

THE LAW OF THE TRIGGER

BY
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Chapter One

Ben McKeever was the first to come.

Owen Toller and the two Stanley boys were chopping cotton in the bottomland below the Toller house when the first silver notes of the triangle came to them. Owen frowned, resting on his hoe. Now, why would Elizabeth be ringing the triangle this time of day?

He shouldered the hoe as though it were a rifle and walked up the gentle slope until he could see the house. A tall, big-boned man, he did not walk like a sodbuster. His was the toe-and-heel, almost mincing, stride of a horseman. Working the land had not yet rounded his big shoulders, and he walked erect, head back, with the unconscious pride of a soldier.

And yet there was something of the land about him, in the way he smiled at the green young cotton plants, as though they were children. A few years back, when he first moved to the farm, he had felt out of place at times, and not very comfortable. But that was in the past. His cotton was good. The corn was thriving. He had never been happier or more comfortable in his life.

Now, on reaching the crest of the slope, he could see the house and his wife waving to him from the back yard. Owen smiled and waved the hoe over his head. Then he frowned slightly, noticing the glistening black buggy drawn up beside the barn and recognizing the rig as Ben McKeever's.

What, he wondered, would bring a banker here all the way from Reunion?

"Bruce," he called to the older Stanley boy, "looks like you and Bud will have to work on your own for a while. My wife wants me at the house."

"Sure, Marshal," the boy called. "Me and Bud can clean up here before sundown."

A good many people still called him "Marshal," although he had quit the job almost five years ago.

Five years... Strangely, he could remember very little beyond that time. A man in his early forties, he sometimes felt that his life had actually begun

just five years ago, when he had stopped being a lawman and started being a husband and a father.

Elizabeth had gone into the house to see about their guest, but she came out again as Owen approached the barn. He left his hoe in the tool shed, methodical as always, grinning a bit at his wife's impatience. Elizabeth had been a schoolteacher in Reunion—the prettiest they'd ever had, to Owen's mind—and the miracle of their marriage was bright in his chest whenever he thought of it, which was often.

"Owen, it's Ben McKeever. He wants to see you."

"I recognized the rig," Owen said, kissing her lightly, marveling at the softness of her yellow hair, continually amazed that this frail, girllike woman could be the mother of his children. "What brought him all the way from Reunion?"

"He hasn't said." Her eyes were anxious and faintly worried. "Owen, we're not in trouble at the bank, are we?"

"No more than any other farmer. We owe Ben money, but he knows he'll get it at harvest time."

Lonnie Toller, age three, grabbed his father's legs the moment Owen stepped into the kitchen. From the day the boy first learned to crawl, this had been a ritual in the Toller house; Lonnie would cling laughing to his father's leg while Owen rode him about the kitchen on his instep. Elizabeth usually enjoyed this game as much as they did, but today was different, with Ben McKeever waiting impatiently in the parlor, listening.

"Owen," she said anxiously, "you're keeping Mr. McKeever waiting."

Owen speculated that most people wouldn't take a man from his work just to talk; they'd go down to the field. But not a banker, he guessed. They were used to having people come to them.

Nevertheless, Owen Toller was not a man to be hurried, even by his wife. He continued the game through to the very end, then lifted his son into the air with a sudden swing of his foot and caught him in his arms. Lonnie screamed with laughter.

"Owen!" Elizabeth said indignantly. "Mr. McKeever will think you're frivolous, carrying on this way!"

Owen grinned. "Maybe I am frivolous." But he swung the boy to the floor, gave him a whack on the behind, and sent him scurrying. "How's the baby?" he asked.

"Asleep," his wife said pointedly. "Though it's a wonder how he can sleep through the racket you and Lonnie make."

Owen laughed and took her in one strong arm and hugged her quickly. "All right, honey, I'll go in and see what Ben wants. And I'll try to remember to act respectful, just in case we might want to borrow from him again."

"Well, you'd better, Owen Toller!" But she was smiling as her husband left the kitchen.

In the small, neat parlor, Ben McKeever sat fat, breathless, and impatient on one of the horsehair chairs.

"Hello, Ben. What brings a Reunion banker out toward Lazy Creek?"

McKeever stood up with a great effort and shook Owen's big hand. "Had a little land out this way I wanted to look at," the fat man wheezed. "Just thought I'd drop by." He sank heavily into the groaning chair. "Nice place you got here," he said. "You aimin' to clean up that place on the other side of the creek? Likely place for corn, if I'm any judge."

Owen hid what little curiosity he felt and played it McKeever's way, although he was sure that the banker had not come all the way to Lazy Creek to talk about corn. "Figured I'd clear that space next year, if I can get the Stanley boys to give me a hand," he said. "Providing, of course, that my credit's still good at the bank."

"A Toller don't have to worry about credit in Reunion," McKeever said expansively. "And your own boys will be big enough to help you before too many years." Owen laughed. "I guess you're right." He left it hanging there. McKeever would pick it up when he was ready.

The banker fumbled a cigar out of his vest pocket and glanced about the small room. "Looks like you'll be needin' a bigger house here, Owen, the way your family's started to grow.

"I might, at that," Owen agreed.

And now McKeever was ready to come out with it. He held a match to his cigar, sat back, and fixed Owen with his expressionless eyes. "Owen," he asked, "how would you like to make a thousand dollars?"

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "that all depends on what I'd be called on to do."

"But you could use the thousand, couldn't you?"

"Sure," he said carefully.

"Well, Owen, that's the amount the reward comes to. For the capture of the Brunner boys."

A door slammed in Owen's mind. Ben had made a long trip for nothing. "I'm sorry, Ben. I can't help you."

"Dead or alive."

Owen shook his head, and there was coolness in his eyes. "It's been five years since I've strapped on a gun, Ben. All that's behind me. Even if I wanted to do it, I couldn't I've got my family to think about."

He saw that McKeever was merely waiting for him to finish in order to continue with his own argument. Owen knew that he would have to state his feelings as strongly as possible and leave no room for doubt. He said, "I'm a farmer, Ben, not a lawman. The people of this county decided that for me five years ago. If you want the Brunner boys captured, why don't you go to Will Cushman? He's the sheriff of the county."

McKeever showed no embarrassment for what he guessed was in Owen's mind. "Now, Owen," he said mildly, "I wouldn't have pegged you as one to hold a grudge because I supported Cushman when he ran against you for sheriff."

"I hold no grudge, Ben. I merely pointed out that Will is the sheriff, not me."

"And I don't need to point out," the banker said bluntly, "that the Brunners have made a fool of Will Cushman. He's the laughingstock of the hills. They say our sheriff couldn't find his nose with both hands, and they're right."

Owen started shaking his head again, but McKeever broke in before he could speak. "Cushman hasn't got the guts for the job. I know," he said, holding up a hand, "I should have thought of that before supporting him. But it's too late for that now. Owen, Oklahoma's a new state; it's just learning to walk. Back East there are capitalists itchin' to throw millions of dollars into our state, but they don't dare risk it as long as there are men like the Brunners to threaten their investments. Now, I have confidential information that a railroad has plans to lay track to Reunion. But the James brothers are fresh in their minds. And the Doolins. Now it's the Brunners, and there's talk that the railroad has changed its plans and the track is going somewhere else. Owen, don't you see what this means?"

"I don't see what it has to do with me," Owen said. "The Brunners are none of my business."

McKeever's naturally florid face became red. "They will be your business," he said angrily, "if they keep the railroad out of Reunion. Don't you realize what a railroad would mean to you farmers? It would multiply your present market a hundred — a thousand times!"

Owen refused to be ruffled. He said quietly, "The James boys couldn't stop the railroad. I doubt that the Brunners can do it either."

McKeever lurched forward in his chair. "I happen to know they can! The railroad plans ain't settled. They're surveying a spur-line route to Reunion, but they've also laid out a western route that could join up with the Santa Fe. It's a ticklish proposition; the least thing could throw them away from one plan and make them settle on the other."

Owen sat quietly, saying nothing.

"I tell you," McKeever went on, "if we don't get this railroad, eastern Oklahoma will lag twenty years behind the rest of the state. That's how important it is. The people of this county have got to make the decision, and we don't have much time. Eastern capital pouring in here can mean the difference between prosperity and poverty for the settlers, the difference between good roads and wagon tracks. Schools, industry. Oklahoma is just beginning to come alive. We can't let outlaws like the Brunners strangle it before it gets big enough to fight for itself!"

"I know," Owen said calmly.

McKeever smiled, thinking that he had made his point.

"I know," Owen said again. "That's the reason the people elected Will Cushman sheriff."

The banker's smile bent like hot wax, but he was skilled in diplomacy and held his temper. "We need you, Owen," he said tightly. "All the people of the county need you."

"I'm sorry, Ben."

There was storm in Ben McKeever's pale eyes. "You mean you won't do it?"

"I mean I can't do it. I told you, Ben, I'm a family man now, and a farmer. Not a lawman."

The banker was making a great effort, but he was slowly losing the grip on his temper. Laboriously he pushed himself out of the chair. "Owen Toller," he said. "Once people mentioned the name in the same breath with Earp and Masterson. I didn't think a man like you would ever back down from toughs like the Brunners."

Owen felt the blood draining from his face. In his time many had hated him, but no man had ever suggested that Owen Toller lacked courage. "Ben," he said softly, his gray eyes glinting, "I've got work to do in the field. If you'll excuse me..."

Ben realized that he had made a bad mistake. Another time, a few years back, a blunder like this might have been fatal. He swallowed uneasily.

"I guess I talked out of turn," he managed to say.

"We'll forget it," Owen said flatly. "Now, if you'll excuse me..."

As McKeever backed clumsily toward the front door, he said, "Owen, will you think it over?"

"It's out of the question, Ben."

"The thousand dollars, Owen. Think of that!"

"If I got myself killed, how long would a thousand dollars take care of Elizabeth and the kids?"

The banker stood fast in the doorway, breathless and sweating. "Owen," he said, "I am not without influence in this state. If I wanted, I could make it tough on a man."

"Ben," Toller asked coldly, "are you threatening me?"

A chill seemed to shake Ben McKeever. "I just want you to think it over," he said quickly, then lumbered hurriedly out of the house.

The banker was sticky with sweat when he reached his buggy. He wiped his face thoroughly with a red handkerchief before taking the reins and heading back for Reunion. Toller had proved tougher than he had anticipated. But he would come around. And soon. All men came around when Ben McKeever set his mind to it.

Slowly, the lush green smell of the hills soothed him, and McKeever allowed his huge bulk to spread comfortably over the leather-upholstered seat. He speculated with quiet pleasure on the untapped richness of the land. Here the dirt was dark and bursting with growing things. Farther into the hills there were huge fortunes in timber ready for the cutting.

McKeever's land, much of it. McKeever's timber. He was a man who dealt in futures, and he was one of the few who could see the great wealth that would someday come down out of those hills. Someday this land that he had bought for pennies could not be purchased at any price. That was McKeever's vision.

But first, before the vision could be realized, there must be a means of transporting this great wealth to market. The railroad was the answer. Not the Katy, for it was too far away. The spur line was the answer, and the banker had worked hard and long to get it. He cringed when he thought of the money he had spent, of the subtle bribes that he had passed out so lavishly to surveyors and minor officials in order that good reports of this country might reach the powerful financiers in the East. And then the Brunners had come.

The very thought of those brothers, Ike and Cal Brunner, could send McKeever into a rage. They had caused havoc, raiding into Arkansas and Missouri, as well as in Oklahoma, disrupting the fragile line of communication and commerce, robbing banks, wagon trains, peddlers.

Nothing was too large or too small. It seemed that the Brunners and their gang of ignorant hill boys robbed and killed for the sheer pleasure of it.

Beneath his folds of fat, McKeever writhed in rage when he speculated on the possibility that his vision, his empire, might be destroyed because of this small band of stupid cutthroats that hid in the hills, struck like panthers, vanished like smoke.

Often McKeever had cursed himself for supporting Will Cushman for county sheriff. At the time it had seemed the right move. He had been afraid of Toller. The man had a mind of his own, thought as he pleased, and did his job to his own satisfaction only. McKeever would not support a man who refused to take orders.

Besides, how would it look to the Easterners if the county elected a gunsharp for sheriff? They'd think this was still a wilderness, where differences were settled with guns, and they would look around for a more civilized place to invest their capital.

Cushman had seemed the right man for the job. He was easygoing, well liked, a good talker and campaigner. But McKeever had overlooked two things in selecting the man: experience and guts. Cushman had neither.

But Toller would come around, McKeever told himself, to the tune of whirring buggy wheels. If he doesn't, I'll make it so hot for him he'll fold up on that farm inside a year!

