness. I could feel that.

At the top of the stairs I pounded on a door and woke up a faded, frazzle-haired old doxie, who, for a dollar, let me have the key to a room at the end

of the dusty hall. The room was just big enough to undress in without skinning your elbows on the walls. There was a sagging iron bed and a washstand with a crock pitcher, bowl, and coal-oil lamp on it. A corner of a broken mirror was tacked on the wall over the washstand. There was an eight-penny nail in the door, if you wanted to hang up your clothes.

It wasn't the finest room in the world, but it would do. I raised the window and had a look outside before I lighted the lamp. I was glad to see that there was no awning or porch roof under the window, and there was nobody out in the street that I could see. I lighted the lamp, took the straw mattress off the bed, and put it on the floor in front of the door. I was dead tired and I didn't want any visitors while I slept.

Automatically I went through a set routine of checking my guns, putting them beside me on the mattress, stretching out with my feet against the door. If that door moved I wanted to know about it in a hurry. Small things, maybe, but I had learned that it was small things that kept a man alive. Trimming a fraction of a second off your draw, filing a fraction of an inch off your gun's trigger action, keeping your ears and eyes and nerves keyed a fraction higher than the next man's. A heartbeat, a bullet. They were all small things.

For a long while, in the darkness, I rocked on the thin edge of sleep while almost forgotten faces darted in and out of my memory, flashing and disappearing like fox fire in a sluggish swamp. Laurin's face. And Pappy Garret. The fabulous Pappy Garret whose name was already beginning to appear in five-cent novels, and history books, and maybe even the Sunday newspaper supplements back East. My pal Pappy, who had taught me everything I knew about guns. I tried to imagine what Pappy would say if he could see how famous I had become. Would he smile that old sad smile of his if he could see the bright look of admiration in small boys' eyes as they read the "Wanted" poster?

At some unsure point half thoughts became dreams, and then the dreams vanished and there was nothing for a while.

I don't remember when I first felt the pressure of the door on my feet, but when I felt it. I was immediately awake, wide-eyed, staring into the

darkness. There wasn't a sound. Not even from the saloon below. At first, as I lay rigid, I thought that I must have imagined it, but then the door moved inward again, slowly, carefully.

For just a moment I lay there wondering who in Ocotillo wanted to kill me. Kreyler? Maybe, but I didn't think he would try it while Basset was trying to get me on his payroll. Could I have overlooked somebody in the saloon that had something against me? A brother or cousin or friend of somebody I had killed? That was possible. I managed to roll off the mattress without making any noise. I wasn't scared, now that I knew what was going on. I was awake, but whoever it was at the door didn't know it. When he found out, he would be too close to death for it to make any difference.

I eased the mattress away as the crack in the door widened. A figure slipped into the room without a sound. I still couldn't tell who it was. White moonlight poured on the bed, but the rest of the room was in darkness, and for a moment that empty bed confused the killer.

I don't know why I waited. I could have squeezed the trigger and killed him before he knew what hit him. But for some reason I didn't.

I saw a knife glint dully as he began to move forward. Then I saw who it was.

I must have given a grunt of surprise, because the figure wheeled quickly in my direction. I didn't see a thing, but instinct told me to do something and do it in a hurry. I started to dive, and as I moved to one side the knife flashed and glittered, cutting the air down over my head. There was a sudden thud as it buried itself in the wall. I heard the quivering, disappointed whine of well-tempered steel. Then I slammed into a pair of legs and we crashed to the floor.

The would-be killer was Marta, the Mexican girl.

I heard clothing tear as we went down. I made a grab for her arms but she jerked away and gouged bloody holes in my face with her fingernails. I grabbed again and this time I got her down, my hands on her shoulders and my knee in her stomach. Her body was smooth and hot, and somehow hard and soft at the same time, like gun steel covered with velvet. Neither

of us made a sound. We had landed near the window, and cold moonlight fell on her sweating face. Her blouse had come apart in the fight, and from her waist up she was mostly naked. She twisted her head to one side and sank those white, gleaming teeth in my wrist.

I heard myself howl as she broke loose and dived across the floor for one of my guns. But I grabbed her hair and jerked her back, scratching and clawing like some wild animal. I could feel warm blood running down my arm, and when she tried to bite me again I hit her. I hit her in the mouth as hard as I could. I felt her lips burst on my knuckles and blood spurted halfway across the room.

"Goddamn you!" I heard myself saying. She was limp on the floor, but I still had a hold of her hair, holding her head up. "Goddamn you!" I let go of her hair and her head hit the floor like a ripe melon. She was as limp as a rag, and I didn't give a damn if she never got up.

I fumbled around the dark room in my underwear until I finally found my shirt and got some matches. After a while I got the lamp burning and poured some water into the crock bowl and began washing the blood off my arm. But I couldn't stop the blood that kept gushing out of the deep double wound on my left wrist. The pain went all the way up to my shoulder and down to my guts. Anger swarmed all over me like a prairie fire.

"Get up, goddamn you!" I said. But she didn't move. I went over and gathered up my guns and her knife, trailing blood all over the place. Then I jerked off half her blouse and wrapped it tightly around my forearm. Pretty soon the bleeding stopped.

After a while she began to stir. She lifted herself slowly to her knees, shaking her head dumbly like a poleaxed calf.

"Get out of here," I said tightly. "And stay out. So help me, if you ever try a thing like that again I'll kill you."

She looked at me for a long time with those stupid eyes. She looked like hell. Her mouth was bloody and her lips were beginning to puff. She didn't look so damned wild and deadly now.

I went over to the door and flung it open. "Go on, get out of here."

She managed to get to her feet, swaying, almost falling on her face again. She put one foot out, as if it were the first step she had ever taken. Then she tried the other one. After a while she made it to the hallway. I slammed the door and locked it.

I don't know how long I sat there on the springless bed, nursing my arm and letting the anger burn itself out. But finally the red haze began to lift and I could think straight again.

She had tried to kill me! That was the thing that got me, when I began to think about it. But why? I didn't know enough about women to answer that. A lot of people had tried to kill me at one time or another, but, before tonight, never a woman. Maybe she was just plain crazy. I remembered that Kreyler had said that when I had asked him about her. Maybe Kreyler knew what he was talking about.

My wrist was still giving me trouble. The pain was no longer located in any one particular spot; the whole arm throbbed and ached all the way to the marrow of the bone. I got up and washed it again in water and tried to do a better job of bandaging it, but I couldn't tell any difference in the way it felt. That was when I heard somebody on the stairs. Footsteps in the hall.

I found my pistol and blew out the lamp. When the footsteps stopped in front of my door I was ready. I jerked the door open and stepped to one side, my pistol cocked.

It was the girl again, Marta.

She had washed the blood off her face but she was still a long way from being a beauty. Her face was swollen, her lips were split and puffed all out of shape. But she had found a clean blouse from somewhere to replace the one I had torn off of her – and in her hands she had a bottle of whisky.

"Whisky good for arm," she said flatly. "I fix."

There was no fight left in her. Her eyes had the vacant, weary look that you see in the eyes of very old people, or perhaps the dying. I felt like a fool holding a gun on her, and in the back of my mind I suppose I felt sorry for

what I had done to her, even if she had tried to kill me. What could I do with a girl like that? I couldn't hate her. I couldn't feel anything for her but a vague kind of pity.

And I was dead tired and maybe I did need the whisky.

"All right," I said. "Wait until I light the lamp again."

I lit the lamp and she came into the room, almost timidly. She took the bowl of bloody water, threw it out the window, and filled the bowl up again from the pitcher. "Come," she said.

She unwrapped my arm and washed the wound again. Then she opened the bottle and poured the whisky over my wrist and I almost hit the ceiling.

"Bad now," she said, "but good tomorrow."

"If I live until tomorrow. At the rate things are going, there's a good chance that I won't."

She began bandaging the wrist again, without saying anything. I turned the bottle up and drank some of the clear, coal-oil-tasting fluid. It was the raw, sour-mash stuff that the Mexicans make for themselves, and when it hit my stomach it was almost as bad as pouring it in the wound.

"Where did you get this?"

"My house."

"It may be fine for wounds, but it's not worth a damn to drink."

"Papacito drink," she said.

"You like saloon whisky, don't you? Saloons and saloon whisky and gringos. Why don't you stay in your own part of town?"

For a moment she looked at me with hurt eyes, then went on with her bandaging. I didn't give a damn what she did. I was just talking while the whisky cooled in my stomach. It occurred to me that it was a crazy trick, letting her back into the room. Maybe she had another knife hidden on her somewhere.

"That good?" she said.

She finished with my arm, then poured some whisky on a rag and cleaned the blood off my face.

I had a look in the mirror. "That's fine. My face looks like something left on a butcher's block. I might as well throw away my off-side gun, for all the good it's going to do me. What the hell's wrong with you, anyway? Are you just plain crazy or did you have a reason for trying to get that knife into me?"

She looked down and said nothing.

"Out with it," I said. "I'm not mad now, I just want to know what you've got against me."

She still didn't say anything, so I grabbed her arm and jerked her around. Then I got a handful of her hair and snapped her head back.

"Tell me, goddamnit! Did somebody pay you to try a trick like that?"

We stood there breathing in each other's faces. Finally she said, "No."

"Then why?"

She shrugged. "I hate you—for a little while. You shove Marta away. I think maybe I kill you."

It took me a minute to get it, and after I finally did get it I didn't understand it. Just because I hadn't wanted to go to bed with her, she tried to kill me!

She was looking down again. Her eyes still had that dull, beaten look in them, and I had a queer feeling that she was crying and the tears were falling on the inside. I didn't know what to make of her. It made me uncomfortable just looking at her.

She said flatly, "I go now."

"That's fine." I went over and opened the door. She waited a long minute, watching me, as if she thought maybe I was going to change my mind and ask her to stay.

I didn't. All I wanted was to get her out of here and never see her again.

After she had gone I lay a long while trying to figure her out. But I couldn't do it, and along toward dawn I lost interest and tried to get some sleep. And at last I did sleep, and dreamed restless dreams, mostly of my home in Texas.

Fiesta was over when I woke up the next morning. Most of the Mexicans had gone back to their one-mule farms or their sheep herds, or wherever Mexicans go when fiesta is over. My room was a mess, with blood all over the floor, and the bed knocked around at a crazy angle, and everything I had scattered from one corner to the other. My wrist was swollen stiff and hurt like hell.

I picked up some of the things, shirts and pants and a change of underwear that had been kicked out of my saddlebags in the scuffle, and put them back where they belonged. I stood at the window for a while, looking down on the gray scattering of mud huts that was Ocotillo, and for a minute I almost made up my mind to get out of there. The place was crazy, and everybody in it was crazy. I didn't want any more to do with it.

But where would I go? Back to Texas and let some sheriffs posse decorate a cottonwood with me? To New Mexico or California, and take my chances with the Cavalry or United States marshals?

I didn't think so.

It looked like Ocotillo was the end of the line, whether I liked it or not. And that proposition of Basset's – I'd have to listen to that, too, whether I liked it or not, because I didn't have any money and I didn't know of anybody that I could go to for help.

For a week, maybe, I thought. Or a month at the most. I could stand it that long. When I got some money together I could find a place to hole up until the law lost interest in me. Maybe I'd go across the line into Sonora, or Chihuahua, or some place like that. But it would take money.

There was one pretty thing about this business of Basset's. Robbing Mexican smuggling trains wasn't like robbing an express coach or a bank or anything else that the local law had an interest in. The law didn't give a damn if a smuggling train was robbed. They probably took it as a favor.

But it's funny the way a man's mind works on things like that. I had never had anything to do with robbing people. Killing—that was different. A man had to kill sometimes in this wild country. In the bitter, hate-sick Texas that had been my home, it had been the accepted way of settling arguments between men. Life was cheap. The lank, quiet boys of Texas had learned that when they rode off to fight for the Cause and the Confederacy, when most of them didn't even know what Confederacy meant, or care. Killing had become a part of living. But robbing people—that was something new that I had to get used to.

There were only the bartender and one other man in the saloon when I got down there. The bartender was kicking the wreckages to one side and making a few passes with a broom, the other man was eating eggs and side meat at the bar. The place was dark and sick with the stale, sour smell of whisky and smoke and unwashed bodies. The man looked at me quietly as I came in and stood at the end of the bar. The bartender glanced at me and said:

“Eggs?”

“Fried on both sides, and some of that side meat.”

The man smiled wearily and pushed his own plate away half finished and stood up. “Eggs and side meat,” he said. “Side meat and eggs. It wouldn't surprise me if I didn't start cacklin' like a chicken before long, or maybe gruntin' like a hog. Sometimes I think I'll get myself a Mexican woman, like some of the other boys, and let her cook for me. But I can't stand that greaser grub, either.” He smiled a thin, pale smile. “Lordy, what I'd give for a mess of greens and a pan of honest-to-God corn bread!”

“Eggs sound good to me,” I said, “after living out of my saddlebag, on jerky, for a spell.”

He smiled again, that sad, faraway smile. “Wait till you've choked 'em down as long as I have.”

The bartender went back to the rear somewhere and I began to smell grease burning. The man who didn't like side meat and eggs glanced lazily at my scratched face and bandaged wrist, but his pale eyes made no comment.

He was about thirty, I guess, but no more than that. His voice was as thick and sirupy as molasses—a rich black drawl of the deep South. Everything he did, every move he made, was with great deliberation, without the waste of an ounce of energy. Lazily he shoved a filthy, battered Confederate cavalryman's hat back on his head and a lock of dry, sand-colored hair fell on his forehead.

He smiled slowly. “Welcome to Ocotillo,” he said as if he were reading leisurely from a book, “the Garden Spot of Hell, the last refuge of the damned, the sanctuary of killers and thieves and real badmen and would-be bad-men; the home of the money-starved, the cruel, the brute, the kill-crazy....” His voice trailed off. “Welcome to Ocotillo, Tall Cameron.” He waved a languid hand toward a table. “Shall we sit down? I take it you're one of us now. Perhaps you'd like to hear about this charming little city of ours while you eat your side meat and eggs.”

I shrugged. He was a queer galoot, there was no doubt about that, but there was something about him I liked.

We sat down and the bartender brought me three eggs and three limp slabs of side meat and some cold Mexican tortillas. I dug in, and while I chewed I said, “How did you know my name?”

He looked quietly surprised. “Why, you're a famous man, didn't you know that? The protege of Pappy Garret, the wizard of gunplay, our country's foremost exponent of the gentle art of bloodletting. May I speak for our quiet little community and say that we are greatly honored to have you among us?”

I looked quickly into those pale eyes to see if he were laughing at me. He wasn't laughing. The thoughts behind his eyes were sad and far away.

“Let me introduce myself,” he drawled. “Miles Stanford Bonridge, one-time cotton grower, one-time captain of the Confederate Cavalry—Jeb Stuart's Cavalry, suh— one-time gentleman and son of a gentleman. I hail from the great state of Alabama, suh, where, at one time, the name of Miles Stanford Bonridge commanded more than small respect. The boys here in Ocotillo call me Bama.”

I said, "Glad to make your acquaintance, Bama."

He nodded quietly and smiled. He made a vague motion with his hand and the bartender came over and put a bottle of the raw, white whisky on the table. "One thing about working for Basset," Miles Stanford Bonridge said, pouring some into a glass, "is that he pays his men enough to stay drunk from one job to the other. Not that he can't well afford it—he profits by thousands of dollars from our smuggler raids." He downed the whisky and shuddered. "Have you ever been on a smuggler raid, Tall Cameron?"

"I didn't know there was such a thing until Basset mentioned it."

He poured again, held the glass up, and studied the clear liquid. "You were too young, I suppose, to have fought in the war," he said finally. "And there is no parallel to these raids of ours, except possibly some of the bloodier battles of Lee's eastern campaign. For days after one of our raids the sky above the battleground is heavy with swarms of vultures; the air is sick with the sweet, rotting stink of death; the very ground festers and crawls with unseen things wallowing in the filth and blood.... Please stop me," he said pleasantly, "if I am ruining your appetite."

"You're not."

He nodded again, and smiled, and drank his whisky in a gulp.

I had already decided that he was crazy—probably from too much whisky, and a sick conscience, and maybe the war. What it was about him that I liked I couldn't be sure. His manner of speaking, his slow, inoffensive drawl, his faraway, bewildered eyes—or maybe it was because I just needed somebody to talk to.

"Would you mind," he asked abruptly, "if I inquired your age, Tall Cameron?"

If it had been anybody else I would have told him to go to hell. But after a moment I said, "Twenty. Almost."

He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes and seemed to think. "The day I became twenty years old," he said, "I was a second lieutenant in the Army of Tennessee, General Braxton Bragg commanding. Holloway's Company,

Alabama Cavalry." He opened his eyes. "Maybe you remember September nineteenth, 1863. There we were on the banks of the Chickamauga, which was to become the bloodiest river in the South, and old Rosecrans' Army of the Cumberland was on the other side, so close that we could see the pickets throwing up their breastworks." He broke off suddenly. "No," he said, "you wouldn't remember that."

"I remember hearing about the battle of Chickamauga," I said, "but I don't remember who was there – or exactly where it was, as far as that goes."

Miles Stanford Bonridge shook his head. "It doesn't make any difference now."

I couldn't help wondering how a man like Bama could wind up in this God-forgotten country of southern Arizona. He wasn't a gunman – I knew that – no matter how many men he had killed during the war. His pistol was an old .36-caliber Leech and Rigdon that looked dusty from lack of handling, and he wore it high up under his right arm where he would have a hell of a time getting to it if he ever needed it in a hurry.

He smiled that quiet smile of his while I looked him over, and I had a queer feeling that he was reading my mind.

"All I know about guns," he said, "is what I learned in the Cavalry. I'm not a bad shot with a carbine. Not worth a damn with a pistol, although I killed a man once with one. A damned Treasury agent, after the war was over. He was trying to cheat me out of twenty bales of cotton, so I shot him four times right in the gut. Have a drink?"

"No, thanks," I said.

He poured himself another one and downed it. "Then I had to kill a Yankee soldier, and there was hell to pay after that. For a while it seemed like the whole damned bluebelly army was after me, but I had some friends and they got me up to New Mexico, and finally I wound up here." He laughed softly, without humor. "I was lucky, I guess."

I knew how he felt. With a little switching around his story could have been mine, except that I had taken up with a famous gunman and got the same kind of reputation for myself.

"I had the prettiest little gal you ever saw," Bama said sadly, "but I had to leave her. I wonder what she's doing now...."

I wished he hadn't said that, because it brought back too many almost forgotten days, almost forgotten faces. And a name that I couldn't forget—Laurin.

I pushed my plate away and Bama watched as I rolled a cigarette and put fire to it. At last he said, "Do you mind if I offer a little advice?"

"I'll listen, but I won't promise to take it."

"Leave the girl alone," he said quietly. "The Mexican girl named Marta. She's poison, and a little crazy, too. I've been here for quite a while now, and every man she has looked at always ended up the same way, dead in some gulch or some alley, with a bullet in his back."

His face was deadly serious.

There was nothing I wanted more than to keep that female wildcat out of my life. But what was all the fuss about? First Kreyler had warned me to stay away from her, and now Bama. Curiosity was beginning to get the best of me.

"Does that mean that somebody's got a claim staked out on her?" I said.

Bama nodded slowly and poured himself another drink. "Black Joseph," he said. "And he doesn't like you. He doesn't like you at all."

I was beginning to get impatient with all this hoodoo.

"How the hell does he know he doesn't like me? I've never even seen this famous Indian gun-slinger."

Bama gulped his drink. "Maybe you ought to meet him," he said. "He's standing right behind you."

Chapter Three

WHEN I TURNED, the first thing I saw was a pair of the darkest, emptiest, most savage eyes I had ever seen. There was absolutely no expression in them. They were like twin bottomless wells filled to the brim with black nothingness. His face was dark, angular, beardless, also without

expression. A wide-brimmed flat-crowned hat sat squarely on his head, and ropy braids of black hair hung down on his chest almost to his shirt pockets. He didn't say a word. I couldn't tell if he were looking at me or through me. After a moment he turned and went through the door to Basset's office.

"He doesn't like you," Bama said again.

"I think you're right. Maybe I'll have a drink of that stuff, after all."

"He makes your flesh crawl, doesn't he?" Bama said, pouring a drink in his glass and shoving it over to me.

I felt cold, as if Death itself had just walked by. How he had managed to walk into the saloon and get that close without me hearing him I didn't know. I downed the whisky quick and in a minute I felt better, except that I somehow felt unclean just having looked at him.

"God, how does she stand it?" I said.

"The girl?" Bama raised his eyes sleepily. "She doesn't have anything to say about it. Black Joseph took a fancy to her, and that's that. Have you met Kreyler?"

I nodded.

"He's crazy about that girl—really crazy. You can see insanity crawl up behind his eyes and stare out like a wild beast when the Indian touches her. Kreyler would have killed him long ago if it had been anybody but Black Joseph." He stood up, cradling the bottle in his arms. "I think I'll try to get some sleep," he said. "Joseph's been up in the mountains scouting the canyons for smuggler trains. Probably he's spotted one and we'll be starting on another raid before long."

He weaved across the floor and out the door, still holding tight to the bottle.

I sat there for a while waiting for the Indian to come out of Basset's office. Some of the fat man's hired men drifted into the saloon to drink their breakfast, and along about noon the fancy girls sneaked in and began putting on their paint for the afternoon trade. I didn't see Marta, and the

Indian still hadn't come out of Basset's office. I got tired of waiting, so I went back and knocked on the door.

It turned out that Basset was alone, after all, and Black Joseph must have gone out the back way. The fat man looked up impatiently when I came in. He was poring over a list of names, checking one off every once in a while after giving it a lot of thought. "Sit down," he wheezed, "sit down."

I sat down and he checked off one or two more names, then turned and smiled that wet smile of his.

"Well?"

"I'm here to talk about that job."

"Ha-ha," he said dryly. "Your twelve dollars didn't last long, did it? Well, that's all right. You'll have plenty of money before long, plenty of money."

"How much is that?"

He blinked. His little buckshot eyes looked watery and weak behind the folds of fat. "That depends," he said. "Whatever the smuggler train is carrying, all the boys get a cut, fair and square. Share and share alike."

"Including yourself?"

He blinked again. "Now look here, I'm the man that organized everything here. I see that you boys don't get bothered by the federal marshals, and keep the Cavalry off our backs. Everything's free and easy here in Ocotillo, thanks to me. I take half of whatever you get from the Mexicans. The rest you split among yourselves, fair and square, like I say." He paused for a few minutes to catch his breath. "Now, do you want the job or don't you."

"I have to take it whether I want it or not. You knew that to start with."

"Ha-ha. Well, all right. That's more like it. There's something I'd better tell you, though. Joseph didn't want me to hire you, even when I told him who you were. I'll tell you the truth, I wouldn't hire you if I wasn't short on men. The last raid cut us down. I want to tell you here and now that it's no fancy tea party you're going on, robbing smuggler trains. What has Black Joseph got against you?"

"I don't know."

Basset clawed at his fat face, looking faintly worried. "The Indian's a good man," he said. "Fastest shot with a pistol I ever saw. Dead shot with a rifle, too. He'd as soon kill a man as look at him – maybe he'd rather. I think he actually enjoys killing."

He sounded like a man who had a tiger by the tail and didn't know how to let go. He was afraid of the Indian. It showed in his watery eyes, on his sweaty face. It showed in the way his hands shook when he reached for a cigar.

He was afraid of the Indian and he wanted me to get rid of him. He wanted me to get rid of him, but he didn't know how to go about it. Maybe he figured that by just throwing us together he could manage it somehow.

I remembered those deadly Indian eyes and the way they had looked at me. It occurred to me that maybe Basset had already started dropping hints that I was making a play for Joseph's girl. That would throw us together, all right, if the Indian ever got wind of it.

And then Basset saw what I was thinking, and he didn't like that much. He changed the subject.

"Our scouts have spotted a smuggler train coming up from Sonora," he said. "So you'll be able to earn your money quicker than you thought. Have you got a good horse?"

"His ribs stick out a little, but he's all right."

"Good. That's one thing you need, is a good horse. And a good rifle."

"I've got them."

"Good," he said again. He sat back and breathed through his mouth. "You can start for the hills as soon as you get your horse ready. The boys pull out of town one or two at a time and meet in the hills with Joseph and Kreyler. We have to keep it as quiet as we can. You can't tell about these damn Mexicans. One of them might try to get to the smugglers and warn them."

He sat back and panted after the speech. "You can ride out with Bama and he'll show you where the meeting place is. You met Bama, didn't you?"

"I met him."

"All right, I guess that's all, then. You'll get your cut when you get back."

Everything was very businesslike, like sending a bunch of coolies out to lay a few miles of railroad. It was hard to believe that Basset had just explained his plans for wholesale murder.

I went out of the office, collared the bartender, and found out where Bama, the gentleman of the old South, slept off his drunks. It turned out that he was a neighbor of mine. He bunked over the saloon in a cigar-box room just like mine, except that it was dirtier.

He was asleep on the bed when I found him, one boot off and one on, the dead bottle still in his hands. I got the front of his shirt and shook him.

"Wake up, Bama!"

He grunted and tried to fight me off, being careful not to drop the empty bottle. The whisky smell in the room was thick enough to carry out in buckets.

"Wake up. Basset says we've got to earn our keep."

He came out of it slowly and stared vaguely around the room. Looking into his eyes was like looking into the windows of a deserted house. After a while he brought me into focus, reached out like a sleepwalker, and took my shoulders.

"Ah, the famous Tall Cameron!" He smiled crookedly. "Welcome to my humble..."

"Snap out of it," I said. "We've got a little job of robbing to do."

"Robbing?" He thought about it for a while. "Oh, you mean another raid. God, I need a drink."

"Your bottle's empty. Get your stuff together and we'll get a drink downstairs."

That brought him out of it. He pulled himself up, then went unsteadily over to the washstand and poured a pitcher of water over his head.

"All the damn stuff's good for," he said thickly. "Where's my other boot?"

I found the boot for him and helped him put it on. His pistol was under the bed. I found it and buckled it on him.

"Are you ready?"

He licked his dry lips with a coated tongue. "God," he said, "I wish I had the guts, I'd blow my brains out. This rotten, maggoty mess of filth and corruption and death that I call brains, I'd splatter them all over these filthy walls!" He made a sweeping gesture with his arm and almost fell.

"Come on," I said. "You need that drink worse than I thought."

He was better after he'd had a couple of glasses of the stuff. His eyes cleared, his hands became steady.

"How do you feel?" I said.

He looked at me. "How do I feel? I can't tell you, Tall Cameron, but maybe by sundown you'll know." He took the bottle off the bar and walked out of the place swinging it in his hand. He was the goddamnedest guy I ever saw.

We went around to the livery barn where our horses were, and as the liveryman saddled up for us he slipped boxes of cartridges into our saddlebags.

"Compliments of Basset," Bama said dryly. He swigged from the neck of his bottle and then put it in his saddlebag with the ammunition. As we rode out of town he began to sing in that thick, black drawl of his:

"Oh, Susanna, don't you cry for me,

For I'm goin' to Alabama with a banjo on my knee."

"But her name wasn't Susanna," he said. "It was Myra. And I won't be going to Alabama, with anything."