Back at the farmhouse, Owen stood at the front door watching the black buggy disappear at the bottom of the slope. He was not a quick man to anger, but the banker had angered him, and it showed now in every line of his angular face.

Elizabeth came into the room. "Is Mr. McKeever gone already?"

"Yes," Owen said, not turning.

"What did he want?" his wife asked anxiously.

"He wants me to go after the Brunner gang." Then he turned and saw the fear in Elizabeth's eyes and knew that he had made a mistake. His laugh was forced, but it served to ease the tension, and he stepped quickly to his wife and folded his big arms around her. "I told him no," he said. "I told him it was a job for the county sheriff."

"Oh, Owen," she said weakly, "don't scare me like that!"

He laughed again, and this time it was a free and rolling sound, unbridled by anger. Then suddenly he was quiet and sober. Tilting his wife's chin gently and looking at her, he said, "This was just a crazy notion that Ben had. I told him where I stood."

"But will Ben take no for an answer? Owen, you know how he can be when he sets his head on something."

"Ben will have to take what answer I give him."

But Elizabeth didn't appear convinced, and as Owen held her, he guessed what was in her mind. In the days before their marriage, uncertainty and anxiety had always been with her. In her dreams she had seen them bring Owen home, tied face down across a saddle, as she had seen others return from man hunts.

"Remember when we were married?" he asked. "I promised that I was through being a law-enforcement officer. I meant it then, and I still mean it."

And he did mean it.

But later, as he walked back to his field of cotton, he warned himself: It's not going to be easy. He knew how much this thing meant to Ben

McKeever. The banker wanted the Brunner gang run out of the hills. He wanted the railroad, and he would stop at nothing to get it.

The Stanley boys had worked their way down to the far corner of the field and were now coming back, chopping grass and weeds from between the tender cotton plants. Owen waved and went to work on another row, moving toward them.

He worked with a steady, machine-like swing of the hoe, enjoying the fragrance of fresh-turned dirt. His mind was free to think as it would, and soon he put Ben McKeever out of his thoughts and turned to more pleasant things of the future.

He glanced across the creek at the small patch of corn, and beyond that to the long field of native Johnson grass. The grass made fair hay for the livestock, but still it seemed an extravagant waste of fertile bottomland, and Owen had been working steadily at clearing it out for grain and cotton. Over to the east, adjoining Owen's fields, was the Stanley place. Clint Stanley had two good boys, but the father himself leaned toward the shiftless. He sent his boys out to work for others while his own cotton grew up in grass. Someday, Owen knew, Clint would get enough of the farm and let it go. And on that day, Owen, in the eye of his mind, saw his own fields stretching out as far as he could see, to the farthest limits of the Stanley place.

Of course, it would take money to swing such a deal, but a man with a good name would have no trouble getting money.

Or would he?

Involuntarily, Owen began thinking again of Ben McKeever. Would the banker stop his credit in Reunion? It was a possibility that had to be faced.

Well, he thought at last, if that's the way Ben wants it, I guess that's the way it'll have to be. I'm not going back on my promise to Elizabeth.

Kneeling in the soft earth to file the hoe, Owen thought it again. I'll not go back on my promise!

Chapter Two

Saturday of that week Owen had to make a trip to Reunion to buy supplies and get the plow sharpened. Usually Elizabeth went with him on these trips, but Giles, the baby, had a sore throat that day, and she was afraid to take him out. Spring was a bad time for children.

"I want to go to town with Pa!" Lonnie complained.

"Your mother and little brother need a man to look after them while I'm away," Owen said. "That's your job."

The three-year-old boy was unimpressed with this gift of responsibility, but he was old enough to know by his pa's voice that he would not be going to Reunion.

Elizabeth made out a list of things she needed for the house. "Leave this at De Witt's store first thing," she said, "or you'll forget it." She did not look at him, but busied herself with small things as they talked.

Owen was faintly puzzled. Elizabeth had seemed nervous all morning, which wasn't like her. After he got the team hitched, he brought the wagon around to the back door and called, "Is there anything else you want?"

Elizabeth came out to the wagon, and now he knew that something was bothering her. "Owen," she said carefully, "if Ben McKeever tries to talk to you..."

He did not laugh. When he had been deputy marshal, it had too often been his duty to inform women like Elizabeth that their husbands were dead; had died on some lonely hilltop, or on some crowded street, or in a saloon, in a brush with some kill-crazy outlaw. There was a cause, always. Owen had believed in it, and more than likely the dead man had believed in it, but he never could explain to the widow just what the cause was or why it was more important than her husband's life.

"Don't worry," Owen said gently. "Ben McKeever can't talk me into anything."

It was well past noon when Owen tied up in the alley behind Main Street. Reunion was crowded that Saturday, as it was every Saturday. This was

the day for farmers and their families to come out of the hills and enjoy the brief excitement of town life. A few blanket Indians moved blandly through the milling people, picking at gawdy bolts of material in the stores. Cow hands over from the old Cherokee Strip were making their rowdy rounds of the blind pigs.

Owen had already dropped his plow off at the blacksmith's, and now he walked leisurely along the packed-clay sidewalk of Main Street, nodding and speaking to old friends and acquaintances, gazing with vague interest at the displays in store windows. When he came to Al De Witt's Boomer Mercantile, he went in and waved Elizabeth's list at the storekeeper.

"Will you get these things together for me, Al? I'll be around to pick them up in an hour or so."

De Witt, a frail, fluttery man with a glistening bald head, broke away from two Osage squaws and moved up the counter to Owen.

"How are you, Owen?" the little man said, glancing toward the door.

Owen's eyebrows lifted a fraction of an inch. De Witt looked even more nervous and fluttery than usual, and now the storekeeper took a handkerchief and carefully mopped his face and the back of his neck.

"What's the matter, Al?"

"Well..." The storekeeper swallowed. "You see, Owen, it's..." Finally he took the list from Owen and glanced at it. "I'm sorry, Owen, but I'm afraid I can't fill this order for you."

"Why not?"

"You see, Owen..." He glanced again toward the door. "That is, I don't think I've got all the things on hand. Maybe one of the other places could fill it for you."

"But this is the only place that carries my account, Al. You know that. Look," he said with a heartiness that he didn't feel, "you go on and fill it the best you can, and Elizabeth will understand."

De Witt would not look at Owen. He kept glancing nervously at the door. "I'm afraid I can't do it." He shook his head. "I just can't."

Owen's curiosity was becoming a slow, warm anger. He scowled down on the small storekeeper and said coolly, You mean you won't, Al. What's the matter? Isn't my credit any good these days?"

De Witt stared down at his hands and drummed his fingers on the counter. "I guess that's about the size of it, Owen."

Owen came erect suddenly, as though he had been slapped. Never in his life had he been turned down for credit, and never had he failed to pay his bills every quarter. That De Witt was now cutting off his credit struck him as a personal insult. In anger he turned on his heel and started toward the door, and only then did it occur to him that this was Ben McKeever's doing.

He stopped near the door, smiling thinly. It never paid to underestimate McKeever; the man had his hand in everything, and no doubt Al De Witt was in debt to him himself. Owen walked slowly back to the counter and laid down the list.

"I think I understand, Al. Go ahead and fill it, and I'll pay cash when I pick it up."

The storekeeper stared in grateful surprise, but all he said was "Sure, Owen. That'll be fine."

Outside, Owen paused in front of De Witt's, making a visible effort to keep his anger under control. So McKeever had put the pressure on De Witt, and De Witt was made to put the pressure on Owen. Stay calm, Owen told himself, and think this thing out. Don't go off half cocked and do something you'll be sorry for later.

McKeever's running a bluff, he told himself, wanting to believe it. But Ben is a sensible man and his customers are my friends. He wouldn't risk turning those people against him; he'll call off the bluff when he sees I won't be brought to heel.

That seemed to make sense. A smart man knew where to stop a bluff, and no one had accused Ben McKeever of being stupid. As Owen thought about it, he was almost convinced that Ben was merely testing him. To

prove to himself that he was right, he turned abruptly and started walking south on Main Street, toward McKeever's bank.

McKeever had his desk on the north side of the bank, behind a stained-oak railing, and the fat man looked up, smiling, when Owen came through the front door.

"Hello, Toller. Looks like quite a crowd in town to day."

"Hello, Ben." Owen was glad that he had his voice and anger completely under control. He even smiled as he approached the banker's desk.

"Anything I can do for you, Owen?" Toller shook his head. "I guess not, Ben." He walked up to the teller's cage. He could feel the banker's eyes on his back as he made the withdrawal. Ben knows to the penny how much I've got, he thought. Less than four hundred dollars.

It wasn't much, Owen decided, but it might be enough to outlast the banker's bluff. McKeever looked faintly disappointed when Owen nodded pleasantly on his way out. He knows he's lost, Owen thought. He's just wondering how he can back down gracefully.

But in the back of his mind he knew that McKeever held a strong hand if he wanted to play it out. Owen worried this knowledge for a moment, then decided there was nothing he could do about it but wait.

There were several things to be attended to – bolts and nails to be bought at Coulter's hardware, a horse collar at the saddlery, and finally a sack of gum-drop orange slices and peppermint sticks for Lonnie and Giles. He took his load back to De Witt's to be picked up later with Elizabeth's order.

It was two o'clock by the fancy timepiece in Emmitt's Jewelry Store, and Owen knew that he ought to be starting back for the farm if he wanted to get home before dark. Still, there was something else to be done.

Owen seldom came to Reunion without stopping at the courthouse to visit with his old friend Arch Deland. If a man wanted to get the news as it actually was, without distortion or fanciful coloring, Arch Deland was the person to go to. If Arch ever had an imagination, it had withered and died long ago; he was one of the few old-timers left in the state who still dared

call a spade a spade, politics be damned. Which, Owen thought, is one good reason why he'll never climb higher than a deputy for Will Cushman.

Owen climbed the stone steps to the red-brick building that was the courthouse, then made his way down to the sandstone-floored basement where the sheriff's office was. The only man in the room was Will Cushman. "Hello, Sheriff," Owen said mildly. Will looked up from some paperwork, startled at first. Then his face broke into a wide smile. "Why, hello, Toller. Glad to see you. Pull up a chair." Just a little too glad to see me, Owen thought quietly. Cushman was a smooth-faced, youngish-looking man in his late thirties, well set up, but soft. Damn if he doesn't look more like a gambler than a sheriff, Owen thought, observing Will's spotless white shirt and pearl-gray cravat, his blue serge suit and polished shoes.

Owen said, "No, thanks, Will. I was just looking for Arch Deland." He wondered vaguely how far McKeever's hand reached into the sheriff's office.

"Oh," the sheriff said, as though he were disappointed. "I'm not sure where Arch is. You might find him over by the Sutherland feed store. Farm wagons were blocking the street and I sent him over."

"Thanks," Owen nodded. "I'll have a look."

He found Deland coming out of the Red Dot Cafe, beside the feed store. He must be close to sixty, Owen thought in faint surprise. That's funny; I've never thought of Arch as an old man before.

But he was an old man—gray and grizzled, tough as jerked beef, dangerous and experienced. But old. He wore faded waist overalls, knee-high boots, and a patched hickory shirt. An old-style converted Colt's Frontier, completely without glamour, hung in its battered holster on his right thigh. Now Arch Deland came toward Owen with a lean, outstretched hand.

"By God," he said, "all the sodbusters come to town."

They shook hands warmly, exchanged the usual words of greeting. In his mind, Owen recalled those days, not so long ago, when he and Arch had

worked together out of Fort Smith as deputy U.S. marshals. Oklahoma had been Indian territory then, and statehood no more than a dream.

They talked jokingly of the Toller farm and about the crops. And Owen thought back to other days, harsh and brutal, of mass hangings on the courthouse square at Fort Smith, of man hunts and sudden violence. All that was over, they said. Statehood was here. The Jameses and the Doolins had made their infamous history, and all the violence, so they said, was over. As though a vote of Congress would make any difference in the minds of men like Ike and Cal Brunner.

They talked of Elizabeth and the kids. And Owen thought back to a certain day in the Choctaw Nation. He had lain in the snow on that bitter winter day, and the snow was red and his legs were paralyzed with buckshot. And Arch Deland had said, "Don't worry, kid, I'll get you back to Smith all right." And he did; a nameless outlaw following behind, face down across a pack horse.

Now, as Owen looked at Arch Deland, it was strange that he should think, How much do they want of a man? Arch has done enough! But he guessed that being a lawman was all Arch knew.

At last the talk got around to Owen. "Did you talk to Cushman?" Arch asked.

"Just to ask where I could find you."

"He didn't mention the Brunner gang?" Owen frowned.

"Why should he have mentioned the Brunners to me?"

Deland shrugged. "It was just a guess. There's a lot of pressure on Cushman to clean the Brunners out of the hills, but I guess Will hasn't got the guts it takes for that kind of business."

"I don't see that it would take a special kind of guts," Owen said. "Will doesn't have to go after the gang himself; he could send his deputies after them."

Deland laughed. "You haven't been to town lately, have you? Will tried that once, and the Brunners whipped them seven ways from Sunday. What

deputies didn't get shot up, they quit. All Cushman has to do is say Brunner and he's got a complete turnover in the sheriff's office."

"You haven't quit," Owen pointed out. Deland laughed again.

"Maybe I would if Will sent me into the hills. But he won't. At my age he figures all I'm good for is keeping the streets clear of wagons on Saturdays. And maybe he's right."

"I still don't understand why it should be so tough to clean out a gang of trigger-happy hill boys," Owen said. "Why doesn't Will get up a citizen posse and go after them? A hundred men, if he has to. The Brunners couldn't fight an action like that."

Deland smiled thinly. "A good idea, but it won't work. First, Will would be expected to go along with a citizen posse, and that he won't do. And even if he would, it wouldn't work, because the Brunners would scatter the gang from hell to breakfast all over Oklahoma and Arkansas. Those boys may be book-ignorant, but they're as hill-smart as they come." He shook his head. "A posse wouldn't nave a chance."

Owen asked the question, although he already knew the answer. "Then who would have a chance?"

"One or two good men," Deland said mildly, "dead shots and as hill-smart as the Brunners. They'd have to go in and take the two brothers, and then the gang would fall apart. By the way, has Ben McKeever been out to talk to you?"

In one way or another Arch Deland knew almost everything that happened in this country north of the Canadian, and Owen shouldn't have been surprised. But he was. "What makes you ask that?"

Deland grinned. "Well, Ben owns a lot of timber up in those hills. He'd sure hate for anything to happen that might spoil his chances of getting a railroad through here."

Owen shook his head. "How could the Brunners hold up a thing as big as a railroad?"

"By scaring the pants off the advance surveyors for the company. And they've already done a pretty good job of that. Those boys have to send reports back to New York, and from those reports the big boys with the money decide where the track goes."

Slowly the doubts began working in Owen's mind. Maybe McKeever wasn't bluffing, after all. It was a discomforting thought, but even if it was true, it would not affect his promise to Elizabeth. Of that he was sure.

As if reading his thoughts, Deland said, "Ben can make it tough on you, Owen."

Toller nodded. "He's already started." The deputy did not seem surprised. He grinned quietly, and then punched Owen lightly on the shoulder. "Don't let it worry you; you've got plenty of friends in Reunion. You'll have to ride it out, for Elizabeth's sake." As though embarrassed by this slight show of affection, Deland turned and gazed at the wagons and animals in the street. "There's a chance," he said, "that Ben won't be the only one to apply pressure. People are getting worked up about the Brunners; they want something done." He shot one quick glance at Owen's face. "Don't let them sway you. You've got a wife and family to think about." With an abrupt nod, the old deputy walked away.

It was long after dark when Owen got back to the farm with the supplies. As he unhitched and stripped the team, Elizabeth came to the barn with a lighted lantern. He saw the worry in her eyes and said, "Sorry I'm late. I got to talking with Arch Deland and forgot the time."

"Did you see McKeever while you were in town?"

"Why, yes," Owen said with forced heartiness. "As a matter of fact, I did." He put his lean, hard arms about his wife and held her against him. "If you're thinking of the Brunners," he said, "just forget it. Ben didn't even mention them."

Chapter Three

The tall wooded hills of the old Cherokee Nation stood silent and green in the early morning. The rugged peaks seemed to stretch and expand, growing wilder and more formidable in the brilliant clean light of the new day. Slowly the sound of hoofs faded in and overrode the silence of the hills, and from the south a rider appeared flogging a barrel-chested little bay over an old Indian trace, pounding relentlessly toward the higher ground.

The rider's name was Dunc Lester, and he had come a long way. He had been as far south as the Canadian, had glimpsed the Arkansas border on the east, had spread the word as far north as the Verdigris. A lanky, big-boned boy in his late teens, he wore the clothing of the hill country: big overalls, flannel shirt, and heavy, thick-soled shoes. An ancient Colt's .44, converted to use modern brass-cased ammunition, was strapped around his waist. A twelve-gauge shotgun was slung in a makeshift boot by his left knee.

Indian-like, Dunc rode with blithe disregard for his mount, putting the lathered animal up the hard incline at full gallop. Suddenly, from the great emptiness of the hills, a rifle barked sharply. The slug screamed over Dunc's head and he hauled hard on the reins, bringing the bay to a rearing stop. Quickly he cupped one hand to his mouth and sounded the mournful, sobbing bark of a coyote. Then he kicked the faltering bay and moved on, carefully.

Far above Dunc a man appeared on a limestone outcropping near the crest of the hill. He cradled a repeating Winchester in the crook of his arm and grinned as the rider came toward him.

"Goddamn it, Gabe!" Dunc Lester cried. "What're you tryin' to do, kill me?"

Gabe Tanis, a dish-faced, round-shouldered man in his early forties, shrugged off the boy's anger. "You know what Ike said. Nobody gets through this pass without he gives the signal."

Dunc appeared disgusted. His family and the Tanises had farmed side by side almost as long as he could remember, and Gabe knew him like a brother. "Damn it, Gabe, have your eyes give out on you? Couldn't you see it was me?"

"Sure," Tanis said mildly.

"Then why," Dunc demanded, "did you try to burn the hair off my head with that rifle? You mad at me or somethin'?"

"Nope," Gabe drawled. "But you know when Ike or Cal says something..."

"All right!" Dunc groaned. A man who rode with the Brunners accepted the brothers' word as absolute law, and Dunc knew that he should have given the signal.

Gabe bit off a piece of twist tobacco and chewed thoughtfully. "You get over toward Talequah?" he asked finally.

Dunc began to cool off. He figured he might as well rest a minute and let the horse blow. "Not all the way," he said. "But I've been to a hell of a bunch of places. I don't reckon the Brunners've changed their minds about robbin' the freight company, have they?"

"They ain't said nothing about it if they have."

"Well," Dunc said, "I guess they know what they're doin'. Spring of the year seems like a bad time to get the gang together, though. Johnson grass will take the crops before the boys can get back to the fields."

Gabe shrugged. He didn't care much whether Johnson grass got the crops or not. He seemed to ponder something for a moment. "Did you go past the home place?" he asked finally.

"Came past there yesterday," Dunc said. "Everybody's fine. Your wife was down with the croup last week, but she's up now."

"Sarah Sue's tough," Gabe said with faint pride. "Always was. How many of the boys you expect will be in on the freight-company raid?"

"Plenty." Dunc decided that he was ready to travel again. Ike and Cal would be waiting to hear from him. He nodded to Gabe and kicked the bay

back on the trace. As he was pulling out, he called over his shoulder. "And try not to kill anybody, will you? In case somebody forgets the signal!"

There were two more outposts between Gabe's position and Ulster's Cave. Dunc was careful to stop each time and give the signal. Now he was moving into the wildest section of the hills, where there wasn't even an Indian trace to follow. This was a country of tall pine and spruce, of dangerous limestone overhangs and rocky peaks, of old deer trails that twisted crazily through the woods and led nowhere. In these woods a man could get lost before he knew what had happened; in this forest every tree looked like the next one, every hill had an identical twin. Horses became confused, and even Indians lost their way.

But Dunc Lester had lived most of his life in this hill country of eastern Oklahoma and he knew it well. His folks had moved here when it had been Cherokee country, and they hadn't asked the Cherokees about it, either. He had never learned to read, and he couldn't even sign his name, but he knew better than to let a deer trail throw him off in these hills.

Once his pa had taken him to Talequah, but Dunc couldn't say that he cared much for town life. He remembered vaguely that Talequah had been the capital of the old Cherokee Nation, and he had heard that over to the west somewhere there was a place called Tulsa, and south of that another place called Oklahoma City. He neither wanted nor expected ever to see those places. He had heard that a town called Reunion was the county seat for this part of the country, but about all he knew about Reunion was the bunch of county law dogs they'd chased out of the hills three weeks ago.

Thinking of that episode, Dunc grinned widely. Townspeople were soft. He guessed he'd never forget the way that bunch of deputies had stuck their tails between their legs and lit out for the bottomland. He guessed they wouldn't be bothered any more with the law dogs.

After giving the third and last signal, Dunc was almost within sight of Ulster's Cave. You had to get pretty close before you could see it at all, for it was more of a wide overhanging shelf than a cave. Sort of like one big room that you could drive a dozen or more wagons into, with a roof of

stone and three walls of red clay dirt. The way it was grown up in brush and scrub spruce, it was just about impossible to see it at all.

The last sentry, a short, potbellied little man named Dove Wakeley, waved to him. "You have a good trip, Dunc?"

"Good enough, I guess," Dunc called. "Passed your home place yesterday. The folks are doin' fine."

Dove nodded and grinned, and Dunc rode on out of sight along the narrow hill trail. Now he could see the cave, and the big iron wash kettle simmering with venison stew near the entrance, and the half-dozen horses grazing along the steep slope. Four men drifted out of the cave's dark interior, exchanged greetings with Dunc, and received news of their families.

The few men at the cave were Brunner regulars. Most of them had got in trouble with lowland law – mostly over property rights with the Indians – and the cave was a handy place to hide out in. A good many of these men had lost the land they had settled when the Nation had been cut up into personal allotments. These were the bitter men, and it was no good explaining to them that the land had never been theirs legally; all they knew was that they had been robbed of land that they had cleared and worked and claimed as their own.

As Dunc swung down from the saddle, Ike Brunner and his younger brother, Cal, came out of the cave.

"How was it down south?" Ike asked.

"All right," Dunc said. "Abel Westrum cut his foot with an ax last week and can't ride. Bus Finnley is down with the slow fever. All the others'll be here this time tomorrow."

"Wes Longstreet got in yesterday, from the north," Cal Brunner said. He looked at his brother. "Maybe we better make out a list of the ones we can count on."

Dunc and the two brothers hunkered down by the cave's entrance. Ike took up a stick, smoothed a place on the ground, and scratched the names down as Dunc called them out.

Ike, the older of the two Brunners, was a tall, long-faced man in his late thirties. If he had ever smiled, Dunc Lester had not seen it. Dunc guessed that Ike Brunner was the smartest man he'd ever seen, and without Ike the gang would be nothing. Still, not many of the boys liked him. He was unfeeling, cold, and deadly.

Cal Brunner was several years younger than his brother. Where Ike was feared, Cal was liked. A brash, good-looking kid, Cal Brunner was as quick to laugh as he was to fight; he loved corn liquor and country dances and girls. But he took orders from his brother like everybody else.

To some, Dunc guessed, this would seem like a pretty strange situation: thirty to fifty fiercely independent hill boys taking orders from a man they didn't like. That was because outsiders could not understand what debts these people owed Ike Brunner. Dunc thought of Dove Wakeley. When Dove's woman was down with scarlet fever and seemed sure to die, Ike Brunner hauled a doctor all the way from Talequah, kicking and yelling blue murder. And Ike put his pistol to the doctor's head and told him by God if he let the woman die he'd blow his brains right through the roof.

Dove's woman got well. Some people said it was an act of God, but Wakeley figured Ike Brunner had had a hand in it too, and he had been one of the regulars ever since. And there was Gabe Tanis. Gabe's cabin and sheds had burned to the ground one night. Everything he owned went up in fire and smoke. Of course the neighbors pitched in and helped rebuild, but only Ike Brunner would have thought of bringing him a new team of work mules. Where the mules had come from Gabe didn't know, and he cared less; he just knew that he had the best team in the hills, thanks to Ike Brunner.

Dunc himself was deeply in debt to Ike. During the big dry-up two years ago, the home place hadn't grown enough to half feed the big Lester family. Ike had brought shelled corn and flour to see them through the

winter and early spring. When Dunc heard later that the Brunners were in trouble with the lowland law, he was among the first to help out.

Ike was a tough one to figure, Dunc decided. A lot of hill families would have gone without food during that dry-up if it hadn't been for the Brunner wagon-train raids. A lot of the womenfolks would still be wearing feed-sack dresses if it weren't for the bolt goods that Ike and Cal took off the mule skinnners. And without Brunner money gifts, many of the hill farms would have been lost.

It was a funny thing. How could a man be so open-handed and big-hearted one day and turn killer the next?