It wasn't a long ride to the foothills of the Huachucas. Bama knew all the short cuts, and before long the town was far behind and there were just those naked, dark hills of rocks and boulders and cactus and greasewood. We climbed higher and higher until we got into the mountains themselves, and the going got slower.

"We won't be able to make it today," Bama said. "It'll be near sundown before we'll meet Joseph and Kreyler and the rest of Basset's army. The battle won't start before tomorrow, I guess."

I wondered if it was going to be as bad as Bama made it out to be. I doubted it. But something kept me from asking questions.

We rode for a long while without saying anything. Every half hour or so Bama would take a belt at the bottle.

"You know," he said finally, "this stuff doesn't really do any good unless you've got enough to make you sleep the deep and dreamless sleep of the dead." He shook the bottle thoughtfully. "There's not enough here for that."

"Then why do you drink it?"

He smiled sadly. "I'm afraid," he said mildly.

"You're also crazy."

He bobbed his head up and down, soberly, as if I had just said something very profound.

"It's surprising how much of the stuff you can drink when you're afraid," he went on. "For instance," he said abruptly, "I was awake last night when hell broke loose in that room of yours. I heard the girl in there and I thought to myself, Well, there's one more scalp the Indian can hang on his belt. Of course, I didn't know at the time that my neighbor was the famous Tall Cameron. He'll kill you, you know. The first chance he gets."

"He can go to hell," I said. "I don't want any part of his girl. She's crazy, like everybody else in this Godforsaken place. Last night she tried to kill me."

For a moment Bama looked at me. Then he threw his head back and howled with laughter. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned!" he said when he got his breath. "No, my friend, I'm afraid your days are numbered. If the Indian doesn't kill you, there's always Kreyler. To get that girl, Kreyler would kill you in a minute, if Black Joseph was out of the way."

"I tell you I don't want anything to do with her. Joseph or Kreyler can have her."

There was another long silence while Bama studied the contents of his bottle. He allowed himself a short drink, corked it good and tight, and put it away. "Why don't you tell me about her?" he said finally. "Maybe it will do you good to get it off your chest."

"Tell you about who?"

"The girl you left back in Texas, or wherever you came from. The girl you grew up with and loved and planned to marry. The girl who loved you once but can't stand the sight of you now because you're a killer. The girl who will be the mother of another man's children because —"

He must have seen the anger and sadness in my eyes, because he stopped abruptly and dropped his head.

"God damn you," I said, "if you ever mention her again I'll kill you. So help me God, I'll kill you."

We rode the rest of the way in silence.

We finally reached a place where a great stone ledge reached out over a barren canyon, and that was the marshaling ground for Basset's army.

An army was just what it was. There must have been fifteen or twenty horses grazing down the canyon on the short, dry sprays of bunch grass. And under the ledge the men hunkered or sat or slouched, like so many soldiers awaiting their orders to march into battle. There were a few small fires, and with the smell of horses and sweat there was the heavier, richer smell of boiling coffee and frying bacon. Kreyler was standing at the entrance of the canyon, tally book and pencil in his hands, checking the riders off as they came in.

Bama was watching me, smiling that lazy, crooked smile of his. "What do you think of our little army?" he said.

I shook my head. I hadn't expected anything like this.

We unsaddled our horses and turned them loose with the others; then we sat down to wait. Riders came drifting in from different directions, a few of

them Mexicans, but most of them were run-of-the-mine hardcases and hired gunmen. They kept coming until there must have been thirty of them. As the sun began to die in the west I helped Bama build a small fire and we cooked some bacon that he had thought to bring along. We washed it down with some greasy coffee that we boiled in a skillet. Bama's eyes were twin, silent screams for whisky, but he made no move to uncork the bottle again.

At last, when the sun disappeared, leaving a cold bloody streak along the horizon, Kreyler passed the word along to saddle up.

"I thought the Indian was supposed to be Basset's right-hand man," I said.

Bama shook his head. "The Indian's guns keep the men in line, but Basset and Kreyler are the ones who really run things. It's a nice arrangement for Kreyler; that deputy United States marshal's badge makes him practically bulletproof. A man would think a long time before he killed a United States marshal in this country."

I knew what he meant. There are some people that you just can't kill and get away with it, and a United States marshal is one of them. Even a crooked one like Kreyler.

Well, it didn't make any difference to me. I didn't intend to kill Kreyler, or anybody else, if he kept his nose out of my business. Anyway, after this job was over I meant to leave Kreyler and the whole business far behind.

That gave me something to think about as we started riding west again, farther up into the mountains. To get away – that was what I wanted. To go someplace where nobody knew who I was, and stay there until things in Texas cooled off. And then I'd go back.

I'd go home.

The very word was enough to turn me sick with longing. The big country of Texas, the people I knew, the kind of life I wanted to live. And Laurin...

But I knew all along that I'd never go back. Not even to die.

The night was coming down on us now and the horses stumbled along Indian file over dangerous, almost forgotten trails. The men were silent as

they rode, and some of them, I guess, were thinking as I was, of home. And some of them would be counting in their minds the money that they would get from their cut of the loot. Some of them, like Bama, would be scared sick, dreading death and somehow welcoming it at the same time.

But it was Texas that I thought of. Smoky nights as still as the grave. The fierce winters of blinding snow. The blazing summers. And the little town of John's City, which was as old as the Sante Fe Trail, as old as the West. I thought of the days of the war, and the bitterness after the war—the carpetbaggers, the treasury agents, the scalawags and turncoats. The blue-suited army. The State Police.

They were all on their way out now, and before long Texas would again be the kind of place I wanted it to be —noisy with giant herds of cattle, dirty with trail drivers, rich and head-high. The strong, patient men would live to see Texas that way again. But not Tall Cameron. And not Miles Stanford Bonridge, once proud landowner in the proud state of Alabama. And not any of the other men who rode in the dark, wrapped in their own thoughts. The impatient, the money-hungry, the kill-crazy. Basset's army.

At last word passed back that the column was halting and the men were to take their positions up ahead. We dismounted and turned our animals over to men that Kreyler had appointed horse-holders; then we climbed single file up a rocky trail until we finally reached the tip of a shallow canyon.

Everything was done with army-like precision, and every man but me, it seemed, knew exactly what was expected of him.

Bama said, "You might as well follow me. It's going to be a long wait until morning."

We picked our way along the rim of the canyon, and now I could see the war party splitting in two parts, half the men slipping silently down the wall of the canyon and up the other side. The rest of us spread out on our side at four- or five-yard intervals and got behind rocks or bushes or whatever protection we could find. Bama found a rock, and I lay down behind a clump of needle-sharp cholla not far from him.

"Now what?" I said.

"We wait," Bama said quietly. "We wait, and we wait, and we wait. And finally the Mexicans will come down this canyon, and then we kill."

"Just like that?"

"It's not as simple as it sounds. We've had scouting parties out for days, following the Mexicans up from Sonora. They never take the same route twice, but once they've picked themselves a trail to follow, they're stuck with it. But everything has been taken care of now. All we have to do is wait here and pretty soon they'll come along."

"I don't get it. They must know that we're waiting for them. At least, they must guess that we're here. Do they plan to just ride along and let us shoot the hell out of them?"

"They know," he said. "And they'll do something about it. We'll just have to wait and see."

So we waited, like Bama said. A pale moon came out and washed those raw mountains with a false cleanness, and a stiffening, bone-chilling cold settled down on us. I wanted a cigarette but I was afraid of striking a match. I wanted a drink, but Bama had left his bottle in his saddlebags.

"How much of this waiting have we got ahead of us?" I said.

"Only the scouts could guess at that. I'd say they'll be along in the morning sometime. Maybe tomorrow afternoon."

I didn't think I could stand it that long. My legs became cramped from staying in one position too long. My wrist began to throb and I thought of the girl and cursed her. I checked the loading of my rifle over and over and up and down the line I could hear other nervous men doing the same thing. If this was the way wars were fought I was glad that I never had to fight in one. It wasn't so bad when it happened quickly, when you were mad at somebody or they were mad at you and all you had to do was shoot. But this waiting — that was something else.

Bama must have gone to sleep. There wasn't a sound from behind the rock as the night crawled by. The cold got worse and ate right into my guts, and

I had a feeling that all this was unreal and pretty soon I would wake up and discover that it had been a dream.

But it wasn't a dream. Ever minute of that thousand-year night was real. But finally it ended. Morning came in the east, bloodshot and angry, and after a while a broiling sun shoved itself over the ridges and beat down on us. By noon we were baked dry and there was no water anywhere. And if there had been water we couldn't have moved as much as a foot to get it. At every move, at every sound a man made, word would be passed down the line:

"Kreyler says goddamnit, be quiet!"

As we lay there, I learned to hate the Marshal. I hated every line in his dry, sun-cracked face. By noon I could cheerfully have killed him.

"Take it easy, kid," Bama said softly.

"Where does he get off bossing us around like that? He's just one of Basset's hired help, isn't he? Like the rest of us."

"Think of something else," Bama said. "This sun bakes a man's brains. It gives him crazy ideas sometimes."

For a while we lay there. I could see the Indian and his half of the party on the other side of the canyon, and I began hating them too, every damned one of their sweaty, grim faces.

"Listen," Bama said.

And after a minute we all began to hear the faraway sound of bells – small bells, cool little silver sounds in the blazing afternoon. Along the rim of the canyon there were brisk metal sounds of cartridges being jacked into rifles. Bama's face was tight and gray as he lay on his belly, sighting along the short barrel of his carbine. He looked as if death had already touched him – as if the grave and he were old friends.

Then the mule train rounded into the canyon. One after the other they came, as if there was no end – gray, sure-footed little mules with bells around their necks and tall, awkward-looking aparejos strapped to their backs. Along the flanks came the outriders, brown-faced, hard-eyed men,

heeled up with rifles and pistols and knives, looking as if they were begging for a fight. In front of the whole business rode a grinning old Mexican on a pale horse, dressed fit to kill in a tall spiked sombrero decorated with silver bangles, flashing light and spitting fire every time he moved his head. His big-bottomed pants were of cream-colored buckskin with more silver bangles and pearl buttons down the seams. A gawdy serape and high-heeled boots finished off his outfit, along with a fancy-handled six-shooter at his side and a long-barreled rifle resting across the pommel of his saddle. He looked like hell, all right. He could have been a gay old ranchero on his way to visit the most beautiful senorita in all of Sonora, from the way he was dressed. I wondered how that grin of his would stand up if he knew that thirty rifles were aimed at the back of his head.

Still the mule train kept coming, and the outriders kept watching the hills with restless eyes. I wondered how they could fail to see us. Did they have any outriders up in the hills looking down on us? If they did, it would be too bad, because they already had more men than we had. Thirty-five, maybe forty outriders were in view by the time the tail of the train had rounded into the canyon.

Word came down: "Hold your fire until Kreyler gives the word."

Bama was dead white. He didn't even seem to be breathing. I wanted to look behind me, but I didn't dare move. The palms of my hands were wet. It seemed almost impossible that in the next few seconds I would be killing men I had never seen before in my life, killing them without giving them a chance in the world. The thought lay heavy and unreal and dull on my mind – but it didn't have time to become an idea.

From somewhere – I didn't know where at first – came a wild, savage scream, and suddenly rifles were beating down on us from above. In the back of my mind I knew that what I had been afraid of had happened: Some of the outriders had got behind us and had discovered us before we could open fire. The next minute I heard one of our own men scream, and Kreyler was yelling, and gunfire seemed to explode from everywhere. I saw Mexicans go down in the first volley, and we fired again and more

went down before they could bring their guns on us. But the rifles up above were raising hell.

"Make for the canyon!" I yelled at Bama.

He was pumping bullets into the Mexicans as fast as he could lever and pull the trigger. After a minute he lay down and began to reload. A bullet whined, kicking dirt up at his feet.

"In the canyon!" I yelled again.

"You're crazy!"

"It's better than getting shot in the back!"

Another bullet slammed into the rock beside his head. "Maybe you're right!"

The others were pouring down the canyon walls now, shooting as they slipped and skidded and fell to the bottom. The Mexicans were shooting their mules and using them for breastworks. It was all a crazy uproar of shooting and screaming and cursing, and there didn't seem to be any sense to anything. I felt the slight tug of a bullet going through the sleeve of my shirt and I snapped a shot into a brown, grinning face. The bullet hit in his mouth and exploded brains through the back of his head.

The violence and noise worked like a fever, and men who had been afraid now seemed crazy to kill. They rushed at each other like idiots, and now and then there was the keen flash of knives in the swirling smoke. I lost track of Bama. I seemed to lose track of everything except the brown faces that kept coming out of nowhere and falling back again into nowhere as my own pistols added to the noise.

The old leader of the smuggler train had been the first to die. He lay under his pale horse with his insides shot out by a dozen rifles, and two members of Basset's army were fighting over his fancy pistol.

I don't know how long it went on. I remember dropping behind a dead horse to reload, and when I stood up again there were no brown faces to shoot at. Whitish, gagging gun smoke swirled around the figures of the men still standing. Occasionally a moan would go up, or a curse, or maybe

a prayer in Spanish. A pistol would explode to startle the sudden quiet, and the Mexican voice would be stilled.

"Jesus!" a voice said. "What did you have to shoot him in the gut for? That was a solid silver belt buckle, and look at it now!"

I went over to a rock and sat down. For a minute I thought I was going to be sick.

Bama came up from somewhere and sat beside me. Pistols were still exploding every minute or so as wounded horses or Mexicans were discovered and killed.

"I wonder," Bama said flatly, "what General Sherman would have to say about our little war here today."

I didn't say anything. The men were cutting the aparejos open, laughing and gibbering and shoving as clank-streams of adobe dollars poured into the dust. I didn't know how much money there was, but I had never seen so much silver before. Twenty thousand dollars, maybe, It looked like that much.

But I was sick, and the thought of money didn't help. The ground was littered with the dead. I had never seen so many dead men before. They lay sprawled in crazy ragdoll positions, smugglers and bandits alike, and the horses, and the gray little mules with the bells around their necks.

"I've seen what they call major battles," Bama said, "without that many men getting killed." He stared blankly at nothing. He rubbed his hands over his face, through his hair. At last he got up.

"Where are you going?"

"To find my horse."

Now I knew why Bama had saved that half bottle of whisky.

Chapter Four

IN THE HOTTEST PART of the afternoon we started back for Ocotillo, what was left of us. Kreyler and the Indian had gathered the silver together and loaded it on pack horses that we had brought along for that purpose. There were several riderless horses, but I didn't take the trouble to count and see how many men we had left back there in the canyon. I guess nobody did. I made the mistake once of looking back, and already the vultures that Bama had talked about were beginning to circle over the battleground. It took everything I had to keep my stomach out of my throat. I didn't look back again.

Bama had finished the rest of his whisky and was riding slouched, chin on chest, deep in some bleary, alcoholic dream. I tried to keep my mind away from the battle, but I kept seeing those brown, grinning faces as they fell away in front of my guns. I wanted to think of my cut of that silver. I tried to remember that killing was necessary sometimes to save yourself – and that silver would save me.

Somehow, we got back to Ocotillo. We split up again when we came to the meeting place, and Bama and I rode back into town the same way we had left it. It was a long ride. Bama still didn't say anything.

It was almost dark by the time I got my horse put away. I went up to my room and fell on the mattress in front of the door. I was dog tired. Every muscle in my body screamed for rest, and every nerve was ready to snap. Then I turned loose with everything I had. I vomited until my guts were sore and there wasn't anything left in me to come up, but still I kept gagging.

When it was over I was soaked in sweat and shaking like a whipped dog. It was all I could do to get off the floor and pour some water in the bowl and wash my face.

It was then that I felt the draft float over the back of my neck and I knew that the door was open and somebody was standing there. I think I knew who it was before I looked up. Sure enough, it was Marta.

“What do you want?”

"I think you need Marta."

"I don't need anybody. Get out of here and stay out."

She looked at me for a moment, then turned and went down the hall. In a minute she was back with a pan and some water, and began cleaning the floor.

"I don't know why they bother to put locks on these doors," I said. "How did you get in here?"

She grinned faintly, took a knife from the bodice of her dress, and showed it to me.

"Is easy."

"It must be."

I didn't feel like talking or fighting or anything else. If she wanted to clean up after me, all right. All I wanted to do was rest and try to forget that I had taken part in anything that had happened today.

She worked quietly, not looking at me. After she had finished I could feel her standing beside me.

"You need eat," she said.

"I need nothing."

She went out of the room, taking the dirty water with her. I didn't bother to close the door.

Maybe five minutes went by, and then she came back with two hard-boiled eggs and a pitcher of cool beer.

"Here."

"You're crazy as hell," I said.

She cracked one of the eggs and peeled it. I took it and bit into it. It tasted good. I washed it down with some of the beer, then reached for the other egg.

"Good?" she said.

I nodded and had some more beer.

"You sick. Why?"

How could I tell her why I was sick? Maybe I wasn't even sure myself. But somehow I felt that the last decent thing in me had been fouled in that massacre. A myth had been shattered. I could no longer tell myself that my killing had been done in self-defense. I was sick with myself, but how could I tell anybody that?

"It wasn't anything," I said.

"You better now?"

"Sure. Have some beer."

She grinned uncertainly, then swigged from the mouth of the pitcher. I was beginning to be glad that she had shown up. I needed something or somebody to take my mind off of things. It was just the shock of seeing so much cold-blooded killing, I tried to tell myself. Pretty soon I would get over it, but now it was just as well that I had somebody to help me get my mind on something else.

"Don't you ever take no for an answer?" I said. "Do you always hang on until you get what you want?"

She shrugged as if she didn't understand me.

"What do you want me for, anyway? I'm not such a prize – not even in this God-forgotten place where almost anybody would be a prize."

She shrugged again and grinned. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, she took my wrist and began inspecting the bandage on my left wrist.

"I am sorry," she said.

"It's all right now."

But it still hurt, and it gave me a vicious, animal-like satisfaction to see that her mouth was still swollen and bruised where I had hit her.

It was dark now. Night had come suddenly down on Ocotillo, and we could hear the noises in the saloon below, and in the dusty street there was the rattle of high-wheeled cars as the Mexican farmers came in from the fields, and the lonesome, forlorn chanting of the native herdsman. I rolled a

cigarette and gave it to the girl, then I rolled one for myself and fired them with a sulphur match.

"Where you learn smoke like this?" she said suddenly.

"A friend of mine. He used to roll them this way, in cornshucks. He's dead now," I added, for some reason.

"You love this friend very much," she said.

"What makes you say that?"

"You are sad when you say he is dead." Then, "He was good man?"

I listened to the night and remembered Pappy Garret. "He was good at one thing," I said. "He could draw faster and shoot straighter than any man who ever lived. He picked me up when I was just a kid running from the State Police and taught me what he knew. I used to wonder why he bothered with me – but I know now that he was a lonely man."

I knew that she wasn't really interested in hearing about it, but she kept quiet and I went on. "He wasn't really a bad man," I said, "but once you start a thing like that, there's no end to it. A gunman kills a friend of yours, then you kill the gunman. Then the gunman has a friend and you have to kill him, or be killed, and it goes on and on that way until you think there isn't a man in the world that doesn't have a reason to shoot you."

Marta stroked my bandaged arm with her cool fingers. "You no bad," she said.

"I'm rotten to the bone, or I would never have done what I did today, no matter how much money there was in it."

She looked up, but I couldn't see what she was thinking. "I think you be rich man pretty soon."

"I'm as rich as I'm going to be, as soon as I get my cut of the silver. I'm through with Basset. I'm going to throw my guns in the deepest river I can find."

It was dark and I couldn't tell much about her face, but I knew that she was smiling. I started hating her all over again. She didn't believe that I would

ever throw my guns away, that I would ever quit Basset. What she believed was what I had said before—that I was rotten to the bone—and it didn't matter a damn to her one way or the other. I was going to be a rich man. I felt her arms crawling around my neck like soft warm snakes and she dug her fingers into my hair and pulled my face down to hers.

I brought my arms up and broke her hold and she hit the floor with her rump. I stood up and for a long moment neither of us said anything. Then I tightened my pistol belt and started for the door.

“Where you go?”

“I don't know.” .

I went down the stairs and heard the noise and laughing in the saloon. The girl was beside me as I pushed through the batwings and went to the bar, and I didn't try to get rid of her or hold her. I didn't care what she did.

The bartender came up and I said, “Tequila. You might as well bring the bottle.”

He brought the bottle and two glasses and I took them over to a table where Bama was sitting by himself. The girl was still with me.

Bama blinked his bleary eyes as we sat down. “I knew you were crazy,” he drawled, “but I never figured you'd be this crazy. Don't you know that Black Joseph will shoot you on sight if he catches you with his girl?”

“To hell with Black Joseph.”

He blinked again. Then he shrugged, smiling that lopsided smile of his. “To hell with him,” he said. “Well, I guess another killing, more or less, won't make much difference on this day of days.” He chuckled dryly. “The funny thing about this place is that everybody thinks that everybody else is crazy—and probably they're right. But there's one good thing about these raids of Basset's. A man can afford tequila for a while instead of that poisonous slop the greasers drink. Here's to bigger foothills.”

He filled his glass and drained it, using the bottle I had brought because he had already emptied his. “May the best man win, senorita,” he said,

nodding in mock politeness. "And may it be entertaining and bloody. Most of all, let it be bloody."

Marta sat stone-faced while I poured a round. "Don't you ever sober up?" I said.

"Not if I can help it. Tequila is good for the soul. It reverts man back to the jungle from whence he came, as they say, back to the vicious, lewd, wild beast that he was before somebody told him that he had a soul. Remember the old camp-meeting hymn that backwoods preachers used to bellow at the top of their lungs? 'I'm Washed in the Blood of the Lamb.' Blood with a mile-high capital B. Did it ever occur to you that the Bible is one of the bloodiest manuscripts ever written? Most of its heroes either are killers or died violent deaths themselves. Blood, I've seen enough of it. I'll wash my soul in the clean, destroying liquid of tequila."

"You're crazy," I said.

He chuckled. "See what I mean?"

Marta was watching him strangely, almost fearfully. Bama slouched back in his chair and smiled at her, his eyes flat and empty. I drank my tequila down, poured another glass, and downed that. My insides began to settle down and I began to feel better. I could feel Bama watching me. Without interest, without feeling.

Pretty soon I began to notice things that I hadn't noticed before. Basset's customers had given us a whole corner of the saloon to ourselves. The area around our table was quiet, as if some kind of invisible wall had been put up around us.

"You can't blame them for moving out of the line of fire," Bama drawled. "As long as you're with that girl we're poison. Have another drink?"

Until now I hadn't really believed that men would kill over a girl like Marta—over money, or pride, or almost anything else, but not over a girl like that. But I saw that I was wrong. Everybody in the place accepted it as a fact that before long either the Indian or I would be dead. The talking and laughing and drinking and gambling went on as usual, but there was a nervous sound to it, a tight feel in the air.

I already had my limit of two drinks, but I took the third one that Bama poured and downed it. I tried to reason with myself. What was the good in taking a chance on getting killed over a Mexican hellcat that was no better than a common doxie? All I had to do was tell her to get away from me, and tomorrow after I got my cut of the silver I'd get out of Ocotillo for good.

But I couldn't do it. I'd never backed down from an Indian or anybody else in my life. In this business you took one step back and you were done for, the whole howling hungry pack would be on you.

So I sat there while Bama smiled that crooked smile of his. But he seemed more interested in the girl than in me. He watched her steadily, and all the time a change was taking place in Malta's eyes. First fear, then uncertainty gave way to a brighter fire of self-satisfaction and conquest. It struck me then that she was actually enjoying this! She wanted to be fought over. She wanted blood at her feet. At every sound her head would turn, her eyes would dart this way and that in excitement. I began to understand why most men wanted no part of her.

Bama took another drink and lifted himself unsteadily to his feet. "Like the darky says," he said, "I'm tired of livin' but 'fraid of dyin'. You don't mind if I just step over to the bar until this is all over, do you?"

I didn't say anything. Bama drunkenly doffed his Confederate hat in Marta's direction, turned, and weaved across the floor.

She was actually smiling now. She reached across the table to take my hand and I pulled away as if she had been a coiled rattler.

"Just let me alone," I said tightly. "There's no way of stopping this thing now, but there's one thing you'd better understand. I'm not getting into any trouble on account of you. And when it's over, I'm telling you for the last time, let me alone."

I don't think she even heard me. Her eyes were darting from one side to the other, and her mind was so hopped up with excitement that she couldn't sit still.

I could feel the change in the place the minute he walked in. It was nothing you could put your finger on at first—there was no change in the way people acted, or in the noise, but I had the feeling that somewhere a grave had been opened and Death itself had walked into the saloon.

In a minute the others felt it, and their heads turned toward the door as if they had been jerked on a string. Saloon sounds—the rattle of a roulette wheel, the chanting of the blackjack dealer, the muffled slap of cards on felt, the clank of glasses behind the bar—all went on for a few seconds and then suddenly played out. I shoved my chair back and there he was standing in front of the batwings. He was looking at me. For him there was no one in the saloon but me.

I didn't know whether to get up or stay where I was. If I had been smart I would have had my right-hand gun pulled around in my lap for a saddle draw—but I hadn't been smart, and it was too late to worry about it now. He started forward, and I could feel the customers pushing back out of the line of fire. This is a hell of a thing, I thought. Here's a man I never saw but once in my life, a man I've never as much as said "Go to hell!" to, and now he's after my hide!

He came forward slowly, in that curious toe-heel gait that Indians have, as if he had a long way to go and was in no particular hurry to get there. Just so he got there. Well, anyway, I was glad the waiting was over. Now that I could look at him, he didn't look so damned tough. He looked like any other Indian, except maybe a little dirtier and a little uglier, with eyes a little more deadly. He had just two hands, like anybody else, and he had blood in his veins that would run out when a bullet went in. That first feeling of doom passed away and I was ready for him.

The smart guys along the bar and against the wall were grinning as if they expected me to fall on my knees and start begging him not to shoot me. They would have loved that. There's nothing that would make them happier than to see me spill my guts. There wasn't a man in the place, with the possible exception of Bama, who wouldn't have taken a shot at me if that had happened.

That's a pleasure they'll be a long time seeing, I thought grimly.

I stood up carefully as he stopped at the table, beside Marta.

“There's something you want?” I said.

For a minute he just looked at me. Or through me. There was no way of telling about those eyes of his. Not a muscle twitched in that stone face, but I noticed that his right hand was edging in toward the butt of his pistol – not much, but enough to carry on through when the time came. He didn't even look at Marta. He just reached with a big hand, grabbed her by the hair of the head, and jerked her half out of the chair.

The smart guys sucked in their guts, laughing to themselves. They already had me dead and buried. They didn't like the Indian much, but they hated punk kids like me even more. They figured I had got my reputation the easy way, and they figured I knew it. I guess I jarred them when I said:

“Take your goddamned hands off of her if you want to go on living.”

Even the Indian showed surprise. His eyelids raised about a millionth of an inch. The next thing I knew his gun was coming out of the holster.

I made my grab and didn't bother to aim. There wasn't time to aim, and when you're standing belly to belly, the way we were, there's no sense in it anyway. I just got the muzzle of my pistol over the top of my holster and fired. I didn't hit him. I didn't even come close. The bullet slammed into the floor somewhere, but I wasn't worrying about that.

The muzzle blast from a .44 is a powerful thing. At that range it can deafen a man, paralyze him, burn him, shock him throw him off balance. That was what I was counting on. I didn't need that first bullet, just the muzzle blast. And the Indian knew it. His mouth flew open as he slammed back under the impact, and before he could get his balance, before he could swing that pistol on me again, he was as good as dead.

I had all the time in the world after that first shot. I shot him twice through his left shirt pocket and he jerked like a monkey on the end of a string. He hit the floor, flopping around like a fish with a broken back. I don't know what kept him alive, but he wouldn't die until he managed to lift his pistol again and try to fix it on me.

Sweat poured off his face as he lifted the pistol, slowly, an inch at a time. For him, it must have been like lifting the south end of Texas, but somehow he did it. There was no fear of dying in those eyes of his. They were completely savage, kill-crazy. Then I stepped in and kicked the pistol out of his hand. I slammed the toe of my boot in his ribs.

“You sonofabitch! You filthy sonofabitch!” And I kept kicking him until somebody came up and pushed me back. It was Bama.

“That's enough!” he said. “Jesus Christ, you can't kill a man but once!”

All the anger and hate seemed to rush out in me all at once. I swung on Bama and knocked him sprawling with the barrel of my pistol. “Goddamn you,” I said, “don't tell me what I can't do!”

He was on all fours, shaking his head like a poled steer. Blood was welling up at the corner of his mouth and I could hear every drop hit the floor and splatter. The saloon had been shocked and jarred and stunned to a deathly quiet. The smart guys weren't so smart now. They stood with their mouths hanging open, staring stupidly.

As suddenly as it had hit me, my anger was gone. I put an arm around Bama's shoulder and helped him up.

“How do you feel?”

“I'm – all right.”

But he was looking at me strangely. First at me, then at the dead Indian, then at me again. He said, “I think I need a drink.”

“Sure.” I poured him a drink with my left hand, keeping my gun hand ready in case the Indian had some friends that wanted to take up the argument.

Bama downed the drink and wiped his mouth with a shaky hand. “Put your pistol away,” he said hoarsely. “Nobody wants to fight you. Not now, anyway.” He took a step forward, and a step backward, then he began to fall.

I caught him before he hit the floor and wrestled his dead weight up to something like a standing position. “Give me a hand,” I said to the girl.

She had a stupid, idiot's smile on her lips. She was half crazy with excitement and power and lust and God knows what else. She couldn't take her eyes off the dead Indian. Some insane, morbid love of blood and violence held her entranced, hypnotized her, charmed her.

"Goddamnit!" I said. "Help me get him out of here!"

Her head jerked up. The idiot's stare went out of her eyes and she got her shoulder under one of Bama's arms and we began to drag him out of the place. We dragged him right over the corpse, the rowels of Bama's spurs raking across the Indian's bloody chest and then clanging to the floor. Nobody made a move. I don't think anybody breathed. From the corner of my eye I glimpsed Basset standing in the doorway of his office, his fat face bloated and pale-looking in the orange light of the coal-oil lamps. I think he was smiling, but I wasn't sure, and I didn't care. There was somebody standing behind him looking out with wild, pale eyes. I think it was Kreyler.

Somehow we got Bama out of the place and up the stairs and into my room. I got the mattress off the floor and put it on the bed, then we stretched Bama out and began to work on him.

He was just drunk, mostly, but there was an ugly lump over his ear and a fine red thread of blood was taking quick long stitches across his face and down his neck, ending in a spreading red blotch on his collar.

"Get me some water," I said.

The pitcher was empty, so she had to go around to the back of the saloon, where the pump was. In a minute she was back, and I dipped a rag into the water and washed the blood off Bama's face. He still didn't move. "Is there a doctor in this place?" I said. She shook her head. She came over to the bed and put a hand on his chest, on his throat, on his forehead. "No need doctor. Too much tequila."

Maybe she was right, but it made me uneasy seeing him stretched out there, not making a move, hardly breathing. I hadn't meant to hit him. But, goddamn him, why couldn't he have kept out of my way? Why did people

always have to make my business their business? If they got hurt they had nobody but themselves to blame.

“Well, I guess there's nothing else we can do. Maybe he'll sleep it off.”

I sat on the bed, staring at nothing, thinking of nothing. Downstairs, they were probably dragging the Indian out and maybe getting ready to bury him, but it didn't mean a thing to me one way or another. The Indian could never have been born, as far as I was concerned. I had no feeling for him at all; no hate, no anger. And in the back of my mind I knew that somebody – Basset, Kreyler, one of the Indian's friends – was probably planning a way to kill me. That didn't seem important either. I was getting out of Ocotillo. I was getting out tomorrow. The girl was standing there beside me, looking at me and not saying anything. She was still smiling, but it was a different, sweet, almost holy smile: It reminded me of old women on their knees in front of altars saying their prayers. It made me uncomfortable having her look at me that way.

I got up and went out of the room and went into Bama's room and lay across the bed in the darkness. I knew that she would be there in a few minutes. And she was.

She didn't say a word. She just lay down beside me and pressed that hot animal self of hers against me and waited. We both waited, and nothing happened. She came closer and those soft arms crawled over me, and then she was breathing her hot breath in my face and mashing her bruised mouth against mine. Still nothing happened. I could have been kissing a stone statue and it would have been about the same. For a while we just lay there. Maybe she thought that it was the excitement of the fight that made me the way I was, but it was more than that. She just wasn't what I wanted. After a while she went away.

Chapter Five

THE NEXT MORNING I awoke to the sound of sloshing water behind the thin partition that separated Bama's room from mine. I got up and sloshed water on my own face, drying it on the tail of one of Bama's shirts. Then I went into the hall and knocked.

"Bama, are you up?"

He opened the door, bleary-eyed, licking his cracked lips. "Well," he said. "I was wondering what happened to you."

"I spent the night in your room. It seemed easier than trying to move you. How do you feel?"

"Fine," he said thickly. "Like I always feel on mornings like this." He touched the knot behind his ear and winced.

"That's where I hit you."

"I know," he said. "You didn't bring a bottle along, did you?"

"Don't you think it's about time to lay off the stuff for a while?"

He looked at me hazily. He sat on the bed, holding his head as if he thought maybe it would roll off his shoulders if he didn't. "God," he said flatly, "what a rotten, lousy life. You killed the Indian, didn't you?"

"The sonofabitch asked for it."

Then he thought of something. "The girl – Marta – where is she?"

"How should I know? I guess she went home, down in the Mexican section. I don't care where she went."

"She – she wasn't with you last night?"

"Not after we got you up here."

He thought for a while, then he said a funny thing. "Maybe there's some hope for you, Tall Cameron. As unlikely as it seems, maybe there's some hope for you, after all."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

But he seemed to have forgotten what he was talking about. "Sometimes I think that memories are the only things that are real. I wish they were. Are you sure you haven't got a bottle?"

Then I remembered that bottle of greaser poison that Marta had used on my wrist. I dug it out from under some dirty clothes and poured him a small one. "I'm sorry about that lick I gave you," I said. "But you butted into something that was none of your business."

"Yes," he said, "I suppose I did." And then he polished off the drink and shuddered. "But that temper of yours," he said when he got his breath, "you ought to learn to control it. It'll turn on you like a bad woman, and that will be the end of Tall Cameron."

"Let me worry about my temper," I said. Suddenly I began to get an idea – or rather, an old idea that had been floating around in the cellar of my mind suddenly came to the top. I said, "Bama, if you hate this place so much, why don't you get out of it?"

He just looked at me.

"What's holding you here?" I asked. "Take your cut of the silver that we got off the smugglers and go down to Mexico somewhere like I'm going to do."

I was telling Bama something that I hadn't even admitted to myself. I was telling him that I was tired of being alone, that I was even afraid of being alone. I was asking him to ride with me. God knows why a man like me would want Bama with him. He would be no earthly good, and his drinking would probably cause trouble wherever we went.

Then it hit me that maybe I could feel the day coming when I would look around me and discover how far down I had gone. When that day did come I would want somebody around that I could still look down on. And that somebody was Bama.

I think he could see the way my mind was working, but there was no anger in his eyes, except possibly an old anger at himself. He started to say something, but he changed his mind at the last moment and had another drink.

"Think it over," I said. "Maybe I could use some company if you want to ride along."

Looking at the bottle, he said, "Do you really think you'll get out of Ocotillo?"

"Why shouldn't I? I've got enough money coming to keep me below the border for a while. After that, something will show up." Then I said, "Speaking of money, I think I'll go down and pick up my cut from Basset. Do you want to come along?"

He reached for the bottle again. "I think I'll just sit here for a while, if you don't mind. Anyway, I got my cut last night."

So I left him sitting there, getting an early start on the road to nowhere.

The bartender was leaning on a broom, contemplating a dark brown splotch on the saloon floor, when I came in. I said, "I want to see Basset," and his head snapped up as if he had never seen me before.

"Sure. Sure," he said. "Wait a minute, I'll see if Basset's up yet."

He went back to the rear of the saloon, where I guessed Basset had a sleeping room next to his office—he struck me as being the kind of man that wouldn't like to get too far away from his business. After a minute the bartender came back.

"It's all right. He's in the office." He was still sitting, fat and sweaty, behind his desk when I went in, looking exactly the same as the last time I had seen him. "Well," he wheezed, "I guess you came by your reputation honest. You can handle guns, I'll say that for you. You've got a bad temper, though. You'll have to learn to hold onto that if you're going to work for me."

"I'm not going to work for you," I said. He sat back, blinking folds of fat over those buckshot eyes. "Now, look here," he panted. "What's the matter?"

"I don't like wholesale murder and I don't like robbing people," I said. "I just want to get out, like I told you. Now if you'll just figure out my cut of the silver..."

He lurched his hulk over in the chair and sat there blinking those eyes at me, breathing through his mouth. "Well," he said. "If that's the way you feel about it. Sure, you can have your cut. No hard feelings."

He pulled out the big bottom drawer of his desk and opened a strongbox with a key. He took out a heavy-looking, clanking canvas bag and shoved it across the desk toward me.

"Here it is," he said. "You sure you don't want to change your mind?"

"I'm sure," I said. I didn't bother to count the silver. I just picked it up and walked out, hoping that I had seen the fat man for the last time.

I went back up to my room and Bama was still there, drunk, as I had expected. I heard him talking to somebody as I came up the hall, and when I got to the door I saw that it was Marta.

"What's she doing here?"

Bama shrugged, "Maybe she's in love with you," he said, waving his arms.

"Maybe she can't bear to have you out of her sight."

"She'd better start getting used to it, because I'm going to put Ocotillo behind me."

I threw the sack of silver on the bed and she stood there looking at me. She seemed to come and go like night shadows, and every time I saw her she seemed to be a different person. I tried to remember how she had looked the first time I had seen her, there in the dusty street with fiesta going on all around us. I couldn't remember.

"I think the girl's got the wrong idea about you," Bama said. "She thinks you killed the Indian because of her. It wasn't that at all, was it, Tall Cameron?"

"No," I said, "it wasn't."

"See?" Bama said, waving his arms again, as if he had just proved something.

The girl didn't say anything. She just stood there looking at me, and I had a feeling that overnight she had grown from a wild animal into a woman. And not a bad-looking woman, at that.

But I still wasn't interested. "You really ought to do something about her," Bama said. "Tell her to go home. It's not decent the way she walks in and out of this place any time she gets the notion." Bama lay back on the bed, holding the empty whisky bottle before him, staring into it as if it were a crystal ball and he were about ready to give us the beginning and end to everything. But, instead, he dropped the bottle and dozed off.

I began digging in my saddlebags, getting my stuff together. "Why don't you do like he says?" I said. "Go home or somewhere. Why don't you stay down in the Mexican part of town with your own people?"

"You need Marta," she said.

"I don't need anybody." But she didn't believe me.

And I didn't believe myself, for that matter. An old, half-forgotten memory began to shape in my mind, and I remembered what Bama had said the day before. "Why don't you tell me about the girl you left in Texas? The girl you grew up with and loved and planned to marry –"

For a moment bright anger washed over me, a hurting, twisting anger that made me want to kill Bama as he lay there in his drunken stupor. But then I remembered Bama's own lost love and the anger vanished. We weren't so different, at that, Bama and me. We both lived in the past, because men like us have no future.

The mood hung on and I couldn't shake it off, and I felt completely lost. A bundle of loose ends dangled in a black nothingness. There was no turning back, and I wondered if maybe Bama had found the answer in whisky.

It even occurred to me that maybe Marta was the answer for me, that maybe she was right and I needed her. But that wouldn't work either, and I knew it. The best thing to do was to get out of Ocotillo.

I threw some more stuff into the saddlebag, then I went over to the bed and rolled Bama over to give me room to count the silver. I hadn't bothered to

guess how much my cut would be, but I had seen the pile of money we had got off the smugglers and I knew that a fair cut would be enough to take care of me for quite a while.

Bama grunted and lurched up in bed as I untied the sack and dumped the contents on the blanket.

For a minute I just looked at it. There were some adobe dollars there, all right, but there was a lot of other things too. I scattered the stuff around and picked up a handful of round brass disks with holes in the middle. On one side they had the names E. E. Basset stamped on them, and on the other side there were the words "Good for One Dollar in Trade."

For a minute I thought there had been a mistake and Basset had given me the wrong sack. But then, from the look on Bama's face, I knew that it was no mistake. This was the way the fat man paid off: He collected the silver and gave his men a pile of worthless brass buttons. Quickly I scattered the stuff some more and sorted it out, and when I had finished I had thirty-five adobe dollars and sixty-five pieces of brass.

Finally I straightened up, and what was going on inside of me must have been written on my face.

Bama seemed suddenly sober. "Take it easy, kid."

"Is this the way Basset pays all his men?"

"I thought you knew," Bama said.

"Look at that!" I kicked the bed and brass and silver went flying all over the room. "Is that what he calls a fair cut? I saw the money they sacked up on that raid— fifteen thousand dollars, at least. Maybe twenty thousand. And he hands me thirty-five dollars and sixty-five pieces of brass. Even if it was all silver. It would still be a long way from a fair cut."

By the time the money hit the floor, Marta was on her knees gathering it up in her skirt. Bama sighed deeply.

"That's the way it is when you work for men like Basset. That's why I was wondering how you meant to get out of Ocotillo. Anyway, that brass is as good as the silver, if you spend it in the saloon."

"I don't intend to spend it in the saloon," I said. Then I wheeled and headed for the door. Marta was standing there, the silver and brass in her skirt, holding it out.

I said, "Keep it. Spend it on saloon whisky, or take it home, or throw it to the chickens. I won't need it."

Her eyes lit up and she smiled a smile like a kid who had just found a wagonful of candy.

Bama lurched across the room and grabbed my sleeve as I was about to walk out. "Don't go down there half-cocked," he said. "Don't you think Basset has had this kind of trouble before? He knows what he's doing and he knows how to take care of himself."

"I don't want any trouble," I said, "but I'm going to get what's coming to me if I have to choke the stuff out of him."

I shook Bama off and went down the stairs three at a time and burst into the saloon. The bartender was still leaning on his broom. He didn't seem exactly surprised to see me and he didn't try to stop me when I marched straight on back to Basset's office. I kicked the door open and said, "Goddamn you, Basset, I want what's coming to me..."

But I left the words hanging. Basset had been receiving company while I'd been upstairs jawing with Bama. Kreyler, the fat man's right-hand gun, was leaning against the wall near the door. I guessed that Bama knew what he was talking about; Basset had experience in handling situations like this.

Kreyler didn't have his guns out, but he had his thumbs hooked in his gun belt, and all he had to do was cup his hand around the pistol butt if there was some shooting to be done. Basset was still sitting where I had left him, smiling that wet smile of his. He sat back wheezing and coughing.

"Why, son, what seems to be the matter? Ha-ha. You look all worked up about something. Doesn't he, Kreyler?"

Kreyler didn't say anything; he just looked at me with those flat, hate-filled eyes.

I said, "I came after my cut of that silver that we took in the smuggler raid. And don't try to talk me out of it, because I'm going to get it one way or another."

I told Kreyler with a look that he could go to hell. If he wanted to make his draw, it was all right with me. But nothing happened for a minute. The fat man and the Marshal looked at each other and I began to get the idea that they were cooking something between them, but I didn't know what. Basset wasn't armed, as far as I could see, and even if he did have a gun on him, I figured it would take him a week to find it among all the folds of fat. If it was just Kreyler's shooting ability that I had to worry about, I was all right.

"Well, now," Basset said, "this is very irregular. Very irregular indeed, isn't it, Kreyler? I was under the impression that you had picked up your cut this morning, Cameron." He didn't seem worried, and that in itself was something for me to worry about. "However," he went on, "we always try to keep the men happy here in Ocotillo. Even the ungrateful ones. Of course, it will mean going into my own pocket, but just so there won't be any hard feelings, I'm willing to add a little to your cut. Say another thirty-five dollars. In silver."

I said, "I was thinking that five hundred dollars would be about right."

He didn't like that. Those little eyes began to narrow and I got the feeling that this was the time to be careful.

"Well, now," he said, "that's a lot of money. But, like I say, we try to keep the men happy."

Grunting, he reached across his desk and pulled the cigar box over. "I think maybe it can be done," he said vaguely. "Five hundred. Yes, I think it can be done, don't you, Kreyler?"

And while he was talking he was opening the cigar box and fumbling around in it. I had seen him do it before, just the way he was doing it now, and it hadn't meant a thing. But this time it did. Something prodded me in the back of my mind and I knew that it wasn't a cigar that he was fumbling for.

It was a little double-barreled derringer, probably, but he didn't get to use it. I guess he intended to let me have both barrels right through the lid of the box, and it wasn't such a bad idea, at that, because one of those little belly guns can do damage out of all proportion to its size. It was a nice setup, all right. In another second he would have shot my belt buckle right through my backbone. If he had lived that long.

At times like that you appreciate your training, and when it came to guns I had one of the best educations in the world. My right hand took over where my brain left off, and what came next was as natural as reciting the multiplication tables. More natural for me.

So I shot him. It was as simple as that, and I didn't wait to see where the bullet hit, because I already knew. When Pappy Garret trained a man, he didn't leave any margin for doubt about things like that. After I had pulled the trigger I moved one foot just enough to pull my body around and lay the pistol on Kreyler.

As a gunman, maybe the Marshal was all right as long as he stayed in his own class, but he hadn't had the advantage of studying with an expert, the way I had. As it was, I had all the time in the world. I could have shot him twice before the front sight of his pistol cleared his holster, and Kreyler knew it. I guess there was an instant there when he was already seeing himself frying in hell, because his eyes got that sick look and he lost heart and didn't even try to get his pistol out.

There's one thing about gun fighting, when you start shooting it's hard to stop. The first thing a gunman learns is to start shooting the minute his hand hits the gun butt—that is, he starts cocking his pistol the instant he starts his draw. If he's good enough he's got his pistol cocked and is squeezing the trigger by the time he clears leather, and from then on it's almost automatic. You cock again as the gun goes down from recoil, shoot again, cock again, until you're out of ammunition.

That's the way it usually goes. That's the way Kreyler expected it to go this time, and from the way he looked, he was already feeling the shovels hit him in the face as they covered him up in some boothill grave. But about

that time something stopped me. I broke off right in the middle of the cock-trigger action and just stood there looking at him.

For a while he didn't believe it. And neither did I. I couldn't think of any good reason why I shouldn't shoot him. He had been drawing on me. He and the fat man had set a nice little trap for me. On top of that, I should have shot him just because of the principle of the thing, if for no other reason, because in the school I had attended they taught never to pull a gun on a man unless you meant to kill him.

This was the second time I had pulled on Kreyler. And he wasn't dead yet.

But finally I began to understand what had happened. In the heat of the fight I had forgotten that Kreyler was a U.S. marshal, and I guess it was instinct alone that held my trigger finger just in time.

After a minute Kreyler began to realize why I hadn't killed him, and I think it crossed his mind that maybe he could make his draw and shoot me while I was worrying about it. But it was just a fleeting thought. I didn't want to kill him, but I would if he forced it. And he knew it.

No more than two or three seconds had passed since I had put a bullet into Basset, but at that moment it seemed like years ago. I realized that I had been holding my breath, so now I let it go.

I said, "Just move easy, unbuckle your belt, and kick your pistol over here." —

He hesitated a moment, then his pistol hit the floor and he kicked it over. I heard somebody running in the saloon, so I stepped over to the door and saw the bartender diving under the bar. After a shotgun, I figured. But he got peaceful when he saw me standing there, and all he came up with was a rag.

"Go over to one of those tables," I said, "and sit there until I think of something for you to do."

His Adam's apple went up and down a few times, as if he were trying to swallow his stomach, then he went over to a table and sat down, still holding onto the rag. Then there was a commotion outside the saloon and

in a minute Bama and Marta came bursting through the batwings. They hurried on back and stopped at the doorway of Basset's office, looking in.

"My God," Bama said weakly. He wiped his hand across his mouth, looking as if he needed a drink. Marta didn't do anything except stare at me.

I said, "Keep an eye on the bartender, Bama. How much racket did I make?"

"Plenty," he gulped. "My God, did you have to kill him?"

"Of course I had to kill him. He was getting ready to shoot me with that derringer in his cigar box."

I turned them and glanced at Basset for the first time. He was sprawled out in his chair, as formless as three hundred pounds of lard in a hot room, and getting more formless all the time. There was a black little hole about nine inches below his left shoulder, but there wasn't any blood to speak of.

I said, "You've been around here a while, Bama. How much excitement is this going to cause?"

"Plenty when Basset's men find out. That will take a little time, though. We heard the shooting upstairs, but I doubt if anybody else did."

"Anyway, that gives us some time to figure out something. First there's the silver. I'm going to get my cut of that before I do anything else."

Bama had opened Basset's cigar box. Something happened to his face as he stared into it. I don't know just what it was, but suddenly he looked very tired and very old. I pulled the box over and had a look at it. Then I heard myself saying, "Well, I'll be damned."

There hadn't been any derringer in it, after all.

It was a shock at first. Then it occurred to me that it had been a lot bigger shock to Basset. There was something in it that seemed funny to me at just that moment, and I laughed a little and said again, "Well, I'll be damned. There wasn't any gun in there at all, he was just reaching for a cigar."

Bama looked at me with those old eyes. "You can kill a man like that, and then laugh at it?"

I was keyed up, I guess, or I wouldn't have paid any attention to him. But as it was, it went all over me.

I said, "What are you crying about? You shoot Mexicans in the back, don't you, for a few lousy pieces of silver? What makes you think that you've got a right to read a sermon to me?"

It hit him like a kick in the gut, and I was sorry after I had said it. I would have taken it back if I could, but I couldn't, so I tried to pass it off the best way I could.

"Why don't you go on out and take a look at the bartender?" I said. "If anybody comes into the saloon, let me know."

That left me with Kreyler, and the problem of what to do with him. But first there was the silver, so I said, "All right, where does Basset keep his money?"

Kreyler gave me a flat look. "He doesn't keep any money, not here. After a raid he has it expressed to a bank in Tucson, under another name."

"But he must have some money here," I said. "Enough to pay me what he owes me." I dumped Basset out of his chair and he hit the floor like a wagonload of mud. Then I began going through the drawers of his desk until I found what I was looking for.

It was in the strongbox that I had seen earlier in the morning, and I had to go through the dead man's pockets to get the key. After I got the box open, there it was, about five hundred adobe dollars.

"That will just about do it," I said, and I sat down in Basset's chair and raked the silver coins into a canvas sack.

Kreyler was watching me, and he didn't look exactly brokenhearted because the fat man was dead. But I could understand that. With Basset dead, and the Indian dead, I had opened the road for the Marshal to sit down at the boss's desk and take over the business for himself.

"You really owe me a great deal," I said. "I've done you two big favors since I've been in Ocotillo, getting rid of Basset and the Indian. To say nothing of not shooting you when I should have."

"You haven't got the guts to shoot a United States marshal," he said flatly.

Every man makes a mistake once in a while, and Kreyler made one right then. I had my money gathered up and was ready to leave everything just the way the Marshal wanted it—but when he opened his mouth he ruined it.

The idea must have been in the back of my mind all the time. Maybe it was even there when I shot Basset. I don't know for sure, but the idea jumped up too fast and too full-blown to have come from nowhere, and I guess I was just waiting for a chance to do something about it.

"Bama!" I yelled. "Come here!"

I was sitting at the fat man's desk, feeling pretty pleased with myself, as Bama came up and stopped in the doorway.

"Bama, how do I look?"

His eyes were puzzled. "You look all right, I guess. Why?"

"I mean how do I look sitting here at Basset's desk?"

"I guess I don't know what you're talking about."

But Kreyler did. I grinned at him and he started swelling up like a toad and you could fairly see the angry fires behind those eyes of his.

"Bama," I said, "I want you to go out and pass the word around that Basset is dead. Find all his men you can. Tell them I killed Basset and from now on I'm the boss of these smuggling raids. If they don't like it, just remind them what happened to the Indian. Oh, yes, and tell them that from now on they get the fair cut that Basset promised them but didn't give them, and that it will all be in silver or gold, whatever the smugglers have on them. But the thing I want you to impress them with is that I'm the boss. And I'll be the boss until a faster gunman comes along to change my mind."

Chapter Six

IT WAS KIND of funny the way it all happened. One minute I was just another wanted gunman on the run, and the next minute I was all set up in business as the boss of a band of cutthroats. It happened so fast and so natural that I didn't have time to give it much thought. I just saw the opening and took it. That, I realized later, was the way bosses were made.

There was one thing, though, that complicated things, and that was figuring out what to do with Kreyler. The Marshal was the key to the whole thing here in Ocotillo. He gave the business the protection and the freedom to operate that it had to have, and without him the whole thing would fall down around my shoulders. However, that worked itself out along with everything else.

I started with the bartender, by putting him back to work as if nothing had happened. Then I marched the Marshal back into the office, and there we waited for things to begin to happen.

"You'll never get away with it, Cameron," he kept saying.

But I would, and he knew I would. Then I began going through Basset's things again and finally I found the thing that would nail Kreyler down just the way I wanted him. It was a big ledger book that the fat man had used to make his bookkeeping entries in, and every penny of smuggled silver was accounted for right there, along with the money he had paid out to Kreyler and the Indian and all the rest. I looked at it and sat back and grinned, and the Marshal knew it was all over.

"Now," I said, "I think we can do business together, Marshal. We'll keep things just like they were when Basset was running things. You furnish the protection and I'll see that you get a good share of the profits. What do you think about that?"

"I think you're crazy. You're wanted in every state west of St. Louis. It would be suicide for a United States marshal to try to do business with you."

"Maybe," I said, "but it would be slow and you'd have a chance to build up a stake." I tapped the ledger. "Here's something for you to think about. Say

I turned this ledger over to somebody in Tucson – say a lawyer that I could depend on, or maybe even a sheriff – with instructions that the book was to be turned over to the United States marshal's office if they didn't get the word from me once a month to hold onto it. Of course, I wouldn't ride into Tucson myself, but I could get somebody else to do it.”

He could cheerfully have cut me into pieces and thrown me to the dogs. But I had him where the hair was short. And he knew it. For a long while he just sat there, angry thunderheads boiling behind his eyes.

At last he said, “I'll have to think it over.”

“Think it over, but the answer better be yes. And in the meantime don't try to beat this ledger to Tucson and put the law on my tail.”

He didn't say anything, so I sat there and let him hate me until Bama got back.