Ponderously, Dunc moved the thought around in his mind. Not that it bothered him particularly. The raid on the freight company would bring in all kinds of things that the hill families needed: food, clothing, maybe even some shoes. Once there had been a wagon load of illegal whisky, and again a shipment of farm implements. Through some curious mental process Dunc had stopped thinking of these raids as stealing. Ike claimed that they were doing the fair thing, taking from the rich and giving to the poor. And Ike was always right.

Now Ike Brunner was staring thoughtfully at the ground, studying the list that he had scratched down in the dirt.

"Fifteen from the south," he said. "Ten at least from the north. That ought to give us thirty men to hit the freight depot with."

"Hell, we could take Reunion with that many men!" Cal Brunner said.

Ike fixed his cool gray eyes on his brother. "Reunion might be easier to take than that depot. Don't think they haven't heard of us down there, and don't think they won't have the place guarded."

Then Ike turned his expressionless gaze on Dunc. "You better fill up on grub and get some rest," he said. "Tomorrow you won't get much of either."

The two brothers watched Dunc strip the bay and put the animal out to graze. Then they stood up and walked casually away from the cave. Cal

shook his head, grinning. "I've got to hand it to you, Ike. The Doolins would still be operating if they had a gang like ours."

"The Doolins were stupid," Ike said flatly. "They tried to hold their gang together by dividing equally. These farmers wouldn't know an equal division if they got one; it would just make them hungry for more."

Cal laughed. "So you don't give them anything!"

"Sure I give them something," Ike said, looking hurt. "A bolt of cloth, some pots and pans, a plow. Maybe a bottle of whisky now and then. More important, I nurse their babies, get doctors for their wives, steal work mules for their farms. Those are the things that make them loyal to me, not money."

Well away from the cave, they passed under a tall pine, and Cal's face was suddenly serious. "The trick, is to keep them loyal, Ike. I get closer to the men than you do, I get to know what they're thinkin'. They don't like the way you've been usin' your pistol."

Ike's long face grew hard. "Who said it?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe nobody; but they're thinkin' it."

"You're gettin' to be an old woman, Cal. Just let me do the thinkin'."

Cal shrugged. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

He started to walk back toward the cave, but Ike called to him. "Just a minute, Cal. Where did you go last night?"

"Why, nowhere, Ike. I was right there at the cave."

"That's a lie," Ike said coldly. "I saw you get up and sneak out, and I heard your horse beat tracks to the south. Couldn't be you was sniffin' around Mort Stringer's girl again, could it?"

Cal was visibly shaken by his brother's anger. He started backing off as Ike came toward him, then Ike's hand shot out and grabbed his young brother's arm in a grip of iron. "I warned you to stay away from that girl," Ike said between his teeth. "You know how Mort Stringer feels about his daughter."

They stood there for one long moment, Cal's face pale, his brother's face red with anger. Gradually Ike released his hold on his brother's arm. "I've made too many plans, Cal," he said tightly, "to have them kicked over by the likes of you. These hill people may not like me, but they respect me. And that's the way I'm goin' to keep it. So you fool around with somebody else's girl, but not Mort Stringer's. Understand?"

"Sure, Ike!" Cal nodded eagerly. "I understand!"

"You'd better. And just in case you ever forget this talk... don't say I didn't warn you."

After the younger brother had beaten a quick retreat back to the cave, Ike Brunner hunkered down beneath the pine, scowling. He didn't like jumping on Cal, but the young hothead stood to ruin every plan he had made. Mort Stringer was a powerful man in these hills, a preacher of sorts who officiated at weddings and funerals. Ike had wisely stayed away from the man, had made every effort not to antagonize him, for he knew what power these backwoods preachers held over the people.

Well, he thought hopefully, maybe I've knocked some sense into Cal's head before it's too late.

Early the next morning the Brunner followers began gathering at Ulster's Cave. They were grim men, many of them, old with work and hopeless in this dawn of a new age that they could not understand. They came heavy with guns: shotguns and rifles and pistols, and here and there a muzzle-loading musket. They came with outraged stories of government men breaking up their stills, and of the court actions being taken against them by the Indians. They were angry men when they arrived at Ulster's Cave, and Ike Brunner was pleased.

Cal Brunner moved among them and came back to his brother, grinning. "They sure look loaded for bear!"

"That's the way I want them," Ike said. Then he walked out and addressed the men in front of the cave.

"Men," he said, "I know what kind of a raw deal you've been gettin'. Us hillfolks was peace-lovin' people before outsiders began comin' in and

started to ruin things. Now the Indians are gettin' uppity, thinkin' they're as good as white people. And do you know who's to blame for all your trouble? I'll tell you who's to blame. It's these outsiders from the East that claim we've got no right to our land. They say they're goin' to sell our land and give the money to the Indians. But that ain't what they've got in mind. What they want to do is turn this land over to the big-money boys back East, so's they can cut down all our timber. Then they'll want to build roads—maybe even railroads—here in the hills, so's they can take our timber out. I tell you, men, what the government's tryin' to do is give us a good skinnin' just so the rich bastards back East can get richer than they already are!”

The men looked at each other and nodded. Ike was right.

“The good Lord knows I've tried to help you,” Ike went on. “But it's come to the point where we all have to pitch in and fight together. If there's anybody here that don't want to fight, I want to hear from him now.”

For a moment there was silence. Then Wes Longstreet, a gangly hothead from Arkansas, spoke for all of them. “We're with you, Ike. We know you're right.”

“All right,” Ike said. “I just wanted to be sure. Now I've got in mind the biggest operation we ever tried. I've got it all planned and, there won't be any slip-ups. How many of you know where Fort Bellefront is?”

Bellefront had once been a fort and later a Cherokee mission. Now it was a freight depot on the stage road linking the Katy railroad, in the east, to the Santa Fe, in the central part of the state. Bellefront was the place where rail freight was brought in on heavy Studebaker wagons to be transferred for shipment to other parts of the state not yet serviced by the steel tracks. All the hill people knew where Bellefront was and what it was. Every man raised his hand to Ike's question.

“Well,” Ike continued, “Bellefront's our target. By hittin' that depot we'll be hittin' the Easterners where it hurts, in their profits. This will be the biggest haul we've ever made; there'll be bolt goods and canned goods and farm

tools. Whisky and guns and ammunition. All the things you and your families need are there at the depot waitin' for us to haul it off."

The men grinned slowly, thoughtfully. "But I want to warn you," Ike said again. "There'll be a fight." When no one spoke up, Ike turned to his brother. "All right. We might as well get started."

Ike and Cal Brunner, plus thirty-one followers, rode away from Ulster's Gave shortly before noon. They headed north.

Thirty-three men in all, Ike was thinking. Plenty of manpower for the job ahead. There'd be nothing left but ashes when they got through with that depot. Then Ike turned his thoughts to something else, and for an instant his stonelike face was touched with an expression that few men had ever seen. He was smiling.

He was not thinking of all that freight and material, or the loose money that might be lying about at the depot. He was thinking of the freight-company safe, and of the riches that were there for the taking. He thought of the four sticks of dynamite that he had wrapped separately and carefully in the shock-absorbing bulk of four blankets; the roll now lashed securely behind his saddle. By sunup I'll be a rich man! Ike Brunner thought to himself. Maybe I'll be the richest man in Oklahoma!

The Brunner gang rode most of the night through that wild, heavily wooded hill country, and as the first gray streaks of dawn were appearing in the east Cal rode back from his point position to report to his brother.

"Looks like we're here," the younger Brunner said, grinning wearily.

"How does it look?" Ike asked.

"Like a graveyard. They'll never know what hit them."

Ike halted the main body and went forward with Cal and Wes Longstreet to see for himself. Cal was right. The sprawling warehouse, flanked on three sides by loading platforms, showed no signs of life. The freight office, a squat log building, was set apart from the warehouse; Ike noted it briefly and was satisfied. The stables were on the other side of the freight office, and in the faint light Ike could see a few horses and the vague shapes of

two old Concords and a mud wagon. Several big Studebakers were lined up beside the main stable, but those were ignored. Not even an eight-team hitch could pull those heavy freighters through that roadless hill country to which they had to return. Most of the horses, Ike noted, were in a pole corral by the wagons.

Ike went back to the main body and called the men around him. "It looks even easier than I figured," he said confidently. "The guards will be in the warehouse. They may be asleep, but they'll wake up soon enough when they hear us coming. But you've got to forget the warehouse at first and take care of the horses. Dunc," he said to Dunc Lester, "you take about ten men and get those horses away from the trouble; the rest of us will stand off the warehouse until you're through. It shouldn't take long. But those horses are important; they have to be used as pack animals if we're to haul anything back to the cave. Are you ready?"

Heads nodded silently. Ike and Cal reined about, and this time the gang followed.

The freight-company guards never knew what hit them— not until it was too late. The band of horsemen rode out of the dark hills yelling and hollering like crazy men, firing their rifles and shotguns wildly in the direction of the warehouse. Ike and Cal directed the fire on that big shed while Dunc Lester and his men rounded up the heavy draft horses and herded them out of the way.

"All right!" Ike yelled. "Go to it!"

The guards began giving ground as the gang rushed the warehouse. Cal started to go with them, but his brother grabbed him roughly. "Come with me. We've got some important things to do."

Quickly he untied the clumsy bundle and took it down from behind his saddle. Cal stood puzzled, oblivious of the rattle of gunfire. "What are you doin', Ike?"

"Stop askin' questions and follow me!"

He knew the men would have their attention focused on that warehouse for several minutes. The sound of shooting was becoming sporadic now;

probably the guards had seen that they didn't stand a chance and were making a run for it. At a dead run, Ike headed for the log freight office, his younger brother right behind him. "Ike, where the hell are you goin'?" Ike didn't bother to answer. He reached the front porch of the office and stopped for a moment to get his breath. Very gently he placed the bundle of dynamite beside the door and drew his pistol. Cal reached the porch about three jumps behind his brother.

"Goddamn it, Ike, I don't see —"

"You will! Just stay here at the door and keep me covered. Don't let anybody come near this place. Not even one of the gang: If they do, kill them!"

Cal drew his pistol, ready to shoot the first person to come near the office. Ike's word was law.

Ike had already kicked the office door open and was inside. In the grayish light of dawn he saw that the room was much smaller than he had first guessed, and this puzzled him for a moment. Almost too late he realized that this front part of the cabin was the freight office, and the rear part was the living quarters for the company manager.

Quickly Ike opened a second door and saw that it led into a small parlor. On the far side of the room there was another door, and beneath the door a thin slice of orange lamplight gleamed. Ike Brunner snarled with the sound of an animal and kicked this third door open.

A man in long red underwear was just pulling on his pants when the door burst open. A woman in a white nightgown screamed as the man lunged for his pistol, which was hanging by its cartridge belt on the bedpost. Ike shot him immediately and the man slammed back against the wall. The woman tried to scream again, but she must have glimpsed the deadly thin smile that played along the corners of Ike Brunner's mouth, and no sound escaped her.

Cal Brunner burst excitedly into the small office as the second shot jarred the cabin. "Ike, where are you?"

He saw the open door and rushed in, pistol ready. Then he saw Ike coming out of the other room, and he also saw the white motionless shape of a woman lying on the floor, and the man staring glassily from the corner of the room.

"Ike, my God!"

"Forget it!" his brother said harshly. He ran from the room and out to the porch, Cal right behind him.

"Ike, what have you done?"

Ike gave his brother such a blinding look that Cal cringed back against the wall. "I said forget it. Watch this front door. I'll be through in a minute."

Unhurriedly Ike unwrapped the dynamite. Cal waited nervously outside as his brother attached the explosives to the hinges of the freight-company safe. They waited outside in a gully while the fuses burned down, and suddenly the windows of the cabin glowed like fire, part of the wall fell in, and the roof lifted crazily.

The shock of the explosion still rang in Cal's ears as Ike hurried back inside the cabin. He thought of that woman lying so still on the floor. That was more than he had bargained for.

Perhaps two minutes passed. Ike came out of the cabin again, this time carrying an opened steel chest. "Look at this, Cal! We're rich!"

Chapter Four

Judge Lochland came on Monday.

Unlike Ben McKeever, Lochland came down to the field where Owen was hoeing corn. Owen looked up in surprise, watching the white-haired, black-clad figure tramping solemnly down the grassy slope toward the creek. The County Judge was an old-timer in a young country; in 1880 he had been an official in David L. Payne's Boomer organization, advocating settlement of the unassigned lands in the Territory. Later he had supported the statehood lobby in Washington and had helped the Dawes Commission with the Indian land allotments.

Like McKeever, Judge Lochland had a vision, and his faith in the future of Oklahoma was unshakable. But, the judge's vision was not tainted with personal greed. Now, as he approached Owen, Lochland smiled gently, his pale old eyes alive and sparkling.