“I don't know,” Bama said wearily. “Some of the men don't like it. They didn't care much for Basset, but they just don't like the idea of somebody coming in and shooting his way to the top.”

“Did you tell them about getting a full cut in silver?”

“I think maybe that will do it,” he said. “They're talking it over now among themselves, and we'll know within an hour or so if they're going to work for you.” He looked at Kreyler and then at me. “No matter what they decide,” he went on, “you'll never get away with it.”

“Kreyler's been telling me the same thing,” I said, “but look at this.” And I showed him the ledger and after a minute he caught on what I was going to do with it.

“I think I'd better have a drink.”

“I'll have one with you. We've got something to celebrate here. Kreyler?”

“If it's all right with you,” the Marshal said flatly, “you can celebrate by yourself.”

“Sure, if that's the way you feel about it.” Then I picked up his gun and threw it at him. “You can have this, only don't get any funny notions. That Marshal's badge won't stop a bullet.”

Kreyler buckled his belt on and walked out of the place, and Bama and I went out to the bar and had the bartender bring us a bottle. Bama downed three fast ones then leaned on the bar and held his head in his hands.

“What's the matter with you?”

“I guess I'm just a little sick.”

“You'll get over it. In a few weeks we'll have all the money we need and we'll leave this town behind.”

“Are you sure?” he said, looking at me. “What happened to you, anyway? Yesterday you were as sick of this mess as I was and all you wanted was to get out.”

“I still want to get out,” I said. “It's just that I've found a better way to do it. What's the sense in going off half-cocked? This business of Basset's fell right in my lap. Why shouldn't I take it long enough to get a little money?”

“No reason, I guess,” he said. “I was just hoping that it wouldn't work out this way. But then, nothing ever seems to work out, does it?”

I couldn't figure the guy out, and I never did figure him out completely. I didn't say so in as many words, but here I was offering a partnership in a well-paying business and he seemed to be sorry about the whole thing. It wasn't the prettiest business in the world—I could see that—but what the hell, he had been in it longer than I had.

After a while we heard boot heels hit the dirt walk outside the saloon and we had company. Four men pushed through the batwings and stood looking at us.

“Basset's scouts,” Bama said. “They're probably acting as spokesmen for the other men.”

One man stepped out in front of the others, then walked around the tables till he could see Basset where he was still sprawled out. For a long minute

he just looked at the dead fat man, and then he said, "By God, he's dead, all right."

Then he walked over to Bama and me and poured himself a drink from our bottle.

"I hear you're the one that did it," he said to me.

I didn't say anything. He was a lean, leathery man with about fifteen cents' worth of tobacco working in one cheek, causing a brown dribble at the corner of his mouth, which disappeared into a bushy, dirty beard. He looked about as excited as a dead armadillo. He sure didn't look like a man stricken with grief.

"Well, maybe you done us a favor, but that's to be found out later, I guess. I hear you're settin' yourself up in Basset's place."

"That's right."

"What makes you think you're big enough to hold a job like that?"

"Any man that feels bigger can take it from me the way I took it from Basset."

He considered that carefully, over another drink. He studied my guns. He studied the dead man. "Look," I said. "I'm offering you men a better deal than you ever got out of Basset. You'll get a fair cut from every raid. The men can watch the money while it's being counted and split up. And, starting now, those brass buttons of Basset's are no good. I'll buy them up with real silver."

He sipped his drink thoughtfully. "How about Kreyler? We can't do anything without him."

"Kreyler's staying with us. Never mind why, but he'll be with us to the end."

Another long minute went by while the scout weighed things in his mind. He had the power to make or break me, and we both knew it. I hadn't made up my mind what I was going to do if he said no.

Luckily, I didn't have to worry about it. The scout shifted his cud and said, "Well, I never liked the sonofabitch much, anyway." And he motioned to the men standing in the doorway. "You might as well come on in, boys, and have a drink with the new boss."

There wasn't anything to it after that. We buried Basset in a gully near the Huachuca foothills, and by night the saloon was doing business as usual. I threw Basset's things out of the back end of the place and moved my things in, what there were of them, and called Kreyler and Bama and the scouts together for a pow-wow.

"I haven't been here long enough to know just how Basset ran things here," I said, "but what I saw of it I didn't like. First, there's that business of letting the smuggler outriders get behind us while we were sitting in ambush. I want a map drawn of those mountains and foothills, and I want every cut and gully and rock and sage brush on it. Like the maps they use in the Army when they're getting ready to plan a battle. Bama, you used to be a soldier. Can you draw a map like that?"

Bama shrugged. "I guess I can try."

We were sitting in the office, the four scouts, me, Bama, and Kreyler. The door was closed but we could still hear the saloon noise on the other side. The scouts looked sleepy. Bama looked thirsty. Kreyler didn't look any way in particular, but I had an idea of what was going on inside him.

I said, "Bama, it will be your job to do the map. In the morning you can take two scouts into the hills and go to work on it. I don't care how long it takes, just so you get everything on it. The other two scouts can ride off toward Mexico and see what you can find in the way of smuggler trains."

Kreyler looked up at that.

"You can't push too hard on a thing like this," he said. "We can't attack every smuggler train trying to make its way to Tucson. They expect a few attacks, but if it happens too often they'll change their route and that will be the end of a good thing."

I could see the scouts agreeing with him, and Bama too. "We're not going to try to get them all," I said, "but the ones we do go after, we're going to

do it right. That's the reason I want the map. If we pick our spot right, there's no reason why we should get shot up. And besides, we won't need so many men if everything is done right, and that means a bigger cut for everybody."

They liked that, especially the scouts, and after a while we got down to details.

"How long have you been thinking about this?" Bama asked after the others had gone.

"Just since this morning. How long do you think I've been thinking about it?"

But he only shrugged and let it go.

"The next thing we've got to do is take care of this ledger," I said. "We can't follow Kreyler around with a gun all the time, and anyway, this thing is better than a gun. It keeps the Marshal tied to us and keeps him from putting a bullet in my back at the same time."

"You're really going into this, aren't you?" Bama said, and I tried to read some meaning into it, but there wasn't anything there but a thick, heavy drawl.

He sat there looking at me with no expression at all. At that moment he looked as if he had lived a hundred years and every year had been a hard one. "If I had the guts," he said, "I'd tell you to go to hell. But I haven't got the guts. So if you'll get me a bottle of whisky I'll tell you what you'll have to do about Kreyler."

I think at that moment he really hated me. But, like he said, he didn't have the guts to do anything about it. Anyway, I was getting used to his moods and the way he talked, so I slapped him on the shoulder and said, "It's not going to be as bad as all that."

I opened the door and yelled to the bartender, and in a minute we had a bottle and a couple of tumblers on the desk.

Bama said, "I know a lawyer in Tucson who would handle the ledger for you, but I couldn't risk showing myself in a place like that. And neither

could you. What you've got to have is a man who isn't wanted by the law here in Arizona. It would be better if he wasn't wanted at all, but it's not likely we'll find a man like that. I think I've got the man you want."

I waited until Bama finished his drink, then he went on. "He's just a kid—much more of a kid than you are. He came riding into town today sometime after the shooting. From Texas, by the look of his rig. He's out in the saloon and you can talk to him if you want to." -

"If you think he's the one we need."

So Bama got up and went into the saloon, and after a minute he came back with a hay-haired kid who looked to be about seventeen years old. He wore blue overalls that had been patched several times around the rump and knees, and heavy brogans, and a dirty felt hat that had part of the brim torn off. He sure didn't look like much, but there was something about him that gave me kind of a shock.

It was almost like looking into a mirror and seeing myself as I had been at that age—except that I had never worn those nester's overalls and brogans. But it was his face, I guess, that got me, and his eyes. His eyes were pale blue and they were kind of bewildered and they didn't know much of anything. And maybe there was a little fear in them, and uncertainty.

"Well, son," Bama said, reaching for a drink, "how does it feel to be in the presence of the mighty? Of course, you've heard of Talbert Cameron, desperado, killer, as they say on the 'Wanted' posters. The fastest gunman ever to come out of Texas, the scourge of lawmen, soldiers, and just plain downright honest citizens."

I wished to hell that Bama would shut up, but he kept running on and the kid's eyes got bigger and bigger. And I couldn't get away from that feeling that the kid was myself standing there, getting my first look at a real gunman and being a little stunned and awed by it. I said, "For Christ's sake, Bama, shut up." Bama grinned a little, sadly, and shrugged. "Go ahead and sit down, son. I don't reckon he'll bite you."

The kid sat down on the edge of a chair and stared at me. He swallowed a couple of times and his Adam's apple flopped around while he tried to think of something to say.

I said, "Bama tells me you're from Texas. What part?" He gulped. "South," he said faintly. "Along the Nueces River."

I'd never been in the brush country, but by looking at the kid I got a pretty good idea of what it was like. It would be blazing sun and blistering wind and men grubbing for a living on land that was never meant to be worth a damn for anything. But those men would love the land, and they would live on it, and fight on it, and die on it. I wondered what had made the kid leave it. "Have you got a name?" I said. "Yes, sir." He was beginning to find his voice now. "Rayburn. John Rayburn."

Bama was sitting on the desk, soberly studying the kid, and I guessed that Bama was also seeing something of himself in this lost, bewildered-looking kid who called himself John Rayburn. After a minute he spoke quietly, with a gentleness in his voice that I had never heard before.

"Do you want to tell us about it, Johnny? We're all pretty much in the same fix here, as far as the law goes. And you are running from the law."

"I've been doin' that, all right," the kid said, and he looked at me and Bama, "but I sure never figured to wind up in any place like this." His gaze settled on me. "Are you really the Tall Cameron that they talked so much about in Texas?"

I started to ask him what they were saying about me, but I changed my mind and said, "That's right. Now, who are you, besides just somebody by the name of John Rayburn?"

"Well, gosh," he said, "I'm not anybody much. My pa owns a little brush-poppin' outfit down on the Nueces, like I said, and I was born there and lived there all my life—until the last month or so." He hesitated until he became convinced that it was all right to talk. "Well, hell," he said, "I guess I got into some trouble. There was a dance in Lost Creek—that's a town by our place—and I guess some of the boys kind of got liquored up and there was a fight. The first thing you know there's a deputy sheriff dead on the

floor, and then the first thing I know they're claimin' I was one of the boys that done it."

He looked at us to see what we thought about it. "I didn't have anything to do with it," he said, "but they locked me up anyway, along with the others. And when they have the trial the jury says manslaughter and sentences all of us to three years on the work gang." He grinned uncertainly. "But the jail they was holdin' us in wasn't much, so I lit out of there as fast as I could. God knows how I wound up in Arizona."

For a minute there was silence and I sat there thinking about myself, a kid who had started running just about the same way, and was still running. Then, for no reason I could think of, I began to get mad, and I wanted to get up and shake that kid until his teeth rattled and knock some sense into his head. I wanted to tell him that there were worse things than the work gang. I wanted to tell him how it was when you ran and ran until you couldn't run any more, but you knew that if you stopped it would be all over. There were a lot of things I could tell him— things I wished somebody had told me.

I think Bama's mind was working about the same way mine was, but he just sat there waiting for me to do something. But all I did was to sit back in the chair and say, "Do you want a job?"

"With you, Mr. Cameron? Gosh, yes!"

I looked at him and then looked away. He was building me up in his mind as a big hero, but I didn't feel like a hero right then.

I said, "Bama, give him the ledger and tell him what to do," and I threw out the sack of Basset's with the five hundred adobe dollars in it. "This ought to be enough to take care of the lawyer."

Bama took the money and waited a minute for me to look at him. But I didn't look at him.

That night after the saloon had emptied and things had quieted down. I went back to my new quarters behind the office and tried to get things straightened out. The room was a plain affair with the usual bed and chair and washstand. On one wall there was a big framed picture that showed a

bunch of battered, dejected, half-frozen soldiers marching through the snow. They had rags tied around their heads and rags on their feet, and they looked as if they had about a bellyful of war. But off to one side there was a cocky little man sitting on a big white horse, and just by looking at him you knew that he was the boss and the war wasn't going to be over until he said so. Down at the bottom of the picture there was some small print that said, "Napoleon in Russia."

There was a bookshelf beside the bed, and a coal-oil lamp. I picked up one of the books, and it was *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. There was also a limp-backed Bible there, and I tried to imagine Basset reading a few chapters of Luke or John before going to bed every night, but the picture wouldn't work out. There were also two big volumes of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and pictures of devils and angels and a lot of people suffering in one kind of hell or another. Well, I thought, Basset ought to be right there among them about now.

There were a lot of other books there, but I didn't look at them. I began to count the money that the saloon had taken in for the night, and it was a little over two hundred dollars. I was just beginning to appreciate what a good thing I'd come into. I made a mental note to ask somebody where Basset had got his whisky supply for the saloon, but I figured it would probably be Mexico. Then I started figuring how money would be coming in every month from the saloon and the smuggler trains, and the amount it came to was staggering.

I paced up and down the room with figures running through my mind, and every once in a while I would stop and look at that picture of Napoleon and I knew just how he felt. There was only one way to look—straight ahead.

That was before I found out what happened to Napoleon in Russia.

But I was feeling pretty good about it then, and the feeling hung on as long as I kept thinking of money and had that picture to look at. It was only after I had undressed and blown out the lamp that something different began to happen.

There in the darkness things began to look different. I began to think about the day and the things that had happened and I couldn't believe it. Here I was in Basset's room, in Basset's bed, and the fat man was dead and buried – but none of it seemed real.

Maybe, I began to think, it was because I didn't want it to be real. I lay there for a long time and I could hear Bama saying, "What has happened to you?" And that was what bothered me. I didn't know. Things had happened too fast to know much of anything. It was like having a comet by the tail and not being able to let go.

Abruptly, I got out of bed, fumbled for matches, and lit the lamp. I looked at the picture again, but that didn't help. The cocky little man on the white horse didn't seem so cocky now, and I doubted that he was as sure of himself as he tried to make people believe.

I went into the office and fumbled around in the dark until I found the whisky that Bama had left. I poured and downed it. I poured again and downed that. I began to feel better.

I took the bottle and glass back into the room and sat on the bed and had another one. I was beginning to feel fine. Another drink or two and I would be ready to kick Napoleon off that white horse and climb on myself.

I don't know how long I sat there, with my mind going up in dizzy spirals, skipping from one place to another like a desert whirlwind. But after a while it hit me and I realized what I was doing. Nothing ever hit me any harder.

Suddenly I could understand Bama, because I was on the road to becoming just like him. Miles Stanford Bon-ridge, gentleman and son of a gentleman. Now I understood how a man could be so sick of himself that the most important thing in the world could be just forgetting.

But not for me. I hammered the cork into the bottle and took it back into the office and there it would stay.

Not for me. But the effort left me weak as I went back and sat on the bed and tried to piece together a lot of loose ends that didn't seem to fit anywhere.

But they did fit when you worked at it long enough. And the first loose end was that smuggler raid. Killing was one thing, but killing like that was something else and would never really be a part of me. I should have known that when I went back to my room and messed up the floor, and maybe I had known, in the back of my mind.

I sat there for a long time, getting a good look at myself and it wasn't very pretty. It was like that first day that I rode into Ocotillo and Marta had taken me to her house and fixed me up with the stuff to shave and take a bath with. I remembered the shock I'd got when I looked into that mirror. The face I'd seen was a stranger's face, and I guess I was experiencing the same thing all over again.

Except that I was looking deeper. Maybe I had a hold of that dark, illusive thing that they call a soul. But I turned loose of it in a hurry, just as I had looked away from the mirror.

Chapter Seven

IT'S FUNNY HOW everything seems different in the light of day. Most of your doubts and fears go with the darkness, and after a while you forget about them completely.

The kid, Johnny Rayburn, got back to Ocotillo late the next day. I came out of the office and there he was standing at the bar, gagging on a shot of tequila.

I said, "You made a quick ride. Did things work out all right in Tucson?"

"Sure, Mr. Cameron."

Then Kreyler came into the saloon and I said, "Wait a minute. All this is for the Marshal's benefit, so he might as well hear about it."

The three of us went back to the office, and I could feel Kreyler's eyes on my back, looking for a soft spot to sink a knife in. But he didn't bother me now. I had him where I wanted him and he knew it. Or he would know it pretty soon.

I said, "All right, kid, let's have it. Tell Mr. Kreyler just exactly what you've been doing for the past day and night."

The Marshal gave the kid a quick look. Then he sat in a chair and waited, and he might as well have been wearing a mask, for all the expression you could read on his face.

"Well," the kid said, "I rode into Tucson, like you said, and I gave the ledger to — to the man Bama told me about. I gave him five hundred dollars and asked him if he would hold onto the book as long as I kept coming back every month to give him another hundred, and he said sure, he'd be glad to. Then I came back to Ocotillo."

I said, "Tell us what's going to happen if we miss giving him the hundred dollars every month."

"He'll turn the book over to the U.S. marshal's office," the kid said.

I expected Kreyler to do something then, but he didn't. He just sat there with that slab face not telling me a thing.

"Well," I said, "it looks like you're working for me, Kreyler, whether you like it or not."

"It would seem that way," he said flatly.

"It doesn't seem any way. You're working for me and you'll keep on working for me until I get tired of having you around."

"All right, I'm working for you."

I didn't like the way things were going. I had expected a hell of a racket about that ledger, but there he was sitting there as if he didn't care about it one way or the other. There was something going on behind those eyes of his, and I thought I knew what it was.

He kept looking at the kid, and then I realized that just three of us knew where that ledger was, me, Bama, and Johnny Rayburn, and if Kreyler wanted to find out where it was he would have to get it out of one of us. I didn't have to do much figuring to guess which one he would work on.

I jerked my head at the kid and said, "Go somewhere and get some sleep." Then it hit me that just "somewhere" wouldn't be good enough. He had to be someplace where Kreyler wouldn't have a chance to work on him. So I said, "Get your stuff and bring it down here. We'll put up a cot or something and you can bunk with me until we figure out something better."

"Well, gosh," the kid said. "Sure, if you want me to, Mr. Cameron." As he went out of the place he seemed to be walking about a foot off the floor, and he had suddenly developed a curious kind of toe-heel way of walking that reminded me of a cat with sore feet. It wasn't until later that I realized that I walked the same way, because I had learned that it was the quietest way to walk. And with a gunman, the quietest way of doing a thing is the safest way.

It began to dawn on me that Johnny Rayburn was imitating me. A thing like that had never happened before. I had never thought of myself as much of a hero, and it had never occurred to me that anybody would want to pattern his life after mine. But there it was, and there was something about it that pleased me—the same way, I guess, that a man is pleased to

have some bawling, yelling brat named after him. It was something like being assured that a part of me would go on living, no matter what happened to Talbert Cameron.

I thought about that, and then I became aware of Kreyler sitting across the desk from me, watching me, reading the thoughts going around in my mind.

"There's something we'd better get straight right now," I said. "If anything happens to that kid, I'll kill you. All the cavalry and United States marshals in Arizona won't be able to save you."

He sat there for a while, half smiling. Then he got up and walked out.

It took Bama and the two scouts eight days to make the kind of map I wanted, but when they finally got back and put the finished product on my desk I saw that they had done a good job. The chart was drawn in six different sections, but Bama had the pieces lettered and numbered and the whole thing made sense when he put it together. There were almost a dozen natural traps that Bama had already marked, and there wasn't much for me to do except to post scouts along the various canyons and wait until a smuggler train was spotted.

"And what do we do," Bama asked, "if the Mexicans decide not to use one of these particular canyons?"

"We'll wait. They'll take one of them sooner or later, and when they do, they won't have a chance."

"No," he said wearily, "I guess not. Do you want a drink?"

"No."

"Well, I do." And he went to the bar and came back with a bottle and glass. "Did the kid take care of the ledger all right?"

"Sure, he did fine."

Very deliberately, Bama poured the tumbler brimful and then sat there looking at it. "I saw him out in the saloon," he said, "when I came in. I thought he was you at first. He walks like you, talks like you, even dresses like you."

I knew that it didn't mean a thing, but still I couldn't help being pleased that somebody else had noticed. "He picked the new rig out in Tucson," I said, "with his own money. It's funny that he'd get just the kind of things I wear."

"Funny?" Then Bama picked up the glass and drained it without taking a breath. He was tired and dirty and his eyes were red-rimmed from long hours of riding in the sun. He said, "I guess I don't see anything very funny about it."

"What the hell's wrong with you, anyway? You know what I mean."

"I don't know anything," he said, "except that I just saw a kid out there blown up with his own conceit and making a goddamned pest of himself. Eight days ago he was just another punk kid who had got off the right track but not so far off that he couldn't have been put back on again. Now he's swaggering like a fighting rooster that hasn't got sense enough to know that he hasn't been equipped with gaffs. But I suppose you're doing something about that. What are you doing to him, anyway – giving him lessons in gun slinging?"

"I'm not doing a damn thing to him," I said, and in spite of all I could do I was letting him get under my skin again. I stood up and grabbed the front of his shirt and twisted it. "Look," I said tightly, "there's something we'd better have an understanding about. You're just working for me, like Kreyler and all the others. When I want you to say something or do something, I'll let you know. Until that time, you'll keep your goddamned mouth shut."

As usual, I was sorry after I had said it. He just stood there looking at me with those sad old eyes and I knew that I would never be able to hate him.

"I'm sorry, Bama," I said. "I didn't mean what I said, but why do you have to keep prodding me until I fly off the handle that way?"

He kept looking at me and I had the uncomfortable feeling that he was pitying me, and if there was anybody in the world that I didn't want pity from, it was Bama. I sat down and said, "Go on, have another drink and forget it."

I poured one for him and shoved it across the desk, but he shook his head and said, "I can forget about us because I guess we're not very important to anybody now. But that kid is different."

I was getting impatient again, but I forced myself to sit tight until he got it off his chest.

Bama said, "Why don't you send him back to wherever he came from? He'd listen to you. Just tell him to go back and put in his time on the work gang and give himself a chance to live like a human being."

I said, "I'm not holding him here. He can do anything he wants to do." But that wasn't answering Bama's question and we both knew it. "Anyway, he's the one who has to take care of that ledger."

Bama sat back and closed his eyes. "Of course, what I think doesn't amount to much, but I was wondering if it wouldn't be better for all of us if we let the kid go – and the ledger, and the smuggler trains, and all the rest of it."

"Now, that's a hell of an idea. Look, one raid is all we need to make. That will give us enough money to keep a hideout until the law forgets that we were ever alive. But that money, we've got to have that."

"But is money the most important thing?"

I got up, tired of the senseless bickering that was getting us nowhere. "By God, you're crazy," I said. "That's the only way to explain the way your brain works."

And Bama smiled that faraway smile and I knew that he wasn't mad at me, and never would be, really. "Sooner or later it always gets around to that, doesn't it? Everybody's crazy." He finished off the drink I had poured for him. "Well, maybe that's the right answer. I don't know any more."

I got to thinking about it later and decided that maybe Bama had been right on a few points. For one thing, the kid was carrying this imitating business too far. God knows where he found them, but somewhere he had picked up a couple of old Prescott revolvers. Navy revolvers, they were called, but the Navy had never bought any of them, and neither had anybody else who had any idea what a good pistol was supposed to be. But the kid had

them buckled on with a couple of cartridge belts that I figured he had made himself, and he had his holsters cut away like a real badman and tied down at his thighs.

He was in the saloon talking to Marta when I first saw him in that getup, and I figured it was about time we had a talk.

Marta was laughing at something when I came up, and I said, "I'm glad to see that everybody's in a good humor for a change."

She laughed again and pointed at Johnny. "Juanito say he be big man like you someday." The kid's face turned red and he fiddled with a whisky glass that was about a quarter full of clear tequila. "Maybe bigger, he say," and Marta's eyes had the devil in them again, that look she got whenever she got two men together. It was the kind of look that you see in Mexicans' eyes when they take their roosters to the fighting pit and start roughing them up before the battle.

But I knocked a hole in some of her fun when I said, "Yes he'll be a bigger man than me." Which, after all, wasn't saying so much. "But not the way he means," I went on. "Not with guns."

The kid's face had started to brighten, but it fell quickly. Then it took on a half-angry, defiant look. "I never said anything about it," he said, "but I was considered a pretty good shot down in the Nueces River country. I guess I know as much about guns as most people."

"You don't know a hell of a lot," I said, "or you wouldn't be making a fool of yourself with those old Prescotts."

Blood rushed to his face as if I had just slapped him. "Look," I said, any my voice was as deadly serious as I could make it. "I hired you on as a messenger boy, not a gunman. When you're heeled you're just advertising for trouble. On the other hand, there aren't many men—not even in Ocotillo—who would take a shot at a man who didn't have a chance to shoot back."

The kid stiffened. "Mr. Cameron," he said, "I guess you don't know much about Ocotillo, even if you do run it."

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Then he took off his hat and I saw the bump over his left ear, and an open cut about an inch long that was just beginning to scab over.

I must have sat there for a minute or more before I could think of anything to say. The thing jarred me because I thought I had everything under control—I had Kreyler nailed down, most of the men were satisfied, and I had two men, the kid and Bama, that I could trust. And still somebody was working against me.

At last I jerked my head at Marta and said, “Go home or somewhere. I want to talk to Johnny alone.”

She didn't like that much, being brushed away like a bothersome fly. But then she saw that I meant business and she got up from the table and sort of melted away.

“All right,” I said. “Tell me about it and don't leave out anything.”

He shrugged. “Well, it was last night. I was in the saloon for a while, and—well, I guess I kind of made friends with that girl, Marta. After a while she said why didn't I walk to her house with her, down in the Mexican part of town, and I said sure, I'd like to. That was the way it started. I got to her house, all right, but her pa raised such a hell of a racket that I didn't stay.” He grinned a little. “I don't understand much of that greaser talk, but I understood enough to know that her old man doesn't like gringos. Well, after that I started back for the saloon, and the streets down there are as dark as hell. That's where they jumped me.”

“Who jumped you? Mexicans?”

“If they were Mexicans, they knew a lot of English cuss words. There were three of them, I think, and I still don't know what the hell they wanted. I didn't have any money. And if it was somebody with a grudge against me, why didn't they shoot me instead of hitting me over the head?”

“How did you get away from them?”

"I guess they weren't expecting much of a fight. Anyway, we stirred up the Mexicans. The next thing I knew I was in one of those adobe houses and Marta was taking care of this cut on my head."

Slowly I began adding things together. Kreyler and that Mexican girl – they might have something to do with it. Maybe the Marshal was just crazy enough to fight for that girl when he didn't have guts enough to fight for himself. I was beginning to understand that women could make men do crazy things. Anyway, I put Johnny Ray-burn and Marta together in my mind and I didn't like it at all. Even if it had nothing to do with that ambush.

"It's about time we had an understanding," I said. "That girl, Marta, is not for you. The sooner you get that through your head, the better off you'll be."

I had expected an argument, but instead of arguing he just sat there looking puzzled. "Why, gosh, Mr. Garner-on," he said, "I never even thought about her. Not the way you mean." And he began to look uncomfortable. "Well," he said, "to tell the truth, I've got a girl down in Texas waiting for me, and I guess she's the only girl in the world as far as I'm concerned. Do you know what I mean?"

He hit me with it and I hadn't been expecting it. It knocked me right out of Ocotillo and into the big, wild Panhandle country, which had been my country once – but that was long ago. There had been a girl there too, and she had waited as long as any girl could be expected to wait, I guess. But I hadn't got around to going back until it was too late.

My first impulse was to strip those guns off him and make him go back to Texas and give himself up. But then I remembered the ledger, and the kid was the only one who could take care of that for me. And that had to be taken care of. I had to keep my hands around Kreyler's throat.

Until after one more raid. My visions of riches were gone. Kreyler had found my soft spot – the kid – and he was already beginning to shove the knife in.

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Cameron?"

“Wrong?” For a moment I forgot what we were talking about. “No, nothing's wrong. Just see if you can find Bama, will you, and tell him to see me in the office.”

Bama took his time about coming, but finally he did come, and the world felt like a saner, safer place with Bama around. He helped himself to one of Basset's cigars on the desk, then he pulled up a leather-bottomed chair and sat down.

“You look worried,” he said. “That's not much like you, Tall Cameron.”

Why the hell he couldn't just call me Tall I don't know. But he always used my full name, and for some reason it always reminded me of the first time I ever saw my name on a “Wanted” poster.

But that was just a passing thought, as he sat there looking at me, and I was surprised to see that he was almost sober – or as sober as I had ever seen him, anyway.

I said, “I think Kreyler has already gone to work on the kid. It was a mistake letting Kreyler know who was going to take care of the ledger for us, but I guess it's too late to worry about that.”

And I told him what the kid had told me, about the bushwhacking and the way they had tried to brain him, and Bama sat there rolling the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other and not saying anything.

“If they get their hands on him again,” I said, “they'll beat the information out of him and then put a bullet in his skull.” Bama still didn't do anything, so I said, “Why don't you say something?”

“What good would it do? It's your show now. You've got everything just the way you want it. Of course, you could send the kid back to Texas if you wanted to.”

“You knew we can't do that. Everything here depends on Kreyler, and Kreyler depends on the kid.”

Bama sighed. That was all.

“How many men on my payroll would fall in with Kreyler?”

“Five, maybe six. You find malcontents wherever you go, but I couldn't point them out for you.”

Then I went to the map that I had tacked on the wall of the office and said what I had meant to say in the first place.

“We've got a scout report that a smuggler train has entered here, at a place called Big Mouth Canyon, about twenty-four hours ago. Heavily loaded, according to the scout, with maybe a record load of silver or gold. How soon can you get the men together?”

Bama stared at me. “You can't attack in a place like that. They'll be traveling over open country. Their outriders will be fanned out and they'll shoot us to pieces.”

“We can't string it out any longer,” I said. “This is the raid we have to make. And it will be the last one.”

Bama looked at me, and then at the map, and then he sighed again and got up from his chair. “Well, I'll round up as many as I can find,” he said, “and tell them we'll meet at the same place tonight.”

That was one thing about Bama, you didn't have to talk all day to get an idea across. One raid, that was all I wanted, and then we'd find a place to start all over again –not, as Bama had said, that it made much difference about us. But the kid still had that girl waiting for him, and Bama knew how I felt about that.

It all began much the same as the last raid, except that I was the boss now and not just another rider. But I didn't have the knack for organizing the way Basset had had. I didn't have the patience to sit down with paper and pencil and check off all the names of men I could depend on. I left that job to Bama while I took Johnny Rayburn around to the livery barn to get our rigs in shape.

I didn't like the idea of bringing the kid along on the raid, but I couldn't very well leave him back in Ocotillo making bullet bait of himself. The stableman brought my black in, and a bay for Johnny Rayburn, and then we heard a commotion outside and Bama came in.

His face was worried and he was wiping nervous sweat off the back of his neck with a dirty handkerchief. I waved the stableman out of the place and said, "What's going on?"

"You've got to send somebody out," he said, "and call your men in, because the raid is off."

"Like hell," I said.

He wiped his neck some more and then brought the handkerchief across his mouth. "Maybe you'd better come out and see for yourself."

I went out, with the kid on my heels, and saw maybe a dozen men ganged around in front of the saloon. In the middle there were two horses, and it didn't take me long to see what the excitement was about. As I began to shove men aside I heard Kreyler saying. "Morry, get yourself a partner and ride out to the meeting place and tell the men to come back in."

By that time I was in the middle of things. I said, "Just stay where you are, all of you." One of the horses was nervous, snorting and pawing the ground, the way animals will do at the smell of blood. He started to rear up but I grabbed the reins and jerked him down good and hard, and then I stroked his neck for a minute until he quieted down. After all that I finally got around to inspecting the thing in the saddle.

It had been a man once, but now it wasn't much of anything. He lay belly down across the saddle, his feet and hands tied with a strip of rawhide under the horse's belly to hold him in place.

"Somebody give me a knife."

A knife appeared from somewhere and I cut the rawhide thongs. The body slid out of the saddle and sprawled out in the dust at my feet. He was one of my scouts, a little man with a mangy beard and a pair of wide-open eyes that seemed to be staring about a thousand miles into space. He had been shot all to pieces and there was no use feeling of his pulse to see if he was dead.

I went around to the other horse where the second body was, and I cut him down. This one had been my chief scout, the lanky, tobacco-chewing man

who had thrown his weight on my side the day I shot Basset. He was bleeding from almost a dozen wounds, wounds that at first looked as if he had been caught in the haphazard blast of a scatter gun. But then I saw that there was nothing haphazard about it. He had been shot to death scientifically, by an expert rifleman, with the bullets just missing the really vital parts of his anatomy. It was the hard way to die, the way he had died. It was the long way.

I don't know how long I stood there looking at him before I began working up some kind of feeling about it. I had never known him very well. He was just a man on the run, like the rest of us, and his name was Malloy, and he was a pretty good scout who did his job without asking too many questions. That was about as much as I knew about him. But, seeing him sprawled out in the dust, I seemed to know him better than I had ever known him before. And for a moment something like fear struck in my guts, and I had the crazy idea that it was myself that I was looking at. I could almost feel the pain that was still a silent scream in the scout's eyes, I could almost feel the darkness closing in....

Then Bama said hoarsely, "My God, he's still alive!"

I snapped out of it, and I looked into the scout's eyes, and I saw that Bama was right.

"Get hold of him and take him into the saloon," I said. "Take him back to the office and put him on my bed. Bama, see if you can find Marta. She's pretty good at this kind of thing."

But I knew that neither Marta nor anybody else could help him now.

Four men picked him up as easily as they could and took him into my room and put him on my bed. Somebody brought some water and rags.

"Whisky."

Somebody brought the bottle, but I knew that the scout would never be able to drink it. I soaked a rag and washed his face and that was about all I could do for him. It occurred to me then that it had been meant all along for him to live until he got back to Ocotillo. Such careful shooting wouldn't have been necessary if they had meant only to kill him.

"How do you feel, Malloy? Can you swallow some whisky?" They were both stupid questions, but I couldn't think of anything else to say. For a moment his eyes lost their glassiness, and he looked at me and at the men crowding into the room.

"Who did it, Malloy, can you tell us that?"

It took a long time to get his mouth working, and when . finally did get it working, no sound would come out. I put the wet cloth to his face again and squeezed a little of the water between his lips. He tried again, and this time I could make out the words "Smugglers... Indians..." His mouth kept working, but those were the last words he ever said.

I turned around and said, "Get out of here, all of you." Then I saw that Bama had come back with Marta and I motioned for Bama to come in.

The girl came in with him and I said, "Not you. He's already dead."

She looked at me in that flat way of hers, and then she crossed herself. "I say prayer."

It looked like it was a little late to pray for Malloy, but what difference did it make?

She knelt down by the bed where the dead man was and I turned to Bama. "Smugglers. Indians. What the hell did he mean by that? Apaches don't run in this part of the country."

"Mexican Indians," Bama said. "They're even more expert at torture than Apaches."

"Do these Indians run smuggler trains of their own?"

Bama shook his head. "The Mexicans hire them sometime, when they have to, as guards, and that's what we've run into this time. The Mexicans don't like them, but your men like them even less. They won't go up against a smuggler train with an Indian guard, if they know about it."

I thought a minute. "They will this time, because we can't wait for another one."

Bama didn't believe me. He thought that I had run up against something that I couldn't knock over.

I said, "You'd better be getting your horse ready."

He just stood there. "They won't follow you. They won't go up against those Indians. They're scared to death of them."

"They'll be scared of something else if they don't."

I walked into the saloon and Bama came after me, more out of curiosity than anything else. The men were ganged up at the bar pouring whisky down their gullets to settle their guts. I saw Johnny Rayburn and motioned him out of the way, and then I heard Kreyler saying:

"Mexicans are one thing but Indians are something else. If you men want to follow Cameron and wind up like those two scouts, that's fine, but not me."

I was behind him before he knew it. Instinct told me that arguing with him would only be a waste of time, so I stepped in and hit him as hard as I could behind the ear.

It stunned him. It stunned all of them. From the corner of my eye I saw that Bama and Johnny had their hands on their guns, in case it came to that.

But it didn't. I jerked Kreyler around before his head cleared and hit him in the face. I slammed the heel of my hand on his chin and snapped his head back, then I hit the corner of his square jaw. It was a fool thing to do, maybe, using my hands when I had guns, but I was still remembering that he was a United States marshal. And I didn't want to kill a United States marshal, no matter who he was.

The way it turned out, I didn't need the guns. It hurts to get hit like that, behind the jaw when you're not expecting it. It hurt Kreyler. I could see pain flare up in those dull eyes as his head snapped back. He began to go down, gasping for breath and grabbing for something to hold to. But there wasn't anything there, and he fell to his knees, and then he went over on his side.

I stood back for a minute, panting, and looking at the men.

"Has anybody else got any ideas about not going on this raid?"

Nobody said anything for a minute. Then Bama yelled:

"Look out!"

But I had already seen Kreyler making a grab for his gun. I could have shot him, or I could have kicked the gun out of his hand, but I didn't do either one of those things. I stepped in and slammed the toe of my boot in his gut.

His mouth flew open and his face went from a dead white to an ashy gray. He folded up like a jackknife and began to gag. The Marshal would never be any sicker than he was at that minute, not if he lived to be a hundred. All the fight had gone out of him. The fight seemed to have gone out of everybody.

I said, "Bama, have you got a list of the men who are to make this raid?"

"I've got it," he said.

Then I looked at the men, still standing at the bar with their mouths hanging open stupidly. "We'll check the list at the meeting place," I said. "Any man who's not there by sundown, I'll find him. I'll find him if it's the last thing I do."

They began to get the idea that this raid was coming off, no matter what Kreyler or anybody else thought about it. They stood there for a minute, shuffling uneasily. Then one of them hitched his belt and started for the door, and the rest of them followed, one and two at a time.

"Well," Bama said, "I guess that takes care of that. You always get what you want, don't you?"

"If I want it bad enough."

Kreyler was still doubled up on the floor, too hurt and sick to move. I said, "What I told the other goes for you too. You'll meet with the rest of us, before sundown." Then the three of us, me and Bama and Johnny Rayburn, walked out of the place. Bama stopped at the bar just long enough to take a bottle out of the bartender's numb hands.

Chapter Eight

WE DIDN'T SAY much as we rode out of Ocotillo and into those barren, angry-looking foothills of the Huachucas. Bama was nursing the bottle again, and the kid wasn't doing much of anything, except that once in a while he would look wide-eyed all around him as though he couldn't understand how he had ever got here. I tried to do some thinking and planning, but my mind kept shooting off on sharp tangents and winding up in strange, long-forgotten places.

I guess we were all thinking pretty much the same thing—the wild Nueces River brush country, the wide green lands of the Texas Panhandle, and Miles Stanford Bonridge's state of Alabama. Home, for all of us, was a long way off. Farther than the poles, farther than those foreign lands on the other side of the ocean, because the distance that separated us from home was more than miles. It couldn't be measured and it couldn't be crossed.

The sun was about two hours high when we finally reached the big rock ledge, and there were six or eight horses already grazing down the canyon while the riders hunkered together under the shelf, waiting. We unsaddled and unbitted and put our horses out to graze, and then Bama went up to the head of the canyon to check off the names as the men rode in.

Johnny Rayburn said, "Is there anything I ought to do, Mr. Cameron?"

He still had that lost look and I began to wish that I had left him back somewhere.

I said, "There's nothing to do now but wait."

I went up for a while to see how Bama was doing. The men were coming in slowly, grim-faced, reluctant.

Bama checked off a name and said, "Twelve. They're coming, but they don't like it worth a damn."

I said, "They're getting paid for it. They don't have to like it."

"Just the same, I've got a feeling that all our trouble won't come from the smugglers. This isn't exactly the smartest play in the world, and the men

know it. They're beginning to say that they should have put Kreyler in as boss."

"The more they talk, the less they'll do." But I wasn't so sure.

"It's the Indians they don't like," Bama was saying. "It would be better if you called this raid off and waited for another train to come up."

"And give Kreyler a chance to work on the kid in the meantime?"

Talking about the kid reminded me that Kreyler's men could be working on him right now, for all I knew. I turned and half ran down the canyon. But nothing had happened. He was squatting with his back against the rocky wall. There was a ragged tally book on his knee, and he was writing painfully in it with the nub end of a pencil. He didn't see me until I was right in front of him, and when he looked up his face got red, as if he had just been caught stealing pennies from a poor box.

"I—well, I guess I was kind of writing my girl a letter," he said. "I know there's no place to mail a letter around here, but when I get back to Tucson I can do it."

I don't know why he thought it was necessary to tell me about it, but he kept stumbling on, telling me about his girl. I guess he didn't notice the look on my face—or maybe I had learned to hide the things I felt.

"You think a lot of this girl, don't you?" I put in. "Why, sure. Well, we've even got it planned to get married—sometime." Sometime....

I should have done something right then. I should have put him on a horse and sent him back to Texas. And I caught myself thinking, That's exactly what I'll do—sometime.

It wasn't Johnny Rayburn that I was interested in, it wasn't even the money—because if this was to be the last raid it didn't make any difference what happened to the ledger. I was afraid—I admitted that. But the queer thing about it was that it wasn't the prospect of getting killed that scared me, it was the business of living and being alone.

It was crazy, and I guess there's no good way to explain it, but I didn't have the feeling when the kid was around.

I guess he was what they call a symbol. A symbol of other times. Better times.

The kid was still talking, rambling on. Now that he had got started, he didn't seem to know how to stop.

"I wouldn't expect anybody else to know how I feel about that girl of mine," he said. "Maybe you wouldn't think she was so much to look at, but she's prettier than a new colt to me. Yes, sir, I'm going to go back there someday. We're going to stake out a little place down on the Rio Grande that I know about and raise some beef cattle and some grain." He laughed. "And some kids too, I guess."

"What you do is your own goddamned business," I said, "except just keep it to yourself. I don't want to hear about it."

The bitterness in my voice surprised me almost as much as it did the kid. I didn't know why I had said it and I didn't know how to explain it. I just knew that I didn't want to hear about his girl, or his plans, or anything else.

I left him sitting there with a startled, bewildered look in his eyes. As I turned I almost ran into Bama, who was standing behind me.

"Well, what do you want?"

Bama ran a hand over that bearded, weak-looking chin of his. "It looks like the last of your men are in," he said. "Kreyler came in just a while ago. The scouts just got in, too." He rummaged in his shirt pocket and took out a section of the map that he had drawn. He put his pencil on the throat of a funnel-shaped canyon. "Here is where the train ought to be around noon tomorrow, according to the scouts. It'll be an all-night ride, and then some, if we get there in time."

"We'll get there."

"Look at this," he said, holding his tally book in front of me. "Twenty men is all we've got, and they're already beginning to lose their guts for this thing. According to the scouts, the smugglers have around thirty outriders, most of them Indians."

I looked up and the sun was almost gone, and long, cool shadows were reaching into the canyon, and pretty soon it would be dark. I said, "Out of these twenty men of mine, is mere anybody we can trust if the going gets tough?"

Bama thought about it. "There's maybe four or five that ought to string along."

"All right, this is what we'll do. When we ride out of here you'll stay with Kreyler in the van of things, and you'd better keep a couple of those men with you. Have the others somewhere in the middle of the column when we hit the mountain trails, and tell them to report to me if anybody starts acting up. I'll be back in the drag with the kid."

We didn't move out until Bama went through the motions of contacting the boys he thought-would stick; then finally he gave me the sign and we began to round up our horses.

It was dark by the time we rode out of the canyon, traveling in a column of twos and looking like the ragged, whipped-out remnants of some defeated army. After a while a pale moon came out, looking aloof and cold as only a mountain moon can look, and I began to feel the uneasiness of the men.

Maybe an hour went by, and then we reached a wide place in the trail where one of the men had dropped out to tighten his girth. "Cameron."

I got a look at his face in the moonlight and recognized him as one of the men that Bama had singled out to be trusted. I motioned to the kid to pull up beside me and I said, "Yes?"

He looked all around as the column wound on down a rocky grade, and he lowered his voice.

"In about an hour," he said, "we're goin' to hit a flat stretch of country at the bottom of this grade. There's talk up ahead, among the men."

"What kind of talk?"

"They're goin' to make a break for it. They haven't got the guts for a raid like this, I guess. They plan to leave you sittin' high and dry."

For a minute I just sat there. "Who's behind this talk? Kreyler?"

“Kreyler's in no condition to do anything. It's all he can do to stay on his horse.” He pondered for a minute. “Maybe he's behind it, at that. I guess he is. But it's Bucky Fay that's doin' the talkin', gettin' the men stirred-up.”

I guessed that Bucky Fay was one of the men I had inherited from Basset, but I didn't know him. Not by name, anyway. I figured it was about time we got acquainted.

I said, “I don't think they've got the guts to make a break for it, but I'll ride up just to make sure. I'll see that you get taken care of when we make the cut on the silver.”

He grinned. That's what he had been waiting for. He was about as dependable as a cardboard dam in a flash flood. But maybe the silver would hold him as long as I needed him.

I brushed my black horse with the rowels of my spurs and we spurted toward the head of the column. We threaded in and out between riders along the narrow trail, and it didn't take long to see that something was going on. I rode up behind one man and heard him saying:

“By God, it's suicide. Nobody but a damn fool would try to attack smugglers in Funnel Canyon. Personally, I never took myself to be that kind of fool. How about the rest of you boys?”

By that time I was riding alongside him, and I said, “Are you Bucky Fay?”

His voice shut off suddenly, like the squawk of a chicken on a chopping block. I had seen him in the saloon and his face was familiar, even if his name wasn't. He was one of Kreyler's buddies, all right, just like I figured—one of those tight, nervous, flint-faced little bastards that I never liked anyway, and that was going to make my job that much easier.

We were on the moon side of the mountain and everything was light enough to see what was going on. The column limped along like a dollar watch with a busted spring, then suddenly it stopped. Everybody was looking, and that was the way I wanted it.

“Bucky Fay?” I said again, and I found that it was getting harder to keep my anger shoved down where it ought to be.

He got over his first shock of seeing me there beside him. He started to sneer—it was just the beginning of a downward twitch around his puckered little mouth, and I guess he thought he had me just where he wanted me. His eyes shifted from one side to the other and he saw that most of the men were on his side and that gave him the confidence he needed.

He started to say something—maybe it was to answer my question, or maybe it was just to hold my attention while somebody else tried to put a bullet in me. It doesn't make any difference now, because he never got it said.

There's only one way to handle things like that. I would have shot him, maybe, if it had been another time, another place, but now I didn't want to rouse half of Arizona by burning a cartridge uselessly. I had him on my near side and my pistol was in my lap for a saddle draw. I leaned over slightly, my pistol jumped in my hand, and I slammed the heavy barrel across his head.

It made a sound like dropping an overripe pumpkin on a flat rock, and his eyes popped out as if they had been punched from behind with a pool cue. I didn't know if I had killed him and I didn't particularly care. I just knew that when he fell out of the saddle he was going to lie there for a long time and he wasn't going to bother me or anybody else.

It all happened pretty fast, without the bickering back and forth that usually goes before a fight. I raised up in the saddle so that I could see every startled, gutless face in the column, and I knew the less said about it, the better. Let them think about it. By the time they got through thinking about it the raid would be over.

I noticed Kreyler up near the front and he looked pretty sick about the whole thing. I couldn't tell what hurt him the most, his sore groin or seeing his plans blow up in his face. I motioned down the line for Bama to get things started again.

“Forward ho-o-o!” Bama called, as if he were still Lieutenant Miles Stanford Bonridge of the Army of Tennessee.

There wasn't any trouble when we hit the flats at the bottom of the grade. We crawled on up into the mountains and around daybreak the column halted again and Bama lifted his arm.

"All right, kid," I said, "let's have a look."

"This is it," Bama said when we reached the point, and he made a vague gesture toward the rocky lowlands below us. At first I didn't believe him, because there was no canyon there at all; it was just a rocky tableland between two small mountain ranges a mile or so apart. Bama must have seen the dismay on my face, and he didn't look very happy about it himself.

I said, "By God, this is a hell of a place to try to ambush somebody."

He grinned, but it looked a little sickly to me. "That's what the men have been thinking all along. Do you want to go through with it?"

"We've got to go through with it."

But I didn't like it. We'd have to go right down and meet the smugglers on their own battleground, and I didn't like to think what the odds would be on getting out alive.

"Isn't there a better place than this?" I asked. "That map of yours showed a neck on this canyon."

Bama wiped his face. "What looks to be a neck on paper can cover a lot of land on actual ground." He was on the verge of telling me, "I told you so," but he didn't. He just sat there and let me sweat.

"Well, we can't sit here and let the men lose what few guts they've got left." I motioned for the column to start moving and we began slipping and sliding down the side of the mountain.

When we hit bottom it didn't look much better, but at least there were a few rocks and bushes that the men could hide behind.

"Maybe you ought to wait and hit them tonight," Johnny Rayburn said, and it seemed to me that it was the first time he had opened his mouth in an hour or more.

“By night they'll be out of the mountains and into the desert,” Bama said. “We couldn't get within a mile of them.”

I rode out a hundred yards or so to get the lay of the land, and after I had done that I decided that the situation wasn't hopeless. I motioned for the men to come after me and we rode right out to the middle of the rugged mountain valley.

“It stands to reason,” I said as Bama pulled up alongside. “That they'll come right down the middle of this draw, fanning their outriders a hundred yards or so on both sides. Anyway, we've got to count on that and make our lines.” I motioned for Kreyler to come up, and his face was gray with sickness and hate, and maybe fear.

“Here's where we make our stand,” I said. “When the smugglers come down the middle we'll hit them from both sides from behind rocks and bushes or whatever you can find to get behind. We'll have to depend on surprise. Come to think of it, maybe this isn't as bad as it looks, because they're not going to be expecting an attack in a place like this. Anyway, Kreyler, you take half the men and I'll take the others, and we'll leave about four hundred yards of open space between our lines. When you began to lose your guts, just think of that silver.”

He didn't say a word, but he cut me wide open with a look that was barbed with hate.

“All right,” I said, “get your men and move out.”

There was one thing I almost forgot—the horses. I called to Johnny Rayburn and my dependable man, whose name was Lawson, and got them to round up the horses and take them up to the high ground until the fracas was over. Anyway, that would keep the kid out of the line of fire and away from Kreyler.

It took about a half hour to get everything set, scattering the men out in a wavery line and piling brush in front of them and on top of them to make them as inconspicuous as possible. On the other side of the flat I saw that Kreyler was doing the same thing, and finally everything was set. All we needed now was the smugglers.

By the time the sun was well on its way to looking like a blast furnace, and Bama was lying belly down behind a rock, mopping his face nervously with his neckerchief.

"Pull your guts together," I said, and dropped, down beside him. "Hell, we should have picked places like this all along. These narrow canyons practically advertise an ambush, but they sure won't expect anything in a place like this."

But Bama wasn't happy. His lips were dry and cracked and his eyes had a desperate look to them. "I wish you'd told me you were going to drive the horses off," he said.

"If it's the bottle you're worried about, you can get it when this business is over."

He licked his lips. "I'm not sure that it will do me any good then."

Up until now I had been too busy keeping the men under control to find time to be scared. But now there wasn't anything to do but wait and think about it, and I began to get some of that uneasiness that I had felt on all sides of me.

"Was that smart," Bama said, "giving Kreyler half the men? Do you think they'll fight?"

"They'll fight," I said. "They'd better."

Bama sighed and I knew he was still wishing for his bottle. I jacked a cartridge into the chamber of my rifle and said, "I don't like this any more than you do, but we've got to have that silver."

"Sure," Bama said.

"What's the matter with you? Don't you want to get away from this? Don't you want the safety and security that silver can buy?"

"The things I want can't be bought," he said.

I lay there for a long while looking over my rifle, across the field of fire. He was right, of course. Bama was almost always right, and that's what made me so mad at times.

Bama looked up at the sun and said, "It won't be long now."

As if that had been a signal, we began to hear the metallic sounds of cartridges being jacked into rifles. They would fight, I thought grimly. Maybe they wouldn't like it, and maybe their guts were crawling like a bagful of snakes, but goddamn them, they would fight because they were more afraid of me than they were of the smugglers.

I looked up and Bama was staring at me in that disconcerting way of his, as if he had been reading my thoughts. But he didn't say anything. He lay down again, motionless, looking over his rifle, and after a moment he began singing softly:

"The years creep slowly by, Lorena,
The snow is on the grass again..."

It was an old war song, sugary and sentimental as most of those songs were. I had heard the long, awkward boys of Texas singing it as they marched the dusty roads with Hood to fight in strange and foreign lands for the Confederacy. I had heard it again as they came straggling back after Appomattox, what was left of them.

"We loved each other then, Lorena,
More than we ever dared to tell;
And what we might have been, Lorena,
Had but our lovings prospered well..."

I don't know, maybe it was the song that started me thinking about Texas again. "And what we might have been, Lorena." It was so goddamned cloying and sickeningly sentimental that it was almost enough to make a man throw up—and still, that just about summed it up...

Sometimes, after I had finished with my ranchwork, I used to ride over to Laurin's place, which was only about two miles from our own Panhandle ranch house. And more than likely I would use the excuse of looking for strays, because her brother thought I was wild, as he called it, and never liked for me to be hanging around. But he couldn't keep me from seeing her. We were both pretty young then and we didn't do much except talk a

little, but we understood from the first the way it was. I remember on my seventeenth birthday Pa had given me four head of beef cattle and I couldn't wait to tell her about it. "This is just the start," I said. "Those four cows will grow into one of the biggest ranches in Texas. It'll be our ranch."

I guess we were pretty happy then.

It wasn't my fault that there was a war. It wasn't my fault that the carpetbaggers and bluebellies moved into Texas looking for trouble. I hadn't been the only hothead who decided that it was better to live a life of my own outside the law than to live within the law and have a bluecoat's boot heel on my neck.

But I hadn't known that it was going to work out like this. In the back of my mind I had always planned on going back and having that ranch and family just the way we had planned. But I never would. It was too late.

"It matters little now, Lorena,
The past is in the eternal past...."

"Will you stop that goddamn noise!" I said, and my voice was shriller, louder than I had intended.

Then we all began to hear the bright, faraway little sounds of bells, and I heard somebody say, "Get ready, here they come," and the word was passed all along the line. I looked around and everything seemed to be all right. All the men were down, covered up with brush. Nothing looked out of place.

The bell sounds became mingled with the clatter of hoofs on the rocky ground, and then I could see them coming.

"By God, it's just like I figured. Right down the middle."