"That's fine-looking corn," he said mildly, taking Owen's hand.

"It's fine land," Owen said. "And the rains were on time. What brings you so far from the courthouse, Judge?"

Lochland's smile widened, but the expression was strangely without humor. "I think you can guess, Owen."

Toller's eyes narrowed slightly. "The Brunner gang?"

The judge nodded. "But before you say no, will you listen to what I've got to say?"

Owen felt the muscles of his face go taut. As man and judge, Beuford Lochland commanded his admiration. Owen respected the man's fairness and honesty, and he knew that turning the judge down would be difficult. Lochland would not come at him with threats, as McKeever had done. He would come with truth, as straight as a lance and as hard to turn.

But Owen merely nodded pleasantly toward the creek bank. "I guess that will be as good a place as any to talk. Under the trees."

The two men hunkered down in the new grass beneath the twisted branches of a great live oak. Lochland said, "I hear Ben McKeever came to see you the other day."

Owen glanced at him, then nodded.

"This is a peculiar situation," the judge said. "After all these years, Ben and I find ourselves on the same side of the fence. But our reasons are different."

"And your methods of persuasion."

Lochland laughed. "Ben has started putting the pressure on you, has he? In some ways our banker is a fool, I'm afraid. Sure, he can make it plenty tough on you if he goes at it hard enough, but he ought to know there are some men who won't buckle under that kind of pressure."

"What kind of pressure did you have in mind, Judge?"

Lochland did not laugh this time. "You haven't heard about Fort Bellefront, have you? The Brunner gang hit it . night before last, burned it to the ground, got off with a fortune in freight and express goods, not to mention seven thousand dollars from the company safe. Owen, were you acquainted with Frank Ransom, the freight-company manager?"

Frowning, Owen said, "Sure. I used to stop at Belle-front when I was working for the government."

"And Frank's wife?"

"Edith Ransom? Arch Deland used to claim she was the best flapjack cook in the territory." He smiled faintly, remembering.

Judge Lochland paused a moment, then looked at Owen. "They're dead," he said bluntly. "Murdered. The Brunners killed them."

Owen sat for a moment in stunned silence. Until this moment the Brunners had not seemed quite real to him. In these great square counties, almost as large as states back East, he had imagined himself far removed from that wild hill country and the Brunners. Judge Lochland's coming had changed all that, and it made him angry and uncomfortable, knowing that he could do nothing. He plucked a handful of tender grass and flung it at the wind.

"I'm sorry about Frank and Edith. They were a fine pair."

"The Ransoms won't be the last," Lochland said quietly. "The Brunners are getting bolder, Owen. They're getting stronger all the time. They've got an iron-hard grip on the hills, they're poisoning the minds of the ignorant, they're making outlaws and killers out of poor farmers. Brazenly, they laugh at the law. They're making jokes of our puny efforts to stop them."

Suddenly Owen came to his feet, every muscle tense. "I've heard all that, Judge. I've seen others like the Brunners and I know what they are. But why do you come to me?"

Lochland squared his shoulders in a hint of a shrug. "For help, Owen."

"I can't help." He shook his head angrily. "I told Ben I couldn't, and now I'm telling you. It's not my job; I'm just a farmer, like a hundred other men in this county."

"I was hoping you'd see it as more than just a job," Lochland went on in his quiet voice. "I was hoping you'd see it as a duty... an honor."

"An honor?" Owen turned abruptly. "When I was young, maybe that's what I thought, but now I figure I've done my part, Judge. And you mention duty. I can't see it's my duty to go up in those hills and get my fool head shot off by a bunch of men I've never even seen. I have a wife and two children; my duty is to them, Judge. My duty is to stay right on this farm and look after my family. The people of this county elected Will Cushman to take care of outlaws like the Brunner boys; so Will is the man with the duty." He dropped his hands to his sides. "I guess that's all there is to say."

"I could appoint you special deputy, Owen. You wouldn't have to take orders from Cushman."

Owen smiled, wearily but not angrily. "That isn't it."

"Yes... I know. And I think I know how you feel about Elizabeth and the children. But what about Frank and Edith Ransom, and the others who are dead or penniless because of the Brunners? Don't you feel anything for them?"

Owen repeated stubbornly, "It's not my job."

"But you're the only one who can do it, Owen. I know it's a bitter thing. I know it's difficult to understand why you should be asked to risk your life for hundreds of people who are willing to do nothing. But that's the way it's always been. A few men with strength and courage have been willing to step into the breach at the crucial moment, though it was seldom their job. Remember the New England farmers at Lexington and Concord? The gallant Texans at the Alamo? Were those men working at their jobs, Owen, or was it something else... something that only a few of the strong can understand?"

"I'm sorry, Judge, but you're wasting your time."

Judge Lochland sighed, then smiled with surprising gentleness. "Well, you can't blame a man for trying." He pushed himself to his feet and took Owen's hand again. "Please give my regards to Elizabeth and the children."

"I will, Judge. And watch yourself on the grade back to Reunion; it gets pretty steep."

Owen watched the erect, white-haired figure stride proudly across the field toward his buggy. He could not be angry with a man like that.

Still, an anger was in him as he plodded back to the field and took up his hoe again. He slashed recklessly at the tough young weeds, striking the reddish earth with the sharp blade as though it were his enemy. Farmers at Lexington and Concord! Texans at the Alamo! The Judge must be slipping off the track in his old age. What did Owen Toller have to do with Texans, or the American Revolution?

But the judge's words kept coming back to him. "A few men with strength and courage... willing to step into the breach." There was grim poetry in the thought, a kind of terrible truth in the meaning.

But Owen Toller had no wish to make history. He was no longer young, and the thought of death held a terror more real than it once had done. He was happy on the farm with Elizabeth and the children; Reunion would have to look elsewhere for their man with strength and courage.

When Owen came in that night, Elizabeth asked, "Didn't I see a buggy down by the cornfield this afternoon?"

Owen smiled, splashing water at the kitchen washstand. "You don't miss much, do you?" He dried his face, took his wife in his arms, and kissed her gently. "It was Judge Lochland. We were just talking."

Elizabeth's eyes widened, pleased that a man of Judge Lochland's stature should come all the way to Lazy Creek to talk to her husband. "Why, Owen, I didn't know that you and the judge..." And then the look of pleasure vanished. "Owen, what did he want?"

"We just talked, that's all."

"About the Brunners?"

He had never been able to fool her, and he knew that it was useless to try. "You can read me like one of those books you used to teach from." He managed a laugh, but the sound was forced. "All right," he said soberly, "we did talk about the Brunners. The gang raided Fort Bellefront and killed the freight manager and his wife. They were friends of mine."

"Oh." It was a small sound. "I'm sorry, Owen."

He shrugged, but the gesture did not erase the grim lines around his mouth. "It's one of the risks of trying to do business in those hills. I used to tell them they'd better move that depot to a settlement."

He made a stout effort to be casual, but Elizabeth could see that his mind could not dismiss the thought so easily. He turned abruptly, almost in anger, and went into the parlor. "Where's Lonnie?" he called after a moment.

"In the yard. I'll call him in a minute." Elizabeth came into the small, crowded room and stood beside her husband. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked quietly.

"There's nothing to talk about. The Brunners raided Bellefront and murdered Frank and Edith Ransom."

"Did Judge Lochland want you to do something?"

"He wanted to make me a special deputy to go after the Brunners, but I told him the same thing I told McKeever."

"You did right!" she said happily, hugging her arms about his huge shoulders. "They have no right to ask favors of you. If they had made you sheriff, perhaps it would have been different; but now..."

"Yes," Owen said tonelessly. "That's what I told Judge Lochland."

The coldness of his voice shocked her. She dropped her arms and stared at her husband's face. "Owen, don't you think you did the right thing?"

"Yes. Of course I do."

But Elizabeth wasn't sure. "There are hundreds of men in this county," she said quickly, to drive her point home. "Men without families and no farms to look after. Young men. Let them go after the Brunners, if they're so eager to break up the gang! Let Will Cushman do it. Let the freight company do it. They have detectives who get paid to do things like that."

Owen's face softened. His faint smile was that of a man who had loved his wife for a long time and knew her well. "You're absolutely right. Except that Will Cushman won't get out of Reunion. And freight-company detectives know nothing of those hills." When he saw the stricken look on her face, he added quickly, "I was only joking."

When Saturday came around again, Elizabeth and the children went to Reunion with Owen. They reached town shortly before noon, and Owen let Elizabeth and the children out on Main Street before tying up in the alley. "Here," he said, handing her twelve dollars. "You'd better take this to do your shopping."

Elizabeth frowned slightly. "But we have our account at De Witt's, don't we?"

"I closed it last Saturday," Owen said blandly. "I must have forgotten to tell you."

His wife asked no questions when she took the money, but he knew she was guessing what had happened. It won't last long, Owen thought. When the situation gets desperate enough, somebody will have to go after the

Brunners, and then it will be all over. He was glad that he had been firm with Judge Lochland.

Knowing that Elizabeth and the boys could easily spend hours shopping at De Witt's or one of the racket stores, Owen felt free to make small purchases for the farm himself. His business took him in and out of a half-dozen stores, buying staples, a roll of wire, a new whetstone, but not until he reached Boss Tappit's barbershop did he become aware of the tight-lipped stares that seemed to follow him.

Settling into the big leather-covered chair, anticipating the luxury of a professional shave, Owen felt the unusual silence in the room. "You boys look like you just buried your best friend," Owen said. "Is anything the matter?"

Talkative Boss Tappit said shortly, "Nope," and slapped a hot towel on Owen's face.

That was the last word spoken at normal volume in the crowded shop until Boss dusted him with a powder brush and said, "That'll be two bits."

Owen thought he could guess what was wrong, but he wanted to be sure. He searched the stores and street until he found Arch Deland.

The deputy grinned without humor when Owen put the question to him. "Sure, I can tell you what's wrong. This county wants the Brunners stopped, and Ben McKeever has convinced the people that you're the only man for the job." He shook his head. "People are funny animals. They've got to thinkin' you're responsible for the Ransoms' deaths because you didn't light out for the hills when McKeever told you to."

Owen couldn't believe it.. "They blame me?"

"I told you people are funny animals. That's the way McKeever's got them to thinkin'. They figure it's just pure stubbornness on your part that the Brunner boys are still free."

"Stubbornness! How many of them ever tried to bring in a man like Ike Brunner? How many of them ever went after a killer on his own ground?"

"I know," the old deputy said soothingly. "But they don't."

"If they think it's as easy as all that, why don't they go after the gang?"

Deland laughed quietly. "I guess they figure this is a job for a specialist. And you're the only one around."

"This is the damndest thing I ever heard of!" Owen said angrily. He took Deland's arm and pulled him around to the side of the feed store. "Now start at the beginning with this nonsense; I want to hear it all."

"You know the beginnin' as well as I do," Arch said, hunkering down with his back to the plank wall. "But maybe you don't know that Will Cushman took some deputies and a pair of freight-company detectives into the hills lookin' for the Brunner hideout."

"Will Cushman?"

"It surprised me, too, but he did it." Not that it did any good. They came back last night empty-handed, and Will wired Fort Smith that the gang must have scattered out in their direction."

Owen snorted. "That gang didn't scatter anywhere. They're right there in those hills."

Arch nodded. "And that's where they'll stay, too, I guess, if it's left up to Cushman or a few outsiders like those freight detectives to bring them in."

Owen paced a tight, angry circle. "What's Will going to do now?"

Deland shrugged. "You know Will. I guess he'll sit tight and wait for the Brunners to plan another raid... and maybe kill another couple like the Ransoms."

"What do you think ought to be done?" Owen demanded.

"I'm just a deputy and an old man." Deland smiled sadly. "I don't get paid to think."

Owen turned abruptly and glared down at his old friend. "Maybe that's what's wrong with this country. People are too busy worrying about their pay to do a job that needs to be done." Then he saw immediately that he had overstepped the mark. "I'm sorry, Arch. I didn't mean you."

The old deputy was not angry. "I know you didn't. You were talking about Owen Toller."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know, exactly, but I think this thing is beginning to eat at you. Oh, I don't mean the pressure that McKeever's puttin' on, or the looks people give you here in Reunion: But I think you're beginnin' to have doubts about yourself. You think of the Ransoms and wonder if you could have prevented it if you'd done what McKeever said. You're beginnin' to wonder if these people are right — these people that don't have the least idea what it's like goin' after a killer. I'm afraid you're beginnin' to wonder if you don't have a duty to go after the Brunners." Deland got slowly to his feet. "Don't let them confuse you, Owen," he said earnestly. "You have no duty here. There's not a man in this county that's done as much for it as you have. These people..." He raked cold eyes over the faces of passers-by. "They always want somebody else to do the dirty work for them. Well, I figure you've done enough of their dirty work, and so have I." Owen was silent.