Bama didn't say anything. He looked frozen, and he was gripping his rifle hard enough to put dents in it. The smugglers' advance guard was getting close now, three Mexicans riding in line with about twenty yards between them. Behind them came a fat old geezer on a dappled horse, all decked out in a white sombrero and a scarlet sash and silver bangles. He was almost as fat as Basset, but he was mean and tough and he carried two six-

guns and a knife and he had a scar from the top of his left ear to the point of his chin to prove it. Flanking him there were a couple of saddleless riders with dirty rags around their heads, and I guessed they were the Indians who were scaring everybody to death.

They didn't look so tough to me. They rode heavily, slouched on their ponies, in the way of all Indians. Most of them wore dirty hickory shirts that they had picked up somewhere, and a great variety of pants, most of which were torn off or cut off just below the knee. There were a great many knives and hatchets and a few old cap-and-ball pistols that must have been relics of the Mexican War.

After the advance guard, and the head smuggler and his personal bodyguard, there came the train of little gray mules and the outriders. It was pretty much my first raid all over again, except for the Indians. There was nothing much we could do now except lie there and hope that they didn't see us until we had the whole train in our field of fire.

After they all came into line I saw that the picture wasn't as bad as the scouts had painted it. After some fast counting I saw that there were only twenty Indians and four Mexicans, including the head man, so they only had us outnumbered twenty-four to twenty. Which wasn't bad, considering that we had our twenty in ambush.

I could feel Bama tighten up as the outriders began to come by. They were damn near close enough to shake hands with.

I let about half the train go by and said, "Suck your guts in and pick out a target." Then I got an Indian's head in the V of my rear sight. I waited an instant while the knob of my front sight settled on his ear. I should have squeezed the trigger. Bama was waiting for it, white-faced, but I couldn't seem to make my finger move.

This was a hell of a time to think about ethics, but I simply couldn't kill a man like that, without giving him a chance in the world to fight back. I lowered my rifle. Before I realized what I was doing I was standing up and yelling – and that, I guess was when hell moved to Arizona.

Chapter Nine

IT DIDN'T TAKE long to see why the men held such a deadly respect for the Indian's fighting ability. There was no period of surprise when I stood up and yelled, there was no time wasted in shock, and they didn't wonder what to do. They just did it. One instant they were riding in deep lethargy under the broiling sun, and the next instant they were screaming insanely and firing point-blank down our throats.

I had never seen anything like it. I fell back and lost sight of my target completely, and the next thing I knew, an Indian was trying to split my skull with a hand ax. I must have shot him, but I can't be sure about anything that happened then. I had dropped my rifle somewhere and was clawing for my pistols, and across the flats I could hear the sharp volley of fire as Kreyler's men let go with their first rounds.

Vaguely, I saw the fat old smuggler slide from his horse and come charging at us with both pistols blazing. He went down holding his gut. The Mexicans milled senselessly, wondering what had hit them, but the Indians were chopping us to pieces. And the crazy thing about it was that you could shoot them but they would keep coming and slash your throat and laugh at you before they died. It was a nightmare of screams and smoke, and men wandering aimlessly with bullet holes in them like lost souls in limbo.

It couldn't have lasted long, but time like that isn't measured by the ticks of a clock. A lifetime can be lived by the time a bullet travels twenty paces. In the instant it takes a hammer to fall and a cartridge to explode you can grow to be an old man. I felt like an old man right then. My hands shook. I wasn't certain of anything. I kept falling back and more Indians went down in front of my guns. Then my pistols were empty and I scooped one out of a dead man's hand and kept on firing. Then I heard Bama yelling, and I looked around and saw him kneeling behind one of those little gray mules, his rifle to his shoulder.

Somehow I got over to him and he gave me covering fire while I punched out-my empties and reloaded. We seemed to be the center of attention now as four or five Indians spotted us and rushed us. We beat them off that

time. I dropped one and Bama got one with his rifle, and they turned and got behind rocks to think up something better. That was when I began to notice that we were all alone out there.

I didn't see any of the men anywhere. It was just me and Bama and maybe a half-dozen Indians. And I had a feeling that pretty soon it would be just the Indians.

"My God," I said, "are all the others dead?"

Bama laughed. It wasn't a pretty sound. He pointed behind us, and the men were running—what was left of them. They were running for the high ground and the Indians had decided to let them go and concentrate on us.

For a long moment I cursed. I used all the vilest words I'd ever heard, and they weren't half enough to say what I wanted to say. And then our friends the Indians were coming again. This time they had spread out and were coming at us from three sides, and they must have picked up some of our rifles because their shooting was getting better all the time.

They had changed their tactics too. They had learned that charging us wasn't the answer, so they were creeping up on us from behind rocks and bushes, and even dead animals and men. They seemed to flit across the ground like cloud shadows in front of a racing wind, and they were gone before you realized they were there.

I took some shots just to keep my nerve up, to feel the pistols in my hands, but I wasn't doing any good. I looked back at the high ground just in time to see Kreyler and his men clawing their way up the steep embankment.

"The bastards! The goddamn no-good bastards!"

Bama laughed that wild laugh again.

"Shut up, goddamn you! Shut up and let me think!"

The wildness went out of Bama's face and he just looked tired. Very sober and very tired, and he looked as if he didn't give a damn what happened.

"I'll get them," I said tightly. "If it's the last thing I do, I'll kill every last one of them."

And Bama said flatly, "Yes, I guess you would, Tall Cameron."

"I will!"

Somehow I would get out of this mess. I didn't know how yet, but I would, and when I did...

"Watch it!" Bama said.

I caught just a glimpse of an Indian as he shuttled from one rock to another. I burned a cartridge just because I wanted to shoot at something, not because I thought I would hit anything. I started reloading again, filling the cylinders all the way around, six cartridges to a pistol. I finished one gun and got three in the other one and that finished my belt.

That was when the sun stopped giving off heat. That was when cold sweat started popping out on my neck and my insides felt as if it had been washed with ice water. Bama's .36-caliber ammunition wouldn't fit my pistols, and anyway, he was out too.

"How many rounds have you got for that rifle?"

He checked the magazine and there were two.

"Well, that gives us eleven shots between us. Have you got any ideas?"

"I guess you could pray, if you go in for that sort of thing."

That seemed to end the conversation. Things didn't look too bright, but they could be a lot worse. For one thing, Bama was getting his guts back—I could tell by the way he talked—and guts was just the thing that might save us. My brain still burned when I thought of Kreyler and his boys running out on us, but I'd have to wait a while to take care of that. The Indians moved in a little more.

"How many do you make out there?" I said.

"Six, seven, eight, maybe more."

He was a big help. But he still had his guts, and a rifle and two cartridges, and that was something. "When they get close enough, they'll have to rush us," I said. "I guess that will tell the story."

"I guess so," Bama said. He didn't even sound interested. He scrunched down behind the little mule and began fumbling at his pockets. After a while I got my own makings out and gave them to him. It seemed that the whole world held its breath while he built a cigarette and held a match to it, and I caught myself jumping every time the wind rattled a piece of dry grass. Take it easy, I told myself. Just take it easy and let them come. There won't be anything to it then; all you have to do is shoot.

I took my guns out and laid them on the mule where they would be handy and then I took the tobacco and corn-shuck papers and built a cigarette for myself. It was so quiet that I began to wonder if the Indians were really out there. I looked out at the battlefield and for the first time I saw it as it actually was. The most pitiful things there were the little mules with the bells around their necks. The men didn't seem to mean much, dead or alive – but those mules, they hadn't asked for any of this.

As far as I could see, they were all dead. The ones that hadn't been shot for breastworks had run into stray bullets. When I thought back on it, it seemed a wonder that anything was still alive. The battle seemed long ago. I had to keep reminding myself that it wasn't over yet.

"Watch it!" Bama hissed.

And about that time four Indians jumped up and started at us in a crazy-legged gait, as silent as ghosts. It didn't seem right that they didn't make any noise. They ought to yell, I kept thinking, but they didn't. One of them had a rifle and he fired once, and that snapped me out of it. The other three could have had guns if they had wanted them – there were plenty of them scattered around – but they seemed to favor knives and hatchets. They were almost on top of us before I got my guns to working. I heard my pistols roaring, and after a moment I heard the empty click of my off-side gun, so I dropped that one.

I stopped the one with the rifle and two of the others. I thought Bama had the last one, but the bullet went in and out without even slowing him down. He came charging over the mule, a bloody mess and a scream. Then Bama swung his rifle and the stock made a sickening, mushy sound as it smashed into the Indian's skull.

I thought we would be swarmed then, but the others decided to sit this hand out. When I turned around Bama was wiping the blood off his rifle and making a higher breastwork by putting the Indian on top of the mule.

I had three rounds left for my right-hand pistol, and Bama had one for his rifle. I wondered how many Indians were still out there. There was no way of telling. They seemed to come out of the ground like weeds.

Bama was puffing and blowing after his skirmish. He hunched down in an awkward, one-sided position, his face as white as a frog's belly, and that was when I noticed that he had been hit.

It was his leg, about halfway between the knee and the hipbone. The Indian rifleman, I guessed, must have done it with that single shot that he let go with.

"Well," Bama said between puffs, "I guess this about frays it out, Tall Cameron. You'd better make a run for it. There can't be many more of them left. I've still got a bullet. I can stop one of them."

"Shut up and give me a knife."

He didn't have a knife, but the Indian on top of the mule had one, and I used it to slit Bama's trousers up to the hip. There was a lot of blood and it was coming out in spasmodic little spurts, and I figured that an artery or something had been hit. But still it wasn't too bad, everything considered. There was a clean hole where the bullet had gone in and come out. There didn't seem to be any bones broken.

I said, "Just keep your eyes open and watch our friends out there." Then I hacked off the leg of his trousers, wound it up, and tied it loosely above the bullet hole. I got my empty pistol between the leg and the bandage for some leverage, and began to twist. After a minute the spurting stopped.

I took his rifle and put it on top of the mule where I could get to it.

"Just take it easy for a few minutes and we'll be out of here."

But Bama didn't believe it, and I guess I didn't either. As Bama had said, it began to look as if our string had about frayed out. I could see them moving around out there again—or rather, I could feel them. They were

getting closer all the time, but they never showed enough of themselves to shoot at. It was very quiet.

And then it wasn't quiet any longer because they were coming after us.

Bama just sat there looking at them. They split the afternoon wide open with their yelling and shooting – six of them, and I remember thinking that it might as well be six hundred.

They came at us from three sides and it seemed to take them a year to reach us. I had the impulse to shoot as fast as I could at anything that moved, but I choked it down and took my time. I made the one cartridge in Bama's rifle good, but it didn't even slow them down. Bama seemed to have completely disconnected himself from the whole business. He sat there smiling that half-smile of his, as if a hole had suddenly opened up for him and he could look right through that impenetrable barrier that separates the living from the dead. I don't know what he saw there on the other side, but whatever it was, he had reconciled himself to it, and he was waiting for it with no bitterness and no regret.

But not me. I hadn't gone to all this trouble only to be cut down by a few savages. All I had to do was hold onto my guts. I raised my pistol and waited until it seemed that I had the muzzle in an Indian's mouth. Then I pulled the trigger. He was the fast one of the bunch. He was the eager one with a whetted taste for blood, and I could almost smell his rancid breath in my face as the pistol jerked in my hand.

I could count him out. He was traveling the road to hell on a fast horse, and now I could turn my attention on the others and try to figure out a way to make two bullets do the job of one. That was what I was thinking, and the next thing I knew he was hacking at my skull with a hand ax.

I don't know how he did it. I'd never seen a man take a .44 bullet in the face before, and keep coming after you, still determined to kill you. We went down in a bloody tangle of arms and legs and my pistol went flying out of my hand. Something hit the side of my head then. It felt like a mountain falling on me, but I guess it was just a glancing blow from the Indian's hatchet. A smothering black fog rolled in. It was a cool, comfortable fog

where there was no noise and no pain, and the most pleasant thing in the world would be just to lie down and let it wash over me.

But I kept fighting. Reflex, I guess, took over where the brain left off, and I grabbed hold of an arm and held on until the fog drifted off somewhere. We seemed to wrestle for a week, kicking, biting, scratching there on the rocky ground. He was gouging at my eyes and giving me the knee every chance he got, but I still held onto that arm. I seemed to be covered with blood and I couldn't tell if it was coming from me or him, or maybe both of us. I held onto that arm.

When it was over it was over all of a sudden. He went limp and the hatchet dropped out of his hand and that's all there was to it. I shoved him away. I knelt on my hands and knees and tried to gulp all the air in Arizona into my lungs. "Well," I heard somebody say, "the sonofabitch finally decided to die." It didn't sound like my voice, but it was, I guess. And then—finally—I remembered the other Indians.

I couldn't move. I squatted there like a poled steer and wondered why I wasn't dead. What had happened to the other Indians that had been in on the charge? It worried me, but I didn't have the strength to do anything about it.

I gulped some more air into my lungs. My stomach was sick and fluttery and the muscles in my legs were as weak as buttermilk. Maybe a minute went by while I got a hold on myself. I was pretty sure that those Indians hadn't decided to knock off work and go home just when they had us where they wanted us. Maybe it was one of those miracles that you hear about but almost never see. Like Daniel and the lions. But I didn't put much stock in it. I hadn't led the right kind of life for that sort of thing.

I had a few more theories, but I discarded them. It was time to take a look.

The first thing I saw was Bama. He was still sitting there behind the mule, holding onto the bandage around his leg. He looked as if he knew the answer, but he wasn't saying anything unless I asked him, and I was still too addled to think up words to put into questions. I stood up, finally, and saw that the Indians had been taken care of. They were scattered around

carelessly like dirty laundry in a bunkhouse, and just as lifeless. One of them had reached our mule fortress and had died with a knife in his hand just as he was about to go over the top. His trouble had been two rifle bullets in the chest, spaced almost a foot apart. Not very good shooting. But good enough. By that time I had the answer. Johnny Rayburn was walking across the flat with a rifle cradled in the crook of his arm.

I don't know how he did it, but he must have slipped down from the high ground some way and then crawled for about a quarter of a mile on his belly across the flats. The important thing was that he had done it. While all the others had been running, he had been figuring out a way to save my hide.

I guess I hadn't realized before just how close I had been to dying. The thought of it put a watery feeling in my guts.

"He's going to be a big help to you, isn't he, Tall Cameron?" Bama said dryly.

The words jarred me, because that was exactly what I was thinking as the kid came toward us. With some training, with some of the greenness rubbed off and some experience rubbed in, he would be a big help. He would be somebody I could trust; that was the important thing.

That was when I started changing my plans, putting the kid into them, taking Bama out of them. Bama couldn't help me. Not with that leg. But the kid... That was something else again.

Johnny Rayburn grinned nervously as he came up to where we were. He looked awed by the thing he had just done.

"I thought I told you to stay with the horses," I said.

"Well," he said, "I figured the horses could take care of themselves. Anyway, I wasn't crazy about staying up there on the bluff with Kreyler's men." He shifted hands with his rifle. "I didn't do wrong, did I?"

I laughed, not because anything funny had happened, but just because it felt good to have a kid like that on my side. I said, "No, you didn't do anything wrong."

"I told you once I was a pretty good shot."

"Not too damn good," and I nodded at the dead Indian, "when you space them a foot apart." I knew that Bama was listening. And I didn't give a damn. I said, "But there's nothing wrong with your shooting that can't be fixed. And I'll fix it."

He couldn't have been more pleased if I had just handed him Texas with a fence around it.

From that moment, I guess, it was just me and Johnny Rayburn against the world. Or rather me and Johnny Rayburn, and a fortune in silver. That reminded me – we had to do something about the silver.

We didn't have any horses, and we sure couldn't carry the stuff on our backs. I looked up at the high ground and saw that Kreyler and some of his boys were still up there. I guess they had time to get their guts in shape, and probably they had just been waiting for me and the Indians to finish each other off so they could come back down and take the silver for themselves. But I had something else planned for them.

I stepped out in the open and cupped my hands around my mouth and yelled for them to come on down. I hadn't forgotten the way they had run out on us, but I could take care of that when the time came. This wasn't the time.

They must have been pretty disappointed to see me come out of it alive, and they must have had a pretty good idea that it wasn't purely an act of brotherly love that prompted me to call them back into the fold. I could see them talking it over. There was some arguing, I guess, but in the end they came down, as I knew they would. The silver was still down there and they couldn't resist the temptation of that easy money.

As they started down the slope, I went over our battlefield and found my rifle and salvaged some .44 cartridges for my pistols. I was ready for them by the time they rode up, and there wasn't much doubt as to who was still boss.

Kreyler looked like a man who had been outvoted. Silver wasn't as important to him as it was to some of the others, but he couldn't very well

tell them to go to hell, because he still had ideas of running the business himself someday.

I said, "Well, men, we did it. All we've got to do now is get this silver back to Ocotillo and split it up. Let's get at it."

That jarred them a little. They had expected a good cussing at the very least, and here I was practically patting them on their backs. But they got over their shock. A yell went up and they went scurrying over the battlefield, cutting open the silver-filled aparejos and stuffing the adobe dollars into saddle pouches and war bags. But Kreyler wasn't fooled. He knew that I had to have them, if I wanted to get that money back to Ocotillo.

But there was nothing much he could do about it. Anyway, all that silver was putting a hungry look in his eyes, and the first thing I knew, he was as busy as any of us. Bama sat quietly through all of it, his face getting whiter and whiter. After a while I had the kid bring the horses down, and I found Bama's bottle and gave it to him.

"Here," I said, "you'd better have a drink of this."

He took the bottle and looked at it blankly. He turned it up and drank as if it were the last whisky he would ever see. Then he sloshed a little of it on his wound. But not much.

He sat back and closed his eyes for a minute until the pain let up. "You're not fooling Kreyler," he said.

"I'm not fooling anybody."

"You're not going to split that silver, are you, when you get back to Ocotillo?"

I just grinned.

"That's what I thought. I guess there's no use telling you that the men won't stand for it. But they won't. You've pushed them around about as long as they'll take it."

"Why don't you let me worry about that?"

He hit the bottle again. Loss of blood and shock and whisky were beginning to hit him. His eyes were bleary. His mouth didn't seem big enough to hold his tongue. He took another long drink and let the empty bottle slip out of his hand. "You and the kid," he said thickly, "ought to make quite a team."

"We might, at that."

He looked at me for a while. Then he slid over on his elbow. He must have passed out then, because his arm gave way and he fell on his face.

The tourniquet on his leg came loose and blood began spurting again. I grabbed it and tightened it, and stretched him out as well as I could. I looked up and the kid was standing there beside me.

"Get the horses," I said, "and bring them over here. Then find one of those Indian hatchets and cut a pair of blackjack poles long enough to make a travois."

He didn't ask a lot of fool questions. In a few minutes he was back with the horses and poles. The poles weren't nearly long enough, but it was the best he could do in this kind of country. We lashed them to Bama's saddle and laced them with a reata that one of the men had. Then we tied Bama on it.

By the time all that was done, the men were ready to go. The silver had all been gathered up and they were anxious to get home and make the split.

So we rode out of the valley and into the high Huachucas, the thud of hoofs mingled with the heavy jouncing of silver. I didn't look back this time. The death and stink of battle seemed a long way off, and I wanted to keep it that way if I could. The kid rode beside me, his eyes thoughtful, and I could see the question coming long before he got up nerve enough to ask it.

"I was just wondering about something," he said finally. "Did you really mean it, what you said back there? When you said you'd fix up my shooting?"

We rode on for quite a while before I answered. And in my mind there was the memory of empty days and long nights. Tight-wound days and tighter nerves, when the sound of a snapping twig or the rustle of brush was

always a cavalryman, or a marshal, or maybe just a reputation-hunting punk anxious to get a notch in his gun butt. Sounds were always sharper when you were on the run, and alone.

But who could you trust when you had a price on your head?

Well, I guessed I had found somebody at last. So I said, "Don't worry about it, kid. I meant it, all right."

Chapter Ten

IT WAS DARK again when we got to Ocotillo, and the town seemed nice and peaceful and sleepy-looking there at the bottom of the foothills. It seemed a shame to ride in there and get everything all stirred up again. But it had to be done. A few Mexicans came out and watched as we rode into town, and I imagined that their faces had a dull, angry look.

It was a funny thing, but I had never thought of the Mexicans' resenting us and hating us. Well, I thought, they wouldn't be bothered long with me and the kid, and if they got tired of Kreyler and his bunch they could rise up and knock them down. I wondered why they hadn't done it before now.

As we pulled up in front of the livery barn, beside the saloon, the Mexicans sort of melted away in the darkness and I forgot about them. I watched the men while they unsaddled and lugged their saddlebags and war bags back to the rear of the saloon and into the office. After they were all finished we had silver scattered all over the middle of the room and it looked like a hell of a lot of money stacked up there in one big pile. The men were all ganging up in the room to watch the split. Something had to be done about that.

So I said, "It looks like a pretty good haul, doesn't it?" And everybody agreed. I laughed and kicked the saloon door open and yelled for the bartender to set them up.

That broke it up. They all flocked out and ganged up around the bar—all but Kreyler, that is. He stayed in the office with me and the kid, and I had an uneasy feeling that he had picked my brain and knew as much about my plans as I did.

I said, "You might as well get your share of the free drinks."

But he shook his head. He leaned against the door-jamb, looking careful and crafty, but not very healthy.

"Well, I am," I said. I looked at the kid and we went into the saloon and left Kreyler in the office. He couldn't carry off much of that silver by himself, if that was what he had in mind.

Everybody had had a round or two by the time we got to the bar, and it looked like a real celebration was on the way. I motioned to the bartender and he slid a bottle down, and I guess it was the bottle that reminded me.

“By God, we forgot Bama!”

I went out the door and the first thing I knew a couple of arms came out of the darkness and grabbed me. Probably I would have killed her and learned who it was later, if she hadn't laughed. But she did laugh and I knew it was Marta.

“Goddamnit, don't you know better than to jump on a man like that?” She was pawing me and kissing me and she seemed as happy as a pup with a bone.

“You glad to see Marta?”

“Sure,” I said, “I guess I'm glad.”

But just the same I shook her off and got my back against the wall and got my gun hand ready. In the back of my mind I was reasoning, that somebody out there in the darkness could have put a bullet in me while a fool girl was hanging around my neck. It was just a passing thought, but I didn't like it.

Marta's laughter lost its bright edge. “What's the matter?”

“Nothing's the matter. I just like to be careful.”

“You no trust Marta.”

“I no trust anybody. That's how I got to be as old as I am.”

“You no like Marta.”

I was beginning to get tired of this. “Sure I like you,” I said. “I'm crazy about you. Now, just come along with me. I've got a job for you.”

“What job?”

“Never mind, just come along.”

I took her arm and led her around toward the livery barn, the kid right behind us like a shadow. We found the horse, and Bama was still lashed to

the stubby travois poles. He was pretty shaken up but his tourniquet was still in place and the bleeding had stopped. We left him on the travois but untied the poles and lowered him to the ground. The kid felt of his face and forehead while I loosened the tourniquet.

"He's got a fever."

"Then he's all right. What we've got to do is get him somewhere and keep him warm before the chills begin." I thought for a minute and began to get an idea. "Kid, do you think you and Marta can get Bama down to her house without advertising it?"

He rubbed his chin. "Well, sure, I guess so. She can take the feet and I can—"

"That's all I want to know. Marta, have you got some friends—friends with strong backs and not too many brains?"

She nodded, frowning.

"Round them up," I said. "Have them come around to the back of the saloon where the office is. I've got some things I want them to carry down to your place, and I want them to be quiet about it. Tell them it's worth five dollars in silver after the job's over."

She began to get it then, and so did the kid. Marta's face broke up in a grin.

"Marta think you plenty rich!"

"Marta thinks too damn much."

"You leave Ocotillo, maybe?"

"My plans are my own. Now, pick up that travois before we have a dead man on our hands."

"You take Marta with you?"

"Good God, yes, I'll take you with me. Anything, just get going."

The last thing in the world I wanted was to be tied down to a girl like that, but I had to tell her something. And it seemed to satisfy her.

Johnny Rayburn hadn't decided if he was satisfied or not. He was thinking about Bama, I guess, and wondering how we were going to get out of

Ocotillo with a wounded man and several hundred pounds of silver. He didn't know it yet,, but Bama wasn't going with us. I hadn't figured out a way yet to take care of the silver. But I would.

Using the travois like a stretcher, they picked it up and marched off into the darkness. I waited a few minutes until I was pretty sure that they were going to make it, and then I went back to the saloon.

Kreyler was standing in the doorway. I was going to walk right past him, but he turned and followed me to the bar. His face was grim as he said: "Wasn't Marta with you out there?"

I had almost forgotten that the Marshal was still crazy about the girl. Well, he could have her as soon as I got out of Ocotillo.

I said, "There wasn't anybody out there. I was just looking after Bama."

"Didn't the kid go out with you?"

"What the hell is this? If you've got something in your craw, spit it out."

Suddenly he smiled, and I didn't like that at all. What if he had his boys out there laying for the kid? It was something to worry about, but there wasn't much I could do. Of course, I could have gone running after them, but that would have given the whole thing away. There was still the silver to be taken care of. Not even Johnny Rayburn came ahead of that.

I went back to the office and locked the door and put a chair against it. Then I walked the floor, waiting for something to happen. From the sound of things, the men were getting pretty drunk in the saloon. But there was still Kreyler, goddamn him.

Well, I could still take care of him. When he ran out on me I swore I would kill him. And I might do it yet.

Somewhere in that confusion of thoughts there was a knock at the back door. I opened up and there stood four grinning Mexicans, all teeth and eyes in the darkness. They all started jabbering that spick lingo at me, and I told them to shut up and start moving those bags.

They grunted, surprised at the weight of the stuff. But I finally got them loaded up and they went staggering off into the darkness. They only got

about half of it the first time around, and I waited for what seemed a week for them to come back. What if they got curious as to what was in those bags? You can't trust Mexicans. You can't trust anybody with that much money.

But I guess they weren't the curious kind. They came back finally, puffing and grinning, and I loaded them up again. I went around to the livery barn and got that black horse of mine and a sturdy little bay for the kid, and I headed down the alley toward the Mexican part of town.

I knew that part of town pretty well by now, so I went around the back way and came in between the high adobe walls to the back door of Marta's place. Through the open door I could see the Mexicans puffing and wiping their faces as they stared blankly at the pile of silver on the kitchen floor.

"Mr. Cameron?"

"Are you all right, kid?"

"Sure," he said, and came out into the little walled-in yard where I was.

"How's Bama?"

"He looks pretty good," he said. "That girl washed the wound and bandaged it up and gave him some broth. He looks better than he did on that travois."

"Let's go in and look at him," I said. "We haven't got much time, though."

The kid held back as if he weren't any too anxious to go back inside.

"What's the matter?"

"It's the old man," he said. "Marta's pa. He doesn't like gringos to start with, and he especially doesn't like them coming in and taking his house over."

We could fix that, I thought. I'd give him a handful of silver and that would shut him up. Anyway, we went in and there was Bama stretched out on the earth bed with a cigarette between his lips. His face had been washed and his leg had a clean bandage. He looked like a new man.