"There's just one more thing," Deland added after a pause. "The man that goes into those hills meanin' business stands a mighty good chance of not comin' out alive. Think about that, Owen, before you let this thing eat too much at you. A write-up in the Reunion Reflex and a good attendance at the funeral would be mighty poor comforts for Elizabeth and the children."

That afternoon, riding back into the darkening hills toward the farm, Owen thought over the things that Deland had said. He had known all along, of course, that the Brunners were none of his business, but it had been good to hear Deland say it. He was easier in his mind, knowing that he did not stand alone in his beliefs.

Engrossed in his thoughts, Owen did not notice that Elizabeth was unusually quiet. They crossed the south bend of Lazy Creek and Owen let the horses rest for a moment before starting the hard pull into the foothills. Turning his head, he could see the rocky, dark green meadows below, and the orange sun moving sluggishly toward the western horizon.

"We'll just about make it by dark," he said absently, noticing that the children were asleep in the bed of the wagon. Then he turned to his wife, and saw that she had not heard him. Deep in her own thoughts, Elizabeth had allowed her face to fall into a studied, thoughtful frown.

"A penny for those thoughts." Owen smiled at her.

She looked up, startled. "Oh," she said. "I'm afraid I was woolgathering."

"What kind of wool?"

Her frown deepened as she shook her head slowly. "I don't know. Owen, I had the strangest feeling all the time we were in Reunion today. I can't explain it; it's not the kind of thing that can be put into words very well, but... well, I think it was a feeling that people were avoiding me."

Owen scowled. "What do you mean?"

"I told you, I can't explain it. It's nothing anyone said. Perhaps it was in the way they looked at me – women I've known since childhood. Or the way conversation seemed to lag when I came upon a group of women in the stores. I just don't know, but something's wrong."

"Well," he said quickly, "it'll straighten itself out, whatever it is." He cracked the lines over the team and the wagon moved slowly over the deep-rutted road.

Owen was surprised and angered that Elizabeth should become involved in McKeever's efforts to bring him to heel. If they snub my wife, he thought furiously, they're going to have Owen Toller to contend with. I don't care what they think about me, but when they bring Elizabeth into it...

"Now who's woolgathering?" Elizabeth asked.

Owen looked at her and made himself grin. "Not me. I was just admiring the scenery."

Chapter Five

Dunc Lester was not as pleased with himself as he might have been. Oh, they had got off with a lot of plunder in the Bellefront raid; he'd had Gabe Tanis take his share back to his folks. But he couldn't get over the idea that the price had been too high.

The raid was more than a week old and most of the boys had scattered all over the hills. The wild, ragged peaks that surrounded Ulster's Cave were bleak and silent, and Dunc wished that he could have gone back with the others. This time of year his pa needed him to help work the fields, but here he was stuck in this wilderness, because this was the way Ike Brunner wanted it.

Sometimes he got sick of letting Ike boss him around, but he guessed this fact hadn't really occurred to him until after Bellefront. This was the first time one of the gang had been killed in one of these forays. For Dunc, it had been sort of a lark until now. But not any more. Not after he'd seen a load of buckshot almost take Dove Wakeley's head off his shoulders.

Dunc's stomach shrank toward his throat when he thought about it. Dove Wakeley, a simple, good-natured galoot. Dunc had been right beside him when that warehouse guard opened up on them with a twelve-gauge shotgun. There had been a dull thump, like an October pumpkin splitting on a sharp rock. Dove had run maybe a dozen steps, screaming, with no face at all and not much of anything above the shoulders. Dunc Lester would be just as happy if he never saw another sight like that.

Now, sitting on the ridge near the first outpost, Dunc leaned on his shotgun and wondered what Dove's woman would do now that Dove was dead. How long was that Bellefront plunder going to last without a husband?

Dunc got tired sitting in one place, and he got up to stretch his legs, walking around in a tight little circle. He looked down at the wooded crags below and shook his head. That dude sheriff in Reunion could scour this country till doomsday and never find the Brunner hideout. Just the same, Ike said the gang was to lay low a while after Bellefront. Except for eight or

ten men to guard the cave, everybody was to go home and tend his fields as if nothing had happened.

That's where you had to admit that Ike was smart, whether you liked him or not. He knew when to stop.

But Cal—now there was a different story. Cal was a wild one, Dunc thought. Cal didn't take to these hills the way his brother did; he liked to be among people, especially women.

Dunc shook his head in wonder. If the younger brother ever took hold of this outfit, it wouldn't last a week. And Dunc was getting to the point where he didn't care much, one way or the other. He was thinking that the next time Ike sent out the call, he might get himself laid up with the fever. Taking from the rich and giving to the poor was all right, but there were limits.

He stood for a while, looking down on that dark sea of pine. He glanced at the sun and judged that he still had four hours of watch before Wes Longstreet would relieve him and he could go back to the cave. He began to get impatient and irritable. It seemed a sin and a crime that a man should do nothing in the spring of the year but sit on a hilltop holding a shotgun.

At last he tramped over to the far end of the ridge, and in the distance he could see a thin ribbon of wood smoke rising up from Mort Stringer's chimney. Preacher Stringer, some called him. They said that Mort had been the head of a Baptist mission for the Cherokees once. They also said that Mort had given up preaching to the Indians because he figured the whites needed it more, and maybe he had something there. What Cherokees Dunc had seen were as smart as any white man you'd likely run up against. One of them had figured out an alphabet and started a whole new language, so the story went, and Dunc guessed it was true.

So Mort figured the Cherokees were capable of looking after their own salvation, and he had moved up here to this cabin, where the hills were the wildest, where the woods were the darkest and the crudest, and started up to save the hillfolks. Him and his daughter.

Leah, the girl's name was, but Dunc had never seen her, not being much of a Bible-pounder himself.

Dunc gazed down at that lonely little clearing surrounded by darkness, the bleak little cabin with a mud chimney, and thought to himself that it was a mighty poor place to bring up a girl. Mort's woman had died a few months back, and they said the girl took it hard, not having any womenfolks at all to talk to. Now if I was Mort, Dunc thought idly, I'd stop bothering so much about these hill-folks and get that girl down among some women.

At last he turned and tramped back to his position, sat on a rock, and set himself to wait out the hours for Wes Longstreet.

Almost an hour had passed when Dunc spotted the gray stallion picking its way daintily through the rocks at the bottom of the long slope. He came instantly alert, his shotgun at the ready. Then he thought, Why the hell didn't I bring a rifle? A shotgun's no good at this range!

But then the rider cupped his hands to his mouth and the mournful bark of the coyote hung on the still air. Dunc returned the call and thought, That's Cal Brunner. What does he think he's doin' this far from the cave?

He watched with vague interest as the big gray picked its way to the far side of the slope and disappeared among the trees. Dunc shrugged. Well, he guessed Cal Brunner could do as he pleased... so long as Ike didn't have any objections.

He sat on the rock again and waited, idle thoughts drifting in and out of his mind. He was bored.

Perhaps another hour had passed when the muffled sound of a rifle mushroomed gently in the still of the afternoon. Instantly Dunc was on his feet again, running in the direction of the sound. Then he thought, That shot was too far away. I can't do any good without a horse. He turned and ran back to where his little bay grazed in the sparse grass among the rocks.

He had to take a tortuous, twisting trail down the west side of the hill; plunging headlong down that incline would have been suicide. The shot probably meant nothing, he told himself. Probably it was Cal shooting

game. Dunc swore as the little bay stumbled over the rocky trail. Goddamn it, why hadn't Cal warned the outpost if he was going hunting?

When he reached the shelf at the bottom of the trail, he brought the bay up for a moment, scowling. Here, he thought, was just about where he had seen Cal. Dunc called out the barking signal. The hills were silent.

Dunc kned the bay to the south, toward a heavy stand of trees, and called out again. There was no answer. He considered the possibility that a posse might have penetrated this deep into the hills and Cal had run into it, but he dismissed that idea immediately. No posse could have got past the forward outposts without raising a commotion.

Dunc worried this in his mind for a moment. Maybe it was another kind of trouble; maybe Cal had had an accident of some kind. This idea worried him more than the possibility of a posse. Ike would sure be hell to live with if anything happened to that hotheaded brother of his.

After another short pause to orient himself, Dunc put the bay into the woods, beating a slow arc around the base of the hill, keeping in mind the direction from which the shot had come. He was about to call out again when he heard the scamper and clash of steel-shod hoofs on the rocks behind him, and through the woods Dunc glimpsed Ike Brunner's paint mare crashing through the trees toward the sound, and the gang leader's face was twisted and red with rage.

Instinctively Dunc held back, glad that Ike hadn't seen him. When the elder Brunner got that kind of look on his face, he was nobody to fool with. Maybe Ike has taken this as a personal thing, Dunc thought carefully. Maybe I'd better let him take care of it to suit himself.

As Dunc gentled the bay, he could still hear Ike's paint snorting and blowing, pushing through that stand of heavy timber as though it were so much underbrush. There's something queer about this, Dunc thought slowly. Where did Ike come from, anyway? He must have been up there on the hill at the time of the shot, and he sure didn't waste any time getting down there. And from the way he's riding, he must know exactly where he's heading.

Pondering on this, Dunc shook his head. If this was a personal matter, he wanted no part of it. But if it concerned the gang...

He decided that he had better take the chance and move along a little farther. Putting the bay over to the left, he picked up Ike's trail and followed it. It was a steady, treacherous downgrade now, and only after several minutes of riding did Dunc realize that Ike's trail was leading him straight for Mort Stringer's cabin.

Wait a minute, he thought. If Ike and Cal have a fuss with Stringer, that's none of my business.

Dunc was beginning to guess what the trouble might be. He knew Cal, and he had heard that Leah Stringer was a long way from being ugly. Dunc Lester, he told himself, the smartest thing you can do is turn right around and head back for the ridge.

But he didn't turn around. The more he thought about it, the less he liked it, and the more he hoped that he had figured it out all wrong. Getting Mort Stringer turned against them would be the worst thing that could happen. That old man could rile up the hills all the way to the Verdigris, if he ever got his dander up at them.

Cautiously Dunc urged his bay forward. Almost immediately he stopped, hearing Preacher Stringer's shrill, high-pitched voice ringing through the trees. Dunc tied the bay to a young sapling and cocked his head curiously. He was still too far away to tell what Stringer was worked up about, but he was sure preaching hell-fire to somebody!

Well, since I've come this far... Dunc reasoned. He pulled his shotgun from the saddle boot and moved forward on foot, alert as a mother doe, silent as an Indian.

He reached a small rise at the edge of the Stringer clearing. Lying on his belly behind some brush, he could see four of them, Mort and the girl, Ike and Cal. Cal was stretched out on his back, his good-looking face ugly with pain, and Ike was slashing at his brother's trousers with a pocketknife.

"That old bastard!" Cal whined. "He shot me! You hear me, Ike? He shot me!"

"Shut up," Ike snarled coldly. "You're lucky I don't finish the job for him!"

Violently Ike ripped the leg from Cal's trousers, slashed it with his knife, forming a compress with one half of the rough material and a bandage with the other. He worked angrily and silently at bandaging his brother's leg, completely ignoring Mort Stringer's shouting. The girl, on her hands and knees a little behind her father, did not utter a sound. Dunc judged that she had been knocked to the ground, probably by Mort himself, for she shook her head dumbly and made no effort to get up.

"He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword!" Mort Stringer ranted. Jabbing a bony finger at Ike as though it were a pistol, he screamed, "You're wastin' your time, Ike Brunner, for the wages of sin is death! Thus spoke the Lord, and you cannot thwart the will of the Lord! The black shadow of the Angel of Death falls over both of you! The curse of God is upon the name of Brunner and upon its followers!"

Ike glanced up in cold rage but did not speak. Dunc Lester, from his place in the underbrush, was slightly stunned by the steady flow of insane doggerel that came from Mort Stringer's mouth. Maybe Mort had been alone in these hills too long. Maybe the shock of losing his woman had done this to him; Dunc didn't know. But he knew that Preacher Stringer was not the same man that he had seen before on rare occasions. This man was not right in his head; his eyes were glassy and vacant, his voice was too shrill.

It gave Dunc a spooky feeling just looking at him, a dirty, gangly skeleton of a man whose baggy overalls seemed to hang on the sharp bones as a hat hangs on a peg. In one clawlike hand he held a long-barreled rifle, but his eyes said that he was not aware of having it.