But he hadn't really changed. He spat the cigarette out and drawled, "Welcome to our little sanctuary, Tall Cameron," and I remembered that long spiel he had made the first time I saw him. "Welcome to Ocotillo, the last refuge of the damned, the sanctuary of killers and thieves and real badmen and would-be badmen; the home of the money-starved, the cruel, the brute, the kill-crazy...." At the time I thought he had been joking. But it was no joke. I had seen them and lived with them. I was one of them.

"How's the leg?" I cut in on him.

He closed his eyes. "The leg's all right. It's a hell of a thing, isn't it, to have a body that's seemingly indestructible, when you're dead inside?"

"I guess you're all right. You still talk crazy, which is normal for you, I guess."

Bama laughed. "How about Kreyler and the boys? Are they going to let you just walk out with their silver?"

"They don't know yet that I've walked out with it. By the time they find out, I mean to be on my way to Mexico."

Bama had no comment to make on that. He just lay there with his eyes closed. All the time we had been talking there had been a lot of jabbering going on in the other room. I went to the door and saw that it was Marta paying off my baggage boys. They backed out of the house, grinning and bowing, clutching the silver in their hands.

"Where are they going?" I asked.

Marta laughed. "They go cantina."

That was fine. Tomorrow morning they would wake up with a headache and a bad memory.

I wondered how long it would take Kreyler to discover that I had pulled out with the silver. Not long, probably, but after he did find out he would have to find us to do anything about it. We had an hour, I figured, to take care of the silver and get out of Ocotillo.

They say that money can be a burden, and for a minute it looked as if that was what that silver was going to be to me. We couldn't load our horses

down with it. And we couldn't put it on a pack horse and take it with us, because that would slow us down, too. The only thing to do was to go somewhere and have the silver shipped to us.

But now? No freighting company would touch it, even if there had been a freighting company in Ocotillo. We could bury it, maybe,, and come back after it later. But we needed the money now. Anyway, I'd had enough of Ocotillo to last a lifetime.

Then the whole thing exploded pretty and clean in my mind and I knew how we were going to take care of that silver.

I yelled, "Marta!" and she was standing right at my elbow. "Look," I said, "do you still want to go with me?"

Her head bobbed. There was nothing she would like better—especially since I had come into a fortune of silver. Marta's old man had been quiet through the whole thing until now. He had been sitting at a rough plank table holding his head in his hands. Every once in a while he would fumble at some wooden beads around his neck and mumble a prayer, and from the look of hate in his eyes I figured he was praying for lightning, to strike us all. Now his head jerked up and he glared at me. He didn't understand a word of what I had said, but somehow he knew.

"This is what we're going to do," I said. And I was talking to the old man as much as to Marta. "We've got to get out of Ocotillo and we've got to leave the silver here. The old man's got some burros, hasn't he?" She nodded, puzzled.

"All right, we'll go somewhere—" And then I remembered a place on that map that Bama had drawn for me. "We'll go to Three Mile Cave down near the border. Do you know where that is?" She knew. "We'll go there and wait two days, and in the meantime Papacito can load the silver and bring it to us. He can cover it with wood or something to fool anybody who may get curious. I don't care how he does it, just so he does it."

She was beginning to get it now. Her eyes lit up, and I guess she was seeing herself as the belle of Sonora, dressed in silks and satins and cutting quite a figure. The real reason I wanted her along never occurred to her.

But it did to the old man. He jumped up from the table and began to jabber in that spick language, and I could see that he was telling Marta that he wasn't going to do it. But Marta was still seeing herself with all the things that silver could buy. That was one picture that she liked, and she wasn't going to have it ruined, Papacito or no Papacito. Before I knew it, the whole thing got out of control. Marta's eyes spat fire and they stood there in the middle of the room yelling at each other.

I had to break it up myself. I stepped in and shoved Marta against the wall. The old man yelled louder than ever, so I shoved him down in his chair and whipped my hand back and forth across his mouth, crack, crack, like a mule skinner two days behind schedule and laying on the leather.

That quieted things down for a minute. Marta stood against the wall, her eyes still flashing. She hadn't liked the way I shoved the old man around, and I hadn't enjoyed it much myself. But sooner or later somebody was going to have to step in and declare himself boss. So that was what I did.

I got hold of Marta's arm and quieted her down. "I'm sorry," I said. "But we can't stand here yelling at each other. We haven't got time for it. For all I know, Kreyler and his boys may be right outside the door getting ready to shoot hell out of everything."

I said, "Has the old man got it straight what he's to do with the silver? We pull out of here tonight and head for Three Mile Cave. Tomorrow he loads the silver on his burros and meets us at the cave the next day. Tell him again."

She shrugged and told him again, and the old man didn't like it any better this time than he had the first.

"We'd better do something to impress it on his mind," I said. "Tell him we're taking you as hostage. If he doesn't show up with the silver he'll never see you again."

She wasn't so sure that she liked that, but she understood that it was the only way of being sure of that silver. So she told him.

The old man stared at me for a long while with those hate-filled eyes, and then he started breaking up in little pieces. He dropped his head on the table and his shoulders began shaking. The silver would arrive on time.

But in the meantime we couldn't just leave it piled up in the middle of the room. I walked around the house, but there wasn't any place there to hide it. I went out in the yard and kicked around for a few minutes, waking up a hound dog and a few chickens. The chickens gave me an idea.

"Bring the stuff out here," I called. "Johnny, give Marta a hand."

I had the chickens scattered and squawking all over the place by the time they came out with the first load, but I also had a couple of empty chicken coops, which were just what we needed. We piled the silver in the back of the coops and shooed the chickens back in.

That about nailed things down. All we had to do now was to get out of Ocotillo, and we couldn't do it too fast to suit me. We went back in the house and I said, "Well, Bama, I guess this is good-by."

He opened his eyes and looked at me. "Good-by to Ocotillo," he said lazily. "I've been saying that ever since I got her, but I never left the place. Maybe I never will now."

"Sure you will," I said. "I'll have the old man give you some silver. All you can carry. When your leg gets better you can pull out of here. Maybe we'll meet up in Mexico sometime. You can't tell who you'll run into down there, they tell me."

The kid came into the room just as I was finishing my speech. I turned and said. "We've got to get a horse for Marta. I'll have to see if I can get back to the livery barn—if Kreyler's men haven't already missed us and started tearing things up."

"You mean two horses, don't you, Mr. Cameron?" the kid said. "Bama hasn't got a way to travel."

"Bama's not going," I said.

I don't think he even heard me, or if he did, he didn't believe me. "He sure can't stay here," he went on. "He would be the only one left who knew about the ledger, and you know what Kreyler would do to him about that."

"Kreyler can have the ledger," I said. "It doesn't make any difference now."

But he still couldn't believe that I was going to leave Bama behind. Bama was my friend. Bama was a man you could put your trust in. You didn't go off and leave friends to wait for what was almost certain death.

"Look," I said. "We've got a long ride ahead of us and it's no kind of trip for a man with a hole in his leg." I could have gone on arguing, trying to justify it, but what good would it do? It was a hard world, and sooner or later the kid had to learn that.

He began to get a stubborn look. He wanted to argue. Bama was watching us in a disinterested sort of way, as though he thought it might be kind of interesting to see how it-came out. But not too interesting.

Nothing at all happened, the way things worked out. Outside, I heard one of the horses stamp nervously. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary. But just the same, it gave me a funny feeling. Uneasiness started walking up my back with cold feet, so I went to the door and looked out.

Things were pitch-dark out there and I couldn't see a thing. But that feeling was still with me. I stepped outside, brushing my palms against the butts of my pistols, just to make sure that I had them.

That wasn't enough. I should have pulled them and started shooting.

Chapter Eleven

YOU NEVER KNOW, I guess, just what's the right thing to do. You either do it or you don't. And that time I didn't do it.

I stepped outside and something hard and solid connected with the back of my head and bright showers of pain flew out in all directions. I took another step—or I thought I did—and I walked right into that black pit that has no sides and no bottom and I started falling.

It was a long trip. My head hit something two or three times on the way down. Then something slammed in my middle and my stomach jumped up and tried to shove my Adam's apple out of the way and get in my mouth. I fought it, but after a while it didn't seem to be worth the trouble. I let the darkness have its way.

We got to be old friends, me and the darkness. I got to like it down there. It was cool and comfortable and the smothering black fog closed over me and around me and—all I had to do was sleep. The trials and tribulations of the world were away and gone and I didn't have to worry about scrabbling around in the dirt for money or life, because money and life didn't mean anything down there. I should have stayed there. And maybe I would have if I had known what it was going to be like when I got back. But I didn't know it then. I didn't know anything.

I started fumbling in the blackness, and after a while I found a little slit of light about an inch long and about as wide as a thread of silk split four ways—and that was my consciousness, I suppose. Anyway, I clawed and scratched until I got a hold in the slit, and then, with an effort that left me sweating, I ripped the darkness wide open.

I was sprawled out in Marta's kitchen, and a lamp was being held over me. The sudden light hit my eyeballs like hammers and I rolled over and tried to curse, but all that came out was a groan. I heard somebody saying, "By God, he's got a hard head, all right. That's one thing you can say for him." Somebody else said, "Just watch him, and if he tries to get up let him have it again."

I didn't recognize the first voice, but the second one belonged to Kreyler. I lay there for what seemed a long while, trying to get the mud out of my brain. Kreyler... It looked like I had fooled away too much time in Ocotillo when I should have been on the road. The Marshal was either smarter than I thought he was, or I was dumber than I thought I was. It didn't make much difference now. He had found out about the silver, and he had caught up with me, and somebody had damn near beat my brains out with a pistol barrel – if I'd had any brains to begin with.

I tried to move again, and that was a big mistake. The stupor that had me sealed up in a little world all my own, like sod on a grave, suddenly disappeared and I broke into the world of reality, full of aches and pains. My head was the big trouble. It felt like an October gourd that had been stepped on – smashed and empty.

The room began to swim, and my stomach started crowding into my throat again. I raised my head as high as I could, but all I could see was boots and spurs and the packed clay floor. I was ready to give up. I was sick, and tired to death, and blood was getting in my eye, and I couldn't figure out a way to stop it. Kreyler could have the silver. He could have the girl. All I wanted was to be left alone.

But it wasn't as simple as that. Through the sickness I heard the sodden sound of bone and flesh hitting more bone and flesh. Somebody laughed – the man who was supposed to give me another pistol whipping if I tried to get up, I guess. I heard Marta make a tight little sound, and then something hit the floor, solidly, like a sack of oats being dumped off a wagon.

I had a pretty good idea what was happening, but I was in no position to do anything about it. I lifted my head again and the room tilted up on one corner and spun around a few times. Finally it settled down. Things came into focus.

It was about the way I had figured it. Johnny Ray-burn was sitting on his rump, with a bloody mouth and a dazed look in his eyes, and Kreyler was standing over him, grinning, rubbing his right fist in the palm of his left hand. “I can keep this up all night, kid,” the Marshal said. “Do you want to

tell me who has that ledger, or do you want to go through this all over again?"

The kid just sat there looking stupid. Kreyler jerked him up by the front of his shirt and hit him again. Away down in the cellar of my mind a spark set off an explosion of anger. I rolled over on my face. I got my hands under me and began to push. My stomach turned over and tied itself into a knot. I pushed some more and sweat popped out all over me. Somebody had gone to Austin and brought the capitol building to Arizona and tied it on my back. But I was going to get up anyway. And when I did, I was going to see if Kreyler could take it as well as he handed it out. I wanted to see how he would stand up under a pistol whipping. I was going to find out—as soon as I managed to get off the floor.

My intentions were all right, but something went wrong with my arms. They gave away and I fell on my face again. For a moment I just lay there with my head ringing, blowing as if I had run all the way from El Paso. I must have put on quite a show. Anyway, it seemed to amuse Kreyler and his pal. They had a good laugh about it. Then Kreyler came over and turned me on my back with the toe of his boot. "Well," he said, "the great Tall Cameron doesn't look so tough now." And everybody had another round of laughs.

Anyway, I had pulled Kreyler's attention off the kid for a few minutes. And I finally got a look at the Marshal's pal.

He was a frail little man not much over five feet tall, with pale watery eyes and a thin little mouth that was always just about to break into a smile, but never quite made it. When he laughed it was just a sound that he made with his mouth, ha-ha, something like the kind of sound that Basset used to make. He was standing over me with the muzzle of a .44 shoved in my face, looking as big as a rain pipe. I think he would have pulled the trigger just to feel the gun buck, if Kreyler hadn't stopped him... Well, I wasn't the only one in the company with a hard head. Kreyler's gunny was Bucky Fay, the man I had knocked out with my pistol barrel and who was supposed to have been stretched out in the mountains somewhere with his skull split open.

"Not yet, Bucky," the Marshal said soothingly, as though he were talking to a backward child, "I'll tell you when, Bucky, but first we've got some things to do. Remember?"

Bucky thought about that for a while, and finally he did remember. He stepped back one pace, almost smiling, and held his pistol just about on a line with my heart.

"Now, let's see," Kreyler said looking at me. "Would it be better to work on you or the kid?" He wasn't in any hurry. He seemed to have all the time in the world, and this was a delicate problem and he was going to figure it out if it took him all night.

"I think the kid," he said finally. "You're right fond of him, aren't you, Cameron? You wouldn't like to see him with his face all messed up and maybe an eye knocked out, now, would you, Cameron? Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. You just tell me where that ledger is and I won't even lay a hand on him. I give you my word."

Kreyler's word would be about as good as a counterfeit dime. But I couldn't tell him that now. He had guessed right about the kid. I wasn't going to let anything happen to him, if I could help it.

"Can I sit up?" I said.

Kreyler shrugged. "Sure. Let him sit up, Bucky."

Bucky took another step back and lined his pistol up again, this time at some invisible spot between my eyes. My co-ordination must have been getting better, because I made it all the way to a sitting position the first try. But it wasn't without effort. I sat there gulping in air and wiping blood off the side of my face. I felt of my head, and there were two good-sized bumps and a nasty cut, but I figured I would live. For a little while, anyway.

Marta was over by the cook table trying to comfort her old man. Papacito seemed to be taking it harder than anybody in the room. Tears were rolling down his face and getting into his dirty mustache, and he kept fumbling at those wooden beads around his neck and jabbering some kind of prayer

over and over, and for some reason that made me madder than anything else. What the hell did he have to cry about?

"For God's sake, shut him up," I said to Kreyler. "How can I think with that racket going on?"

It must have been getting on Kreyler's nerves too, although he hadn't shown it. He said, "Watch things, Bucky." Then he stepped over and knocked the old man clear off his stool and sent him rolling against the wall.

Marta was on him like a panther, clawing and scratching and spitting out curses in that language of hers. But this was the Marshal's night to do all the things that he had been wanting to do for a long time. Me, the kid, the old man and now Marta. He was taking care of all of us and loving it. Every dog has his day, they say. This one belonged to Kreyler.

He made short work of Marta. He backhanded her hard enough to cross her eyes and then he grabbed her shoulder and shook her until her teeth rattled. "Goddamn you!" he said hoarsely, and I didn't realize until then how mad he really was. Maybe he would have killed her if she had kept fighting. But I guess she had all the fight knocked out of her. He let her go and she dropped down at the table and started crying.

That surprised me. I wouldn't have thought that there were any tears in a girl like that.

Anyway, Kreyler had quieted things down. Now he came back to me.

"What's it going to be, Cameron? Are you going to tell me about the ledger or do I work on the kid some more?"

By now I had discovered that my guns were gone, which was no surprise. What was I going to tell him? I couldn't take much more. And neither could the kid. Of course, there was Bama in the next room, and they could work on him if they killed both of us.

I said, "What good is it going to do me if I tell you where the ledger is?"

Kreyler smiled. "You can go, after that. The ledger's all I want."

"And the silver?"

“You can have that, too, if you can figure a way to get it out of Ocotillo.”

He was lying and we both knew it. Once he knew where the ledger was, he would kill all of us – except Marta, maybe – and take the silver for himself, the way I had been going to do. It would be easy. He could tell the men that I had double-crossed them, and not even Bucky would be alive to tell them any different.

I said, “Would you mind telling me why the men aren't yelling their heads off about their cut? They must have found out by now that the silver's gone.”

“The trouble with you, Cameron,” he said, “is that you don't know how to handle men. I knew what happened to the silver as soon as I found out it was missing. But I didn't tell the men about it. I told them to go on drinking and we'd make the cut in the morning.”

It was all very pretty. I would be missing, and so would the silver, and two and two is always four – anyway, most people think so.

Bucky was still standing there with his .44 pointed at a place between my eyes, and he was probably thinking what a lucky guy he was, because Kreyler was going to split that pile of adobe dollars with him.

Like hell Kreyler was going to split with him. Bucky would wind up with the rest of us, in some shallow grave where we would stay until the coyotes dug us up a year or two from now.

For a minute I thought maybe Marta could help us. I could get a signal to her and she could rush Bucky. Then the kid could keep Kreyler busy for a minute while I got Bucky's gun and finished the job. That was the way things were beginning to shape up in my mind. Johnny Rayburn seemed to be reading my thoughts, because he nodded his head when I looked for just the right spot to make the tackle. But when I looked at Marta I tore the plans up and threw them away.

Marta was a smart girl. I had forgotten how smart.

Marta was through with me. She was through with me, and Bama, and Johnny Rayburn. The money was blowing in a new direction, and Marta was drifting with the wind. The Marshal was her man now.

She had stopped her bawling and thought things over, and she had come to the conclusion that Tall Cameron's future wasn't exactly the bright and shining star to hitch her ambitions to that she had once thought. But Kreyler — that was something else again. From here on out, Kreyler would be boss. Besides that, he would have that pile of silver and could buy her all the pretties her black heart desired.

She thought about that. She liked it. She looked at me and sneered, and she looked at Kreyler and smiled.

But Kreyler wasn't dumb. It was a fact I had overlooked at first, but I was making no mistake about it now. He could look into those eyes of hers and read the lies as plain as anybody and for a minute I thought maybe he was going to tell her to go to hell.

But he didn't. He had wanted her too long, I guess, and she was in his blood. Well, I thought, they would make a nice couple. It would be interesting to stick around and see who would be the first to stick a knife in the other's back.

That was as far as my thoughts got. About that time Kreyler's patience played out, and he stepped over to the kid and jerked him off the floor and hit him across the mouth.

“The ledger,” he said coldly.

The kid said nothing, and that got him another slap across the face. Anger almost made me do something foolish, like getting off the floor and trying to punch a fist through Kreyler's thick middle. The thought was there, but it never got to be more than a thought. My glance ran head-on into that half-smile of Bucky's, and that was a great settling influence.

It was getting bad now. That ham-sized fist of Kreyler's would spat sickeningly in the kid's face.

“The ledger!”

The kid would say nothing.

Then the spat again.

But the kid didn't break. I was the one that broke. I stood it as long as I could and then I yelled, "Goddamnit, let him alone! I'll tell you about the ledger."

Kreyler paused for a moment. His fist was bloody, and he was grinning, enjoying himself. There are men like that.

He grinned at Bucky. "Mr. Cameron wants to tell us all about it. He doesn't like to see his little pal knocked around. What do you think about that, Bucky?"

Bucky laughed, but there was no comment behind his laugh, and no humor.

"I don't much like to stop in the middle of a job of work like this," Kreyler said pleasantly. "I figure the kid will tell me what I want to know, Cameron. It may take a little time. But I'm in no hurry." He grinned again and jerked the kid's limp body up with a big left hand, and I guess that was when I threw caution away.

I started gathering myself. I was going to jump and Bucky knew it and was waiting for it. He opened his thin lips and breathed through his mouth. He was going to shoot me right between the eyes because that was the spot he had been concentrating on.

Oh, he had it figured down to a gnat's hair, all right, and his finger started squeezing the trigger. He was smiling now, actually smiling, and he was probably seeing himself cutting quite a figure among the pilgrims and dance-hall girls; and people would probably buy his drinks for him just to get him to tell how it felt to kill a man like Tall Cameron. Bucky was going to be somebody after this. He was going to get himself a reputation as a gunman, and nobody had to know that he had got it the easy way. All he had to do was pull the trigger.

I could see those thoughts going around in Bucky's mind as he started the squeeze. I had time to move about six inches before the hammer fell – and that wasn't time enough or far enough.

It's funny how your mind works at times like that, being aware of a lot of things but not actually seeing anything in particular. For instance, I knew that Marta would be watching it all and smiling in that detached way of hers, although I couldn't see her. And Kreyler would be too busy with the kid to notice what was going on until it was too late. It was just me and Bucky.

By that time I had lunged forward and was crouching like a wolf ready to spring. But Bucky wasn't worried. He was seeing me lowered away into shallow ditch with somebody throwing dirt in my face. And then the gun went off and the explosion went crashing around the room, and I was wondering why I didn't feel anything, why I didn't go down.

But I didn't wonder long. I crashed into Bucky and he went limp like a bag of grain slit open with a sharp knife, and that was when I realized that Bucky was dead. He was dead before I hit him. I didn't know how or why, and this wasn't the time to ask questions. I threw him aside and wheeled on Kreyler, who was clawing for his gun.

He never got his gun out, though.

There was another explosion and Kreyler took two quick steps forward and one step back, like the pride of the ball getting warmed up for a do-si-do or a skip-to-my Lou. His eyes were faintly bewildered and pained, as if somebody had just played a rather nasty practical joke on him. Then he started falling like a tree in a forest. He crashed to the floor, and he could have been a side of beef for all the fuss he made after that.

Along about then was when I noticed Bama for the first time.

He had that old .36-caliber Leech and Rigdon clutched in both hands, and a curl of white smoke was coming from the muzzle and making a hook near the ceiling, like a question mark over Bama's head. We must have all stood there for a minute or more and nobody did anything or said anything, and Bucky and Kreyler got deader and deader there on the floor. I hadn't seen

Bama get out of bed, and I guess Bucky and Kreyler hadn't either. But he had managed it somehow. He had hobbled on one leg to the door, just as the party was getting into full swing.

I said, "Thanks, Bama. I guess that's a favor I owe you.

He didn't say anything for a minute. His wound had come open and blood was pouring down his leg again, but he didn't seem to notice. Then he leaned against the doorframe and panted. I caught him before he fell and got my shoulder under him and dragged him to the bed.

"Marta!" I yelled. She appeared in the doorway, and from the way she looked, I guess she expected to get belted all over the room. "Get some whisky," I said. "I don't care where or how, just get it."

Things were moving too fast for Marta, I guess. The situation had changed so often that she wasn't quite sure whose side to be on. She just stood there.

"Look," I said. "Do you want to go to Mexico with me or don't you?"

Her head bobbed. She wanted to go where that silver went. She knew that.

"Then get out of here and get the whisky!"

She got out, and I got the bandage back on Bama's leg and stopped the bleeding.

"My God, I thought I was finished," I said. "I guess I forgot that a man's never finished as long as he has friends around."

Bama didn't say anything. He lay there with his eyes closed, and maybe he was remembering that just a few minutes ago I was ready to run out on him. More than likely, though, he was thinking about that whisky that Marta was going to bring.

I went in the other room and the kid was just picking himself off the floor and trying to get the blood out of his eyes. I've seen men lose their seats in the van of a stampede and not look much worse than Johnny Rayburn did at that moment. But I took him over to the washstand and threw a couple of dippers of water in his face and he didn't look so bad. His nose was swollen, maybe broken, and his mouth was split and puffed, but there was

nothing wrong with him that time wouldn't cure. I poured out some more water for him, and then I went outside.

I found Bucky's and Kreyler's horses by the side of the house, and that was going to save me a trip back to the livery barn. I didn't see anything or hear anything out of the way. Those thick adobe walls had probably absorbed most of the noise of Bama's shooting.

I went back in and the kid was drying off his face and looking a lot better. Papacito was crumpled up in one corner of the room like next week's washing. I went in where Bama was.

"How's your leg?"

He opened his eyes and shrugged.

"Are you going to be able to ride?"

"Ride where?"

"To Mexico, where do you think? You sure can't stay here. You've just killed a United States marshal."

Bama studied that over quietly, turning it over in his mind and looking at it from all sides. Finally he said, "No, I think I'll just stay here, Tall Cameron. I don't feel much like running any more."

I could see that he was getting all wound up to make a long speech, but about that time Marta came in with two tall bottles of clear tequila. I uncorked one of them and put it in his hands.

"Here, you're going to need this."

He lay there, holding the bottle up and looking at it, and finally he put it aside. "No," he said, "I don't think I want it."

That jarred me.

"What the hell's wrong with you, anyway?" Then I raised him up and put the bottle to his mouth and poured. It went up his nose and over his chin and down the front of his shirt, but some of it went in his mouth too. He coughed and choked, but I kept pouring until almost a quarter of the bottle was gone.

"This isn't just whisky, it's medicine. Drink it."

I went back in the other room and lifted the old man off the floor and put him in a chair. "Don't forget what I said about the silver, old man," I told him. "If you want your worthless daughter back, don't forget."

He couldn't understand my language, but he knew what I was talking about.

Chapter Twelve

WE RODE OUT OF THE moonlit town that night and into the dark hills, with Kreyler and Bucky lashed behind our saddles like blanket rolls. About a mile out of town we found a dry wash with a bed of soft sand, and the kid and I dug a long ditch with our hands, and that was where we buried the Marshal and his pal. We covered our trail as well as we could and we scattered brush and leaves over the grave. I figured nobody would find them for a few days. Maybe a month, if we were lucky. Marta and Bama watched from a little knoll while we finished the job; then we got on our horses and rode again toward the south.

Three Mile Cave, it turned out, wasn't a cave at all, but a kind of box canyon eating its way back into the side of a hill. The entrance was just barely wide enough for a horse and rider to get through, but after a little way it widened out to maybe twenty yards in the widest place. There was a little grass for the horses, but there wasn't any water. Well, I could do without water for a day, and so could the others. Bama wouldn't miss it at all as long as the tequila held out.

So that was where we stayed, and it didn't turn out to be so bad after all. The next day I got my rifle and went out and beat the brush until I scared out a couple of swamp rabbits, and we ate them for supper that night.

The next day Bama's leg began to act up. It began to swell until we had to loosen the bandage around it, and the flesh around the bullet hole had a red, angry look. By the middle of the afternoon little red fingers began crawling away from the wound and down the leg, and I knew what that meant.

But I didn't know what to do about blood poison. And Marta didn't either. All we could do was sit there and watch the fever spread and keep him hopped up on tequila.

But he ran out that night. I heard the empty bottle when it hit the ground and I went over to where he was.

"It's beginning to stink," he said. "In a couple of days it'll turn black and smell like all the cesspools in the world come together." He laughed

abruptly. "This is a hell of a way to die, Tall Cameron. But then, I guess there isn't any good way to die, is there?"

"What are you talking about?" I said. "The old man will be here tomorrow with the silver and we'll buy you the best doctor in Mexico."

But I don't think he heard me. "There was a lot of blood poison during the war," he said. "I've seen men rub blisters on their heels and in a few days there would be a surgeon amputating the whole damn leg. I was in a field hospital after the battle of Chickamauga – did I tell you about that?"

"No, I don't think so."

He seemed to forget about the hospital. I rolled a cigarette for him and put it in his mouth. "I've been thinking about the war," he said as I held the match. "I wonder if anything was decided by it. There's a theory that wars are inevitable because the natural blood lust in a man demands them. What do you think about that?"

"I don't know anything about wars."

"But you know about killing. It's the same thing."

"It's not the same thing. Do you want to know how I got a reputation as a gunman? It all started one day in a little town in Texas. A drunk Davis policeman pushed me off the plank walk. A little thing like that. Well, I hit him and that raised a big racket, but Pa managed to get things quieted down, and we thought it would blow over. But then another guy hit a cavalryman, and that made two of us, and the Yankees figured they'd have to do something about it. The first thing I knew, the bluebellies were wanting to put me on the work gang, so I had to light out. The federals came out to our ranch and wanted to know where I was, and when Pa wouldn't tell them they tried to beat it out of him. They killed him."

I hadn't thought that I could ever talk about it without getting crazy with anger, but all that happened a long time ago. It was almost like telling a story about somebody else, some person that I only slightly knew.

"That was the way it started," I said. "I came back home and killed the bluebelly. Then it seemed like everywhere I went people were hunting me. They never learned, goddamn them – they would just make me kill them."

It was quiet for a minute. And Bama was right about one thing – I began to smell it.

"I went back once," I said, "to that place in Texas. It was a crazy thing to do, I guess, but there was a girl there and it seemed like I just had to see her. But I shouldn't have done it, I had teamed up with a famous gunman, Pappy Garret, and got myself a reputation, and things weren't the same any more. She was afraid of me. If I had touched her I think she would have fainted. Anyway, she was going to marry somebody else. I guess I'll never go back again."

I had never told those things to anybody else. I don't know why I told them to Bama, unless maybe it was to get his mind off his leg.

"I wonder," Bama said, "what would have happened if you hadn't run away."

"I would have put in two years on the work gang."

"Would that have been so bad?"

I knew that he was talking about Johnny Rayburn, not me. I got up and went to my own bunk.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, and our tongues were beginning to get too big for our mouths, when Marta's old man finally showed up. Around noon I went up on the bluff that formed the south wall of our cave, and there he was, him and his two burros, about three miles away and looking like three bugs crawling up the side of a mountain. He had the silver, all right, I could tell that by the heavy way the burros moved. There was nobody with him, and nobody following him.

"Here he comes," I shouted down to the others. "Johnny, you gather up the horses." Then I went down and we all waited in the mouth of the cave.

The old man was puffing and blowing and the burros were all lathered up as they pulled in. Marta swung onto Papacito's neck and they both began

to jabber away in Spanish. I went around punching the big leather pack bags, and they all seemed solid and heavy enough, so I guessed that all the silver was there. Marta had found a canteen somewhere and was swigging from the neck when I came up and took it out of her hands. "No!" she yelled. "For Marta!"

"It's for all of us," I said.

The kid was coming up with the horses, so I gave him a drink, then I poured a little in my hand and let the horses wet their muzzles. "Get the horses stripped down," I said, "and throw away everything but the saddles and guns. You can start getting those pack bags split up and we'll divide the load between us."

Bama was sitting with his back against a rock as I came up with the canteen. "Have a drink of this," I said.

He turned the canteen up and gulped. His leg didn't look any better. The flesh around the wound was beginning to turn a dark purple, like a deep bruise, and he had that wild look that fever puts in a man's eyes.

When I got the canteen there was about a mouthful of water and some dregs in it. I emptied it and hung it over my shoulder.

"Do you feel like riding?"

He shrugged. He should have been in bed. He should have had a good doctor and a roomful of nurses, and maybe a few preachers to say some prayers. But he was going to ride, because there was nothing else to do. "How far are we from the border?" I said. "Only a few miles," he said, "if we go straight south. But we can't go that way. Federal marshals and Mexican soldiers patrol that country. We'll have to ride into the mountains and take one of those canyons that the smuggler trains use."

"How far will it be that way?"

"Fifty miles, maybe. It's pretty rough country, but you have to go the long way around with the load we've got. We wouldn't be much good if it came to a horse race."

Bama was right, as usual. All right, we would go the long way around. Fifty miles wasn't so far. Not for the rest of us, but for Bama it was going to be a long, long trip. Of course, I could lighten our load by leaving Bama behind. It would make things a lot easier for me, and chances were Bama would never last the trip anyway.

But I didn't have the stomach for it. I said, "I'll have the kid bring your horse around and we'll put you in the saddle."

There was one more way to lighten our load, but I was going to wait until the last minute to do it. I went up to the mouth of the cave and helped get the silver loaded. A lot of it we got in the saddle bags, and the rest of it we had to lash on behind the saddles. It was a clumsy way to do it, and the horses could hardly walk, much less run, but I couldn't think of anything better. When we got to Marta's horse I said, "Throw the saddle off of this one."

The kid didn't ask any questions this time. We stripped the horse and loaded the rest of the silver in those pack bags.

I found Marta and her old man just outside the cave having another one of their arguments. Papacito was all blown up with anger and Marta was stamping her foot and spitting. I thought I could guess what the argument was about.

I said, "Shut up for a minute and ask the old man how they're taking it back in Ocotillo."

I guess the sight of me reminded Marta of the silver, and she forgot all about the old man and flashed a smile at me. She turned and spat out the question. The old man answered sullenly, angrily. I had almost forgotten how much he hated me.

"Papacito say much anger in Ocotillo." She cranked her hand by her ear to show how the men felt about losing their silver. Well, to hell with them. Maybe the next time they wouldn't run off when there was a job to be done.

"Ask him if he saw any cavalry," I said. She asked him and shook her head.

Then the kid and Bama rode up, leading my big black and Marta's animal, which we had turned into a pack horse. She didn't get it at first. She just looked surprised, like somebody had pulled the chair from under her. But when I swung up on the black she got it. She started screaming and screeching and clawing, trying to pull me out of the saddle.

"Get out of here," I said to the kid. "Take Bama up in the hills and I'll catch you there," And all the time the girl was yelling her head off and cursing me, I guess, in Spanish. I gave her a kick and sent her reeling against the old man, and Bama and the kid began squeezing their way out of the cave. Before I could get my own horse through, Marta was clawing at me again. I yelled, "Take her, old man! Get her away from me. That's what you want, isn't it?"

That was what he wanted, but he didn't know how to go about it. He tried to pull her away but she wouldn't budge. The first thing I knew, she had snatched a pistol out of my holster and was shoving the muzzle in my face. "No leave Marta!" she yelled. "No leave Marta!" And all the time she was wrestling the hammer back with both hands.

It was no time to play the gentleman. I rammed the steel to my horse and he jumped and knocked the girl rolling in the dust. But she was up like a cat. She ran to the mouth of the cave and stood in front of it, yelling all the time. She pointed that pistol at me again, but by that time I had my black horse right on top of her. The pistol exploded, but she wasn't a very good shot with a thousand pounds of horseflesh pounding down on her like a runaway locomotive. The bullet must have hit a rock somewhere, because I heard the disappointed whine as it shot up toward a million miles of sky. And that was all for Marta.

We went right over her and blasted through the opening, and the only reason she wasn't killed was because horses, unlike people, are naturally neat animals, and they won't put a hoof down where it's likely to get messed up if they can help it. I looked back once and saw that she wasn't really hurt. The old man was standing outside the cave clutching those wooden beads around his neck, and I suppose he was offering a prayer of thanks because I hadn't run off with that wildcat daughter of his. Or, come

to think of it, maybe he was just cursing. I know that's what I would have been doing if I had been in his place and had been stuck with a girl like that.

So that was the last I saw of Marta. There she was lying full length in the dust, beating the ground with her fists and shredding the air with screams like a madman tearing a rotten shirt. Good-by, Marta. The black horse fogged it down a slight grade and we headed for the higher hills where Bama and Johnny Rayburn were waiting. After a while I couldn't hear her screams any more.

We didn't travel far that day – about ten miles, maybe, and by that time Bama had taken all the jolting around he could stand. So we unbitted and unpacked in a gully where some water oozed out of a broken rock. The kid helped me get Bama stretched out in the shade, and then I went down and filled the canteen and gave him some water. That was about all I could do.

The trip hadn't done Bama's leg any good. It was getting blacker – almost to the knee now – and the inflamed underflesh reached down beyond that. His face was bloated and spotted with fever, but he cooled off some after we got some water down him, and after a while he went to sleep.

“He ought to have a doctor,” the kid said.

“Sure,” I said. “Why don't you just ride over the hill and find one?”

His face warmed, but he had his teeth in the idea and he wouldn't turn loose.

“There's a doctor in Tucson.”

“There's also a company of cavalry and bevy of U.S. marshals. Besides, it's a three-day ride, and Bama hasn't got that long to go.”

“You mean he's going to die?”

He said it as if the idea were new to him. He sounded scared.

Of course he's going to die, I thought. But I didn't say it. I said. “When we get across the border I'll get him a doctor.”

“Do they have doctors in Mexico?”

“Well, hell,- yes, they have doctors everywhere.” But I wasn't so sure about that. Come to think of it, I'd never seen a Mexican doctor. I'd never even heard of one. But then, Bama wasn't going to last that long anyway, and it didn't really make any difference if they had any doctors or not.

Around sundown I went out with my rifle, but there were no rabbits up there in the mountains. We didn't have any supper that night. We built a little fire and sat there looking at it and wishing we had something to cook, but that was as far as it went.

“Do you think Bama will be able to ride tomorrow?” the kid asked.

“He'll have to ride whether he's able or not. We can't just sit here and wait for them to come after us. You don't think that girl's going to waste any time getting her story to the marshal's office, do you?”

That gave him something to think about. Up until now he had just been coming along for the ride. I guess he had never figured on winding up like this, being chased out of the country and being hunted by half the lawmen in Arizona.

I watched him closely, because now was the time to find out if he had the guts it took to face it put. I had taken it for granted that he was the kind of kid that could be some help to me. It came as a shock when I realized that maybe I had guessed wrong.

We sat there for a long time, not saying anything. He knew what he was in for if he stuck with me. If he wanted to get out of it, all he had to do was ride off toward Texas and that would be the end of us.

The stars were very clean and cold and superior that night. The kid lay back and watched them, and maybe he was thinking that those very same stars were shining on that wild piece of Texas brush country that he called home – a place that he might never see again.

It all depended on what he decided. If he wanted to know about guns and how to cut aces from the middle, I was the one who could teach him. If he wanted something else... Well, that was up to him.

And still we sat. An orange slice of moon came up behind the hills and a coyote came out and barked at it. A slight wind came up and rattled the parched grass. I listened to the thousand little night sounds, and to Bama's labored breathing, and finally the kid got up.

"Well," he said, "if we're going to travel tomorrow I guess I'd better get some sleep."

It took me a few minutes to realize that it was all over. He had thought it over in that slow, deliberate way of his, and he had decided to stay. He had built himself a hero to follow. And I was it.

We traveled about twenty miles the next day before Bama's leg stopped us again. He suddenly dumped out of the saddle and hit the ground, and my first feeling was relief. No sorrow. No regret, or feeling of loss. Only relief, because Bama was finally dead and now we could push across the border.

But I was wrong about Bama. At that moment he was as close to death as a man can get, but he wouldn't die. He lay there clutching like a drowning man at that razor-thin piece of life and he wouldn't let go. For a moment I hated him. He was going to die anyway, so why didn't he do it now while it would do us some good? Why did he have to hold on with that death grip and pull us down with him? I just sat there on my horse, watching, waiting. Die, goddamn you! But he wouldn't turn loose.

"He's bad," Johnny said. "Real bad."

The kid was already out of the saddle, wiping the dust off Bama's flushed face.

Well, that was that. I couldn't just ride off and leave him, so I helped get him back on his horse and we held him in the saddle for a hundred yards or so until we came to a washed-out place in the side of a hill. That was where we laid him out. Then I sent the kid out to look for water.

"Bama."

He didn't say anything. His face got as white as tallow, and it seemed that he would go for minutes at a time without breathing. At last he began to shake, and I knew the chills had started.

The kid came back with the water, but we didn't need it now. We stripped the horses and piled the saddle blankets on top of Bama. We lugged the silver into the wash and staked the horses out. Then we settled down to wait.

Night came finally, and there was no change that I could see. My stomach growled and knotted and ached, and I tried filling it up with water, but that didn't help.

I said, "Get some sleep, kid. When you wake up in the morning it'll be all over."

But it wasn't. Bama was shaking when I went to sleep and he was still shaking when I woke up. When the sun came up I took my rifle out again and this time I came back with two rabbits.

We skinned them and cooked them like the other time. Me and the kid finished them off because Bama couldn't eat. He couldn't do anything except lie there and shake.

The day dragged on somehow, and to pass the time I got to figuring on our chances of getting out of this. I counted up and discovered that about fifty-six hours had gone by since we left Marta and Papacito at Three Mile Cave. Three days gone and we hadn't traveled more than thirty miles at the outside. Three days. Marta could have got the word all the way to Tucson in that length of time. More than likely a detachment of cavalry was already headed south. Under forced march they would be right in our front yard by this time tomorrow.

The future wasn't exactly bright. I made my mind up once to pull out of there, but when the time came to do it I didn't have the guts for it. For one thing, I wasn't at all sure that the kid would be willing to leave Bama and come with me. And, too, I kept remembering Kreyler and Bucky. It was Bama's time that we were living on now.

The next morning Bama began freezing with chills one minute and burning with fever the next. He kept us busy piling blankets on him and then taking them off and putting wet rags on his head. Along toward noon he went to sleep again. The kid walked out in the sun and stood there

breathing in deep gulps of clean air. For a moment I thought he was going to be sick.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" he said. "Anything at all?"

"We're doing everything we can."

"But he's going to die, don't you see that?" There didn't seem to be anything to say after that, so the kid went over and sat on a rock and held his head in his hands. All this was new to him. He had never seen a friend of his die like this before.

I found a rock for myself and sat down, wondering about the cavalry. What if they had already picked up our trail? Well, it was too late to worry about it now. We'd have to shoot it out with them, and if there weren't too many of them maybe we'd have a chance after all. The kid would be a help. He was good enough with a rifle, he had already proved that in the smuggler raid. And thinking of that made me feel better. We'd fight our way out of it somehow, just the two of us.

I don't know just when it was that those thoughts turned on me, but suddenly I found myself thinking, And then what?

There would be more cavalry, and more U.S. marshals, and you couldn't go on killing them forever. Where was it going to end?

It doesn't happen often, but once or twice in a life-time a man takes a look at himself and sees himself as he really is, and I guess that was what I did then. I knew where it would end. In a deadwood saloon with a bullet in my back, the way the end had come to Hickok. Over a dice table, the way it had come to Hardin. Or on a lonesome Texas hilltop, where Pappy Garret's career had ended. Not even Pappy had been able to go on forever.

And what about the kid? What about that girl of his, and that little cocklebur ranch that he was so set on?

That, I suppose, was the way my mind was running when the kid spoke. I didn't hear what he said, and it wasn't important anyway, because I was thinking of something else. Then he spoke again and I stood up and said:

"I wish to hell you'd stop whining." My voice was hard and full of anger, and the kid looked as if I had just hit him across the face with a pistol barrel. He didn't understand what I was mad at. And he wasn't alone. Neither did I.

"There's one thing you'd better understand," I said. "If you're not willing to take the hard bumps when they come, then we'd better split up here and now."

That outburst kind of knocked the wind out of him, I guess, because he just sat there with his mouth open. He groped around for words, but this was a situation that he had never even thought about and he couldn't find any words to fit it. I said, "You've done nothing but complain. Not that I expect much out of you, because I haven't had time to teach you anything. But guts come natural, and if you haven't got them you're no good to me or anybody else."

He closed his mouth finally and stared at me with bugging eyes.

He said hoarsely, "I didn't mean to complain. If I was doing it I didn't know it."

"You didn't know it," I said. "You don't know anything, and that's the whole trouble."

Something had gone wrong, but he couldn't understand it. He stood up and wiped his face and shifted from one foot to the other. "Well," he said, "I know I'm pretty green. But I can learn – you said so yourself."

"Maybe I was wrong. I've been wrong before."

He shuffled around some more, putting his hands in his pockets and taking them out. He walked around in a little circle, still not able to understand what had happened. "Maybe," he said, "I got things all mixed up. I thought all along that you were glad to have me ride with you. I thought we were going to be – well, partners. Something like that."

"You thought we were going to be partners," I said dryly, and his face turned beet-red. Then he stopped his marching around and really looked at me for the first time.

"I guess I was jumping at conclusions," he said after a long pause. "I had kind of a crazy idea that you liked me."

"I like you well enough, but that doesn't mean that I want to take you to raise."

He took it all right until then. But now he started to burn. His face started to cloud up and his mouth clamped down to a grim line.

"If I was being so much trouble," he said tightly, "why did you let me ride this far with you?"

"I do crazy things sometimes. I guess everybody does."

At last he began to get it.

"Are you trying to tell me that you don't want me around any more?" he said. "Is that it?"

I said, "That's it."

And that tore it open. He hadn't believed that a crazy thing like this could happen, for no reason at all. But it finally sank in. For a long moment he just stood there staring at me like a backwoods nester looking at a circus freak.

Then he turned and walked stiffly to the wash. He came back with his saddle over his shoulder and headed down to where the horses were grazing.

It was all over. And the whole thing was almost as much a mystery to me as it was to the kid. I needed him. He was my life insurance. And now he was going.

I stood there on a knoll watching him cinch up, wondering how I was going to fight off a detachment of cavalry by myself. After a while he got the saddle on to suit him and he rode up to where I was.

"Well," he said, "I guess this is good-by, Mr. Cameron. No hard feelings."

"No hard feelings," I said. "Part of that silver is still yours."

"I don't want the silver," he said.

He started to pull away and I happened to think of something else. "Where do you aim to go, kid?"

"Back to Texas," he said without turning around.

Back to the work gang. Back to that wind-swept, thorn-daggered land where strong men broke their hearts scrabbling around for a kind of living. Back home.

"Well, good-by, kid."

But he didn't hear me. He rode straight over a rise and dipped out of sight. And that was the last I saw of him. It was hard to believe that just a few minutes ago both of us had been sitting here waiting for the end. Now there were just me and Bama—and the crazy thing about it was that I wasn't sorry.

I stood there for a long time trying to understand why I had deliberately sent him away. He was sure to wind up on the work gang—but then, there were worse things than a work gang. Maybe that was the answer. I waited until I was sure that he was well in the hills, and then I went back to the wash.

"Bama."

The fever had gone from his face and left it weak and flabby, like the face of a very old man. I felt that my face must look something like that. He opened his eyes and I got the canteen and dribbled water between his lips.

"How do you feel?"

He moved his shoulders just a little in the barest hint of a shrug.

"Your fever's gone," I said. "You're going to be all right in a day or two."

But I wasn't fooling anybody. The sickening smell of rotten flesh still hung heavily over the wash. Bama worked his mouth a few times, licking his cracked lips.

"Why don't you go?" he said. "You and the kid. You can still make it if you go now."

"The kid's not here," I said.

He fumbled that around in his mind.

"Where is he?"

"Headed for Texas," I said. I was suddenly tired of thinking about it and talking about it. "What difference does it make? He's old enough to have a mind of his own." I got up and paced the wash. "He can go clear to hell as far as I'm concerned."

Bama didn't say anything. He just lay there with those wide staring eyes watching me as I marched up and down.

"Well, what are you looking at?"

But he only gave that whisper of a shrug again. "Did you tell him to go?"

"Sure, I told him to go. I was goddamn sick and tired of looking at his stupid face."

Bama closed his eyes again, as if the conversation had worn him out. He lay there for a minute, half-smiling, or grimacing in pain. I couldn't tell which.

"Have you got a cigarette?"

I built a cigarette out of the last of my makings, put it in his mouth, and fired it.

"I guess I never knew you, Tall Cameron," he said. "Several times I thought I did, but about that time you always did the unexpected."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Not a thing." He dragged on the cigarette, burning it quickly to his lips, and then he spat it out. "You've got to get out of here," he said. "Take the horses and silver and try to make it to the border. There's no sense in your staying here. Nothing is going to help me now."

"Nothing's going to help you if you don't shut up. Now, try to get some sleep."

He lay there for a while with his eyes closed and I thought that he had gone to sleep. Then he said, "I wonder if she ever married."

“What the hell are you talking about?”

But that was all he said. And pretty soon he went to sleep again.

I squatted down in the wash and listened to his breathing, coming strong for a while and then almost stopping completely. He was a crazy sort of galoot and I had never understood him any more than he had understood me. I had hated him and liked him in spells. There was no foolishness about him. He saw himself as he really was –not just rarely, like most people, but all the time. Except maybe when he was drunk.

I unholstered my off-hand gun—Marta had the other one—and wiped it clean with my shirttail. Then I punched out the cartridges and wiped them clean and put them back in the cylinder. I couldn't help wondering about the cavalry. They must be somewhere in the neighborhood by now. Marta must have told them the direction we had headed.

I climbed out of the wash and got my rifle and began cleaning it off the way I had the pistol. I went down and got the horses and picketed them there in the draw where they would be out of sight. Once again the thought crossed my mind that I ought to get out of there. But it just wasn't in me to let Bama die by himself. He had lived by himself. That seemed to be enough.

It was then, I guess, that I first heard it. Or I thought I did. Maybe I just felt it. I listened hard and there was nothing but the sound of wind. But that feeling was there.

I saddled the black horse, and holstered the rifle, then I rode as quietly as I could up to a hogback ridge just east of our wash. When I got near the crest I crawled the rest of the way to the top and looked over. Sure enough, there they were, the United States Cavalry.

There were eight of them about four or five hundred yards down the slope, and they had got together for a powwow, trying to decide which way to go, I guess. The lieutenant was pointing toward the ridge, and the sergeant was pointing to the south, and then they both dismounted and put their noses to the ground, looking for sign.

The wind must have blown most of the sign away, because they still looked pretty undecided when they climbed back on their horses. Then they did what I was afraid they were going to do. They spread out to scour the whole area. I got the lieutenant in the sights of my rifle once, but about that time the wind changed, and by the time I made the changes in sighting he had ridden around the side of a hill. Well, it was just as well. I would only have brought the other seven troopers down on me. The best thing to do was to go back to the wash, where I had a good line of defense, and make my stand there.

So that was what I did. I got that black horse in the draw and wrapped his forelegs and made him lie down. I picked out a place about a dozen yards from Bama.

And there I stood, waiting for them to find me and come after me...

It seemed like a long time, but I guess it wasn't. I stood there and looked at the hills to the west and wondered what was behind them. It never occurred to me that I could get on my horse and find out, while the cavalry was still scattered out. I heard a sound behind me then and I thought Bama had waked up and was wondering what was going on.

"Bama."

No sound.

"Bama, are you awake?"

Still no sound, except that of the wind coming down the canyon. I left my position and went over to where he was. "It looks like we've got a fight on our hands," I said. "I just spotted some cavalry over behind the ridge. They're spread out now, but I guess one of them will find us before long."

He didn't say anything. He lay there with his eyes wide open, staring up at the sky. I knelt beside him and took his pulse. There was no beat, not even a flutter. His chest was quiet. He was perfectly still. After a while it dawned on me that Bama was dead.

I don't know what I did next. I think I got up and fumbled around for the makings of a cigarette, and finally I remembered that Bama had used the

last of the tobacco. I must have stood there for quite a while, and I had a queer, uncomfortable feeling that Bama had died just as a personal favor to me. A thought kept nudging the back of my brain, warning me to get out of there. There was no reason to stay any longer. Bama was dead. You can't help a dead man.

But I was in no particular hurry. I wondered if I ought to try to dig a grave for him. But I didn't have anything to work with, and anyway, the cavalry would dig him right up again when they found him. Finally I took off my neckerchief and spread it over his face.

Well, so long, Bama. This isn't much of a send-off, but it's the best I can do.

Then I noticed that pile of silver. It wasn't going to help me, or Johnny Rayburn, or Bama, or anybody else. The kid didn't want it, Bama couldn't use it now, and I sure couldn't take it with me if I meant to outrun the cavalry. Poetic justice, I think they call it. The funny thing about it was that I didn't care.

I got my horse out of the draw and stripped everything off him except the saddle and rifle. I walked over to Bama again, still feeling that there was something I ought to do. If I knew any prayers, Bama, I thought, I'd say one for you. But I didn't know any. There's the Lord's Prayer, I thought. Everybody knows that. But when I started on it I got bogged down in the first line and had to stop. I was wasting precious time, but still I had a feeling that somebody ought to say a few words over him, and I sure couldn't depend on the cavalry to do it. So finally I said:

“Well, rest in hell, Bama. Amen.”

Then I got on my horse and rode west.

It surprised me, I guess, as much as it did the troopers, when I got away with it. I rode out of the draw and into the hills, with the soldiers beating the brush all around. Once I got a few miles away, I was safe – for a day or two, anyway. That silver was going to keep the cavalry busy for a while, when they finally found it, and by the time they got around to thinking about me I would be somewhere else.

There was no use heading for Mexico, though. Without money Mexico was no good. Maybe I could head north, where everybody was too busy fighting Indians to pay any attention to me. Maybe I'd try to get to Wyoming or someplace like that.

But that was a long way off, and I was just beginning to realize how sick and tired I was of running. And maybe that explains the crazy thing I did that same night.

A thing like that builds up in your mind, I suppose, and grows and grows without your knowing it. Then at last it breaks as clear as a summer day, and you know what you have to do.

I still remember that night sometimes, pitch-black and the chill of the mountains coming down. But still I had to keep running. My horse almost went over the edge of the bluff before I saw the emptiness looming in front of us. He took a step forward and skittered, and I heard rocks and gravel begin to fall away into a black nothingness. My stomach curled up like a prodded sow bug and I tried to get braced for the sickening plunge.

But that horse had more sense than I had. He reared and wheeled and his forefeet slammed solid earth. We were safe then, but it was a close thing and it took something out of me. I climbed out of the saddle and wiped the sweat off my face. I was scared. Pretty soon I stopped being scared and got mad.

Nobody but a damn fool would try to cross country like this at night – and maybe that's just what I was, a damn fool. And finally I guess I got it through my head that it was time to do something about it.

What I did was to take my pistol and throw it as hard as I could over the bluff, and I listened and listened and after what seemed an hour I heard it hit. Then I scooped the .44 ammunition out of my saddlebags and heaved it into the darkness. And after it was all over I stood there panting as if I had just come through a long spell of sickness.

Maybe it was a fool thing, throwing my pistol away like that, as though by a single act I could throw off everything that was bad. But that pistol was a part of me. And I didn't want it any more. A doctor cuts off a leg when it's

rotten. It was the same thing. It was with me, anyway. I felt naked without it, but I wasn't sorry it was gone.

The rifle I kept in the saddle holster. A rifle is a defensive weapon, a tool for getting food. It isn't the same as a pistol and it can't get to be a part of you the way a pistol can.

I stood for a long time in the darkness, thinking about it. I half expected to start cursing myself for an idiot as soon as the heat wore off. But I didn't. Without that gun I would never have killed the first man. I'd never have been on the run. Maybe I would have had that ranch in Texas like Johnny Rayburn would have someday. Maybe...

But it was too late for a lot of things. Maybe too late for anything. For all I knew, the cavalry was just a hop and a skip behind me, and the important thing was to keep running.

Keep running. It didn't have the same sound that it once had. The feeling of urgency wasn't there any more. I got back in the saddle and the black horse started marching off into the darkness, just as if there were a place out there somewhere that he knew about—a place where we could stop and rest and live like a man and a horse are supposed to live. It was a crazy idea. We kept traveling.

THE END

Freeditorial 