Dunc looked at the girl again and felt a pity for her that he had never before experienced. It sure couldn't have been much fun for her, he thought, living here in these hills with that crazy old man. Of course, he had no way of knowing just what she and Cal Brunner had been up to, but whatever it was, he guessed that he couldn't blame her much.

"The Lord's judgment be upon you!" Mort cried, suddenly brandishing the rifle over his head. Ike continued to bandage his brother's leg and did not look up. "The Lord's will be done!" Mort shouted. "To you who have brought sin and corruption upon my own flesh and blood!" He stared glassily at the rifle and then at Cal Brunner, but the connection seemed to escape him for the moment.

"Oh, don't think I don't know what's been goin' on in these hills!" he shouted. "Don't think I haven't seen your evil comings and goings. Oh, I'm aware of your sins, Ike Brunner, but the day of Armageddon has arrived!"

And at that Ike Brunner turned slowly on one knee, drew his pistol, and shot Mort Stringer in the chest. Once, twice, the big Colt's bellowed in the clearing, and the preacher fluttered for a moment like some disjointed puppet and then fell to the ground as soundlessly as an October leaf. It happened so fast that Dunc was momentarily stunned. Ike's iciness, the offhand manner in which the man could commit murder, left Dunc unable to utter a sound.

He had never seen anything like this before. Oh, in the heat of rage or passion he had seen plenty of violence, and even killing, but he had not known that one man was capable of killing another as casually as brushing away a troublesome fly.

Cal Brunner, on the instant of the first explosion, came up on one elbow, groaning. "The old bastard!" he cried bitterly. "He deserved it!"

Ike blew thoughtfully into his smoking pistol and said nothing. The girl stared wide-eyed in panic at the crumpled body of her father.

"Get me out of here," Cal grated. "I've had enough of this. I've had enough of her!"

Ike did not once look at the dead man. Now he studied the girl coldly. Cal saw the calculating look in his brother's slitted eyes and said uneasily, "Ike, what are you thinkin'?"

"None of your business."

"Listen to me, Ike. You were right. I should have let her alone. But damn it, she seemed willin' enough. Everything would have been all right if the old man hadn't —"

"Shut up," Ike said harshly, still studying the girl. Cal swallowed hard. Now his own panic was almost as obvious as the girl's.

"Ike, for the love of God!"

The girl leaped up like a startled deer. Ike grinned quietly as she fled toward the sheltering trees.

Up on the rise, Dunc relaxed the hard grip on his shotgun and breathed a long sigh of relief. Ike will have to let her go, he thought. Not even he would shoot a girl down in cold blood.

And then, even before the thought had become full grown, Ike Brunner fired once from the hip, and again from a studied aim, and the girl tripped, as though she had stumbled over a stone, and fell face down in a spongy bed of pine needles.

Cal Brunner hid his face in his hands. Then he lay back and covered his eyes with his forearm, as though shutting out the sight would shut out reality.

"Ike, you didn't have to kill her!" he said hoarsely.

"That's where you're wrong," his brother said mildly, and he began to reload. "I told you to stay away from her, but you wouldn't listen."

"But you didn't have to kill her!"

Ike came erect, suddenly angry. "Stop your whinin'!"

Dunc thought he was going to be sick. He lay face down in the weeds, hugging the shotgun hard in his arms. For one wild instant he had Ike Brunner dead in his sights, his finger hard on the trigger, and then he thought hopelessly, What's the use? Killing him won't bring Mort and the girl back. It will only put my folks in bad with the gang.

Now Ike was speaking again, calmly. "There was no other way to handle it. You let the old fool catch you foolin' with the girl. He'd have set out to put the whole hill country against us if I'd let him go."

"But the girl! Did you have to kill her too?"

"What do you think she would have done if I hadn't?" Ike asked coldly. "She would have had the word all over the hills that I'd killed the preacher. How do you think that would have been? How many boys do you think would answer the call if they knew I was a preacher killer?"

Cal groaned, more concerned with his own hurt than with what Ike was saying. But Ike went on patiently, as though he were drilling a backward child in a ridiculously simple lesson. "Listen to me, Cal. It's not my fault that you wouldn't listen to me. I did what I had to do. We've got too good a thing here to let it be ruined by a crazy old preacher or a slut of a girl! We're rich, Cal, and we're goin' to get a lot richer. I'm just beginnin' to whip this gang into shape. Before I'm through with it I'll make the Doolin and Dalton raids look like quilting bees!"

Suddenly he laughed, and it was as chilling a sound as Dunc Lester had ever heard. "These stupid farmers will do anythin' I say, Cal. They'll make us rich and be happy doin' it. Now get up. We've got to get back to the cave."

Dunc lay like a sheep wolf in the brush as Ike lifted Cal in his arms and helped his brother across the clearing to the horses. Cal groaned and whined and fat tears of pain flowed down his smooth cheeks as Ike helped him up to the saddle.

"We'll take it easy. It won't take long to get back to the cave."

"That old bastard! I think the bullet broke my leg."

"It's just a flesh wound," Ike said, holding him in the saddle. Ike swung up on his own rugged little paint. "Another thing," he said thoughtfully. "The boys back at the cave will want to know what happened, and you'll tell them it was an accident."

Holding to the saddle horn, Cal glanced angrily back at the dead preacher. "You'll have to do somethin' about the bodies."

"I'll take care of that after I get you to the cave."

Behind the flimsy fortress of weeds and underbrush, Dunc lay as still as the dead preacher in the clearing. This thing had happened too fast for him. His brain grappled with what he had seen and heard, but the subtler details of Ike Brunner's violence escaped him.

Stupid farmers. What had Ike meant by that? And what had he meant by saying the gang was going to make them rich? They shared and shared alike, didn't they? How could Ike and Cal get richer than anybody else?

For a moment this worried Dunc more than the two bodies in the clearing. He lay there listening to two horses plodding slowly back toward the higher peaks, turning this new thing ponderously in his mind. Stupid farmers. The way Ike had said it angered him. But what had he meant?

At last Dunc could no longer hear the horses. He glanced at the sun and reckoned he had about an hour before Wes Longstreet would come to relieve him on the ridge, and there'd be hell to pay if he wasn't there. Then he turned his attention to the clearing and felt a vague sickness churning inside him. He didn't like anything about this. Killing a preacher was bad enough, but killing a woman—that was about the worst kind of luck there was. Damn it, he thought heavily, I sure do wish Ike hadn't done that!

After a while he got to his feet and walked reluctantly down to the clearing. Gently Dunc rocked Mort's body with the toe of his shoe. The preacher was as limp as a rag doll. Well, Dunc thought stoically, maybe he's better off like this, for all we know.

What he wanted to do was find his horse and get back to the ridge and try to convince himself that none of this had happened.

It didn't pay to get in bad with Ike Brunner. Once you got in the gang there was no getting out of it—unless it was Dove Wakeley's way. Although there was a cool breeze there in the clearing, Dunc felt uncomfortable and sweaty as he turned his gaze toward the trees where the Stringer girl was

lying: Damn that Cal, anyway! There were plenty of girls in the hills; why did he have to pick on this one?

Time was running out and he ought to be getting back to the ridge, but Dunc found his reluctant feet moving him toward the edge of the clearing. A kind of morbid curiosity took hold of him and he could not make himself leave until he had made certain that the girl was dead.

When he was close enough to see her clearly, he thought, Well, she's dead, all right. She lay partly on her side, her face pressed to the soft, clean carpet of pine needles. Something within Dunc's conscience cried out in protest as he looked at the fair, regular features of the girl's face, her partly opened lips, her long-lashed lids barely closed over her eyes, as though she were asleep. The curve of hips, the swell of firm, youthful breasts were all too apparent beneath the flimsy material of her shirt dress. Dunc felt himself sweating again, and his thoughts of Ike Brunner were bitter and angry.

At last Dunc dropped his head and fixed his gaze on the pink heels of the girl's bare feet. He had the desperate feeling that something should be said, that some gesture other than violence should be made, but he could think of nothing. His hard young face was bleak and bewildered as he sought for impossible answers and reasons, and at last he spoke harshly, in a voice no louder than a whisper. "Goddamn it, anyway!" Then he turned to walk away.

The girl moaned.

Dunc Lester whirled, staring at the girl with enlarged eyes. The girl moved her arm and tried to draw up one leg. Slowly she opened her eyes and gazed glassily at Dunc. "Help me," she said. The sound was so weak that it was hardly a sound at all. "Help me," she said again, this time more strongly. She tried to lift herself on her elbow but fell back coughing.

Dunc knelt beside the girl and stretched her out in order to make her as comfortable as possible. Gently he probed the bloodstained dress below her left breast, and she whimpered weakly.

"Ma'am," Dunc said in wonder, "I sure had you pegged as a goner. Maybe you're not, though. We'll see."

He took out his pocketknife and slashed at the dress. The hole, he saw, was neat, although there was plenty of blood. His immediate problem was what to do about that wound, and he pondered this in his mind. At last he took off his leather belt and sawed it between the girl's clenched teeth. "You can bite on this," he said. "I think I can get this bullet out without much trouble."

At the entrance of the knife point into the wound the girl fainted, which was just as well. Dunc worked fast, probing with knife and fingers. He found the bullet just under the rib cage and drew it out.

Bright blood flowed from the wound and Dunc worried about how to stop that. He could see her face getting paler and paler. If the shock of getting shot doesn't kill her, he thought, surely she'll bleed to death if I don't do something fast! He cut the sleeve off his shirt, folded it in a square pad, and placed it over the wound. Then he took his belt from the girl's mouth and buckled it around her, holding the pad in place. He wished that he had some whisky or applejack to pour over the wound, but he had nothing.

Well, he thought, with the tools I've got to work with, I guess that's about the best I can do.

He hunkered down on the soft bed of pine needles, watching the girl's still face and wiping his bloody hands on his trousers. The longer he looked at her, the less blame he could place on Cal Brunner for wanting her. She had not the crude square build of so many of the hill girls. This one was lean and light, supple and strong. There was a feeling of grace and soft texture about her, and the longer Dunc watched her, the more he liked the thing he saw.

He found himself reaching out timidly to touch her dark hair, then felt foolish and uncomfortable and wiped his hands again on his trouser legs. What the hell am I goin' to do with her? he wondered.

He glanced once more at the sun, all too sharply aware of the passage of time. He ought to be on the ridge right this minute. What if one of the gang came past and found the outpost deserted?

The girl whimpered, moved restlessly, but did not open her eyes.

Dunc was suddenly impatient and angry. Hell's fire! He thought. I wish I'd never left the ridge in the first place!

But he had left the ridge. He had seen Ike shoot Mort Stringer and the girl. And he had heard some things that still stirred uneasily in his mind. If Ike had killed the girl, things would have been comparatively simple. Dunc could then have returned to his outpost position and pretended to the others that nothing had happened.

Now everything was confused in his mind. The girl was still alive and he had patched her up. And if Ike came back and found him here, there'd be hell to pay till Christmas!

Hell! Dunc thought. I don't know what to do. She'll die for sure if I walk off and leave her. If Ike doesn't come back and kill her first.

He waited there as long as he dared, wondering and pondering and raking his mind for the right thing to do. Ike oughtn't to have shot her, he decided finally. He just oughtn't to have shot a woman that way!

The nearest doctor was in Reunion, nearly forty miles away and most of it straight down. Likely the girl would be dead by the time he could get her there, should he decide to try such a fool stunt. What was even more likely, Ike Brunner would catch them and kill both of them before they'd gone a mile.

But these were only two of many considerations to be worked out in Dunc Lester's mind. Ike wanted this girl dead—and if he went against Ike's wishes, that was going to turn the gang against Dunc's family.

This was an important consideration. There weren't many hill families that didn't have some kind of tie-up with the Brunners, directly or indirectly, through brothers or cousins or uncles who were members of the gang. Turn against the gang, and the Lester family would have all the hills against them.

And of course, there was always the probability that the lowland law would be waiting to grab him the minute he came out of the timber—providing Ike let him get that far.

Dunc considered all these angles and liked none of them. But the longer he waited and the longer he looked at the girl, the more sure he was that he would try to save her.

Perversely, when the decision came, it angered him. I must be crazy as a coot! he thought savagely.

And while he thought it he was hacking at two tough saplings with his pocketknife. He found the work too slow with a knife, so he went to Mort's cabin and found an ax and while he was at it, a blanket, and came back to the edge of the clearing and went to work in earnest.

Chapter Six

It was directly after dinner, and Owen Toller was in the barn mending his work harness when he saw the two Stanley boys running across the fields toward the house. Bruce, the older boy, carried a long-barreled squirrel rifle across his chest as he ran. They seemed in a hurry.

Owen stepped outside and waved to them, and then the boys veered toward the barn instead of the house. "What's the rush?" Owen asked as they stopped in the barn doorway, blowing like horses.

"We was huntin', Marshal," Bruce said, fighting for breath.

"For squirrels," Bud put in. "Up in the woods."

"That's where we saw them," the older boy began again. "The woman looks like she's dead to me."

"Wait a minute," Owen said calmly. "You were up in the hills hunting and saw somebody. Bruce, you take it from there."

"Well, Marshal," Bruce panted, his breath gradually coming back to normal, "we was up by Indian Rock when we first seen them. There was this man on a horse, and there were two long poles lashed to the saddle, dragging in the dirt behind the horse."

"An Indian travois," Owen said.

"That's what it was, I guess. Anyway, there was a blanket fixed between these poles and the woman was tied down on the blanket."

"She was dead," Bud put in.

Bruce nodded. "She sure looked like it. Course, we didn't get too good a look. We was up on the rock lookin' down when they came past."

Owen frowned slightly. "Did this man see you?"

"I don't think so, Marshal. We yelled, but he looked like he was asleep in the saddle. By the time we climbed down from the rock he was already at the bottom of the slope."

"Where was he headed?"

"Toward Reunion, it looked like." Then the boy thought of something else and said, "The man had a pistol and a shotgun. You think he's one of them hill outlaws, Marshal?"

"That wouldn't seem likely." Owen smiled. "But if the woman's as sick as you say, maybe I ought to cut him off and see if I can lend a hand."

The boys stared bug-eyed with excitement as Owen threw a saddle up on one of his big-bellied work horses. "Ain't you goin' to take a gun, Marshal?" Bruce asked. "That man looked pretty mean to me."

"Me too!" Bud said quickly.

Owen laughed. "I don't think that will be necessary, boys." He rode across the yard and called, "Elizabeth, the Stanley boys claim to have found a sick woman in the woods. Guess I'd better take a look."

Elizabeth, holding Giles over her left shoulder, came outside on the back step. "A sick woman, Owen?"

"A man was bringing her down from the hills on a travois. I'd better see if we can give them a hand."

Elizabeth frowned slightly, knowing that the hill people seldom came down toward Reunion. Then the frown disappeared and she smiled at her husband. "Of course, Owen. We can fix up the boys' room for her if you think it's necessary."

"Probably it's not as bad as the boys made it out." Then he waved to her and rode the awkward, iron-gaited mare around their small vegetable garden and toward the north.

He spotted the dusty, brush-scarred little bay through the trees, about a half hour's ride from the house. The saddle was empty. When Owen got closer he saw the man kneeling beside the pole travois. Why, he's not much more than a kid, he thought. And the girl, she can't be more than seventeen.

But when the man looked up, Owen saw the hard young face and dangerous eyes and knew that here was no mere boy. Quickly the man grabbed his shotgun and leveled the big bore at Owen's face.

"Stay where you are, mister!"

"I came to help," Owen said.

"You a doctor?"

"No and from the looks of the girl I'd say she stands little chance of living till you get her to one."

"That's my worry, and hers," the young man said harshly.

Owen shrugged. "All right, if you want her to die. It seems a shame, though, after you've brought her so far."

The young man scowled, his quick eyes shifting about the woods and hills. He seemed angry and worried, and when he glanced at the girl there was fear in his eyes. At last he lowered the shotgun, but kept it at the ready. "You think you could help her?" he asked.

"I can't say without knowing what's wrong with her."

"She's been shot."

Owen felt a little ripple of warning but kept his voice even. "I see," he said. "How bad is it?"

"The bullet went in under the ribs but I got it out. She's bled a lot and been out of her head. Is there a doctor between here and Reunion?"

"No."

The hard young face sharpened. "I don't hanker to go to Reunion," he said, as though he were thinking aloud, "unless I have to."

"Then I suggest that you turn around and bring the girl to my house. My wife and I will do what we can for her, and then I'll ride for a doctor."

After a moment of sober thought, the man booted his shotgun and climbed on the stubby little bay. "First," he said, "we'll make sure that a doctor can help her." And he nodded for Owen to move out.

Owen kneed his big-footed mount to an awkward trot as they neared the house. Swinging down from the saddle at the back door, he called to his wife.

"Elizabeth, looks like we're going to need that room after all."

When she appeared in the doorway he saw the look of uneasiness in her eyes. "Owen, is she... hurt badly?"

"Yes/' he said gently, "she is."

"Oh." After a moment she said, "I'll get the bed ready."

Owen helped the young man untie the rough hemp rope that held the girl in her blanket stretcher. She opened her eyes for a moment and stared glassily at Owen. "Cal...."

she said, her mouth working several times before the sound was made. "Cal... don't let him kill me."

The young man said harshly, "Give me a hand!"

Frowning thoughtfully, Owen helped him lift the girl from the travois, and they carried her between them into the house. Elizabeth had the bed ready in the boys' room and they laid her down as gently as they could.

"If you've got some whisky," said the hard-faced boy, "maybe you could pour some over the wound."

"Too late for that," Owen said, taking off the belt and blood-soaked bandage. "Elizabeth, get some blankets, all we have, and cover her up. She'll be going into chills soon." He glanced up at the young man. "What's your name?"

He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Dunc Lester."

"When was this girl shot, Dunc?"

He frowned. "About this time yesterday, I guess."

Owen wiped his forehead on his sleeve, holding his curiosity with a heavy hand. "I see. The wound doesn't look too serious, but she's lost a lot of blood. She'd better have a doctor."

Dunc thought about this, saying nothing.

"What kind of condition is your horse in?" Owen asked.

"It's an Indian horse; it'll run till it drops dead. That won't be for a while yet." When Owen turned to leave the room, Dunc said sharply, "Wait a minute, mister. You aimin' to use my horse to get a doctor?"

"I don't have a saddle animal of my own." Then he added with elaborate casualness, "Of course, you could make the trip to Reunion as well as I could."

"No!" Anger and confusion showed on his face. "I mean, I guess you know the trail better than me. You sure she has to have a doctor?"

"If you want her to live."

Dunc swore harshly under his breath, then glanced sharply at Elizabeth and murmured, "Pardon me, ma'am. But I don't know what to do. I just don't know!"

The two Stanley boys, jumping with curiosity, had come through the back door and were now looking in through the parlor doorway. "Marshal," Bruce blurted, "my pa's got a saddle horse you could use."

Dunc Lester wheeled as though he had been struck from behind, glaring at the two boys. Owen did not miss this animal-like reaction, but he merely said, "Thank you, Bruce, but I think we can do with Mr. Lester's animal. Now you boys better go."

Dunc wheeled back on Owen, his eyes dangerously narrow. "That kid called you 'Marshal'!"

"I used to work for the government," Owen said easily. "That was five years ago."

He left the boy standing there and went to the other bedroom, where his wife was taking bright patchwork quilts from a cedar chest. Elizabeth looked up, frankly worried. "Owen, must you go after the doctor?"

He nodded.

"But why can't he go?" Suddenly she flung her arms around her husband and held him hard against her. "Owen, I don't want to be left alone here with him, just me and the children!"

He held her to him, speaking softly and gently, as he often spoke to Lonnie when the boy was frightened. "You and the children will be safe. I wouldn't leave you here if I wasn't sure of that."

"But he's so hard!" Elizabeth protested. "Owen, is he an outlaw? Is he one of the Brunner gang?"

Owen wanted desperately to comfort her, but he could not lie to her. "I'm not sure," he said at last. "Perhaps he is an outlaw—I don't know. But I do know how he feels about that girl in the other room. He won't hurt you or the children because he knows we're doing our best to help the girl."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I am sure." He smiled faintly and released her slowly from the strong circle of his arms. "Don't worry. I'll be back sometime tonight."

Dunc came outside as Owen was tightening the cinch on the bay. "Just one thing, Marshal," he said. "Don't come back with anybody but the doctor."

Owen looked at him. "All right."

"And don't say anything to anybody." Owen nodded.

"In case you decide to bring back some law, you'd better think a long time about your wife and children."

Owen felt the heat of unreasonable anger in his throat. He wheeled on Dunc Lester, grabbed him by the front of his filthy shirt, and slammed him back against the house before he could make a move for his pistol. "You listen to me!" he said in a hoarse, savage whisper. "If you even think of hurting my wife or children I'll hunt you to the end of the earth and kill you by inches! As for bringing back the law—do you think I'd need any help bringing a barking young pup like you to heel?"

With a savage twist, Owen let the boy go. Dunc stumbled two steps and fell to his knees in amazement.

"So don't you ever threaten me again!" Owen said tightly. "I didn't ask you where you came from, because I don't give a damn. I didn't ask if you were a member of the Brunner gang for the same reason. I took you and the girl

into my house and now I'm going after the doctor simply because it's, the decent thing for a man to do. Can you get that through your head?"

Dunc rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth. He nodded. It would have been an easy thing to draw his pistol and kill this ex-marshal on the spot, but this thought did not occur to him.

"All right," Owen said roughly. "Get up. My wife will fix you something to eat while I'm gone."

Still amazed, Dunc Lester watched Owen ride off to the west. He shook his head, filled with sudden respect for this gentle, soft-spoken man with the hidden strength and violence of a timber cat. There goes no dude sheriff or lowland deputy, Dunc thought. When the time comes to be afraid, there goes the man to be afraid of.

It was a wiser, quieter young man who turned slowly and went back into the house.

Shortly after midnight Owen returned from Reunion with Doc Linnwood. Elizabeth was asleep on the parlor couch, and Owen smiled faintly as he sat beside her and smoothed a strand of fine silken hair back from her forehead.

"Owen?"

"Yes," he said.

"You were right," she said, still partly asleep. "That young man was quiet... almost nice. He put away his guns and made no trouble at all."

"That's good." Owen smiled. "Now why don't you get to bed? There's nothing you can do now; Doc Linnwood's with the girl."

Owen himself was exhausted. I'm getting too old for this kind of work, he thought. But he stayed on the couch and smoked a pipe and did not follow his wife to their bedroom until Doc Linnwood had finished his inspection.

At last the doctor came out, wiping his clean hands on one of Elizabeth's best linen towels. He was a young, strong man, big in the shoulders and small in the hips, like a bull buffalo. Without looking at Owen, the doctor went straight to the kitchen and poured himself some black coffee from an

iron pot, then returned to the parlor and dropped into a bulky hair-padded chair.

"How was she shot?" he asked bluntly.

Owen shrugged and smiled. "Accident, I suppose."

"I suppose so," Linnwood said dryly. "Anyway, I'll have to make a report to the sheriff's office when I get back, but I guess that can wait."

"How is she?" Owen asked.

"We'll know better tomorrow. If she gets through the next twelve hours she'll be all right. You'd better get some sleep; that's what I'm going to do."

Owen got necessary bedding from the other room and made a sleeping place for the doctor on the couch.

"Who's the young man?" Linnwood asked, pulling off his heavy shoes.

Owen shrugged. "A hill boy called Lester."

"The girl's husband?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

Scowling, the young doctor unbuttoned his collar and cuffs and stretched out on the couch. He was asleep almost instantly, but before he dropped off he shook his head and said, "Owen, you and Elizabeth sure do take in some strange boarders!"

Owen went to the sickroom and looked in before going to bed. The girl lay pale and motionless beneath the small mountain of quilts. The boy sat slumped in a straight chair near the head of the bed, his eyes closed, his face sagging with fatigue.

Within Owen's mind a well-developed professional curiosity clamored for attention. The girl had mentioned "Cal." Had she meant the younger Brunner brother? Was she a member of the gang? Was the boy?

At last he shook his head. What did it matter who they were? The Brunners were none of his business; he'd made that clear to McKeever and Judge Lochland and the whole county. He didn't want to get mixed up with them now.

However, Owen Toller did not sleep too well that night. Several times he heard the doctor get up and go to the sickroom, and once he heard Dunc Lester and Linnwood talking quietly. He was on edge and restless, and his tossings and turnings disturbed his wife.

"Owen, is anything the matter?" she asked sleepily.

"No. Everything is all right."

"No, it isn't." And now she turned to face him, awake. "It's that girl, isn't it?" she said. "It's an awful thing. What kind of person would want to kill a young girl?"

Owen thought for a moment. "The same kind of person that shot Edith Ransom," he said flatly.

The next morning Owen was working the creek bottom when Doc Linnwood rode past on his way back to Reunion.

"Your patient's all right," the doctor said. "Those hill girls are as tough as boot leather."

"That's good," Owen said gratefully. "Thanks for coming out, Doc."

Owen rested for a moment on his hoe, glad that the girl was going to get well; glad that she and Dunc Lester would soon be leaving and he and Elizabeth could let their lives settle again into the warm, comfortable rut that he had come to cherish. I must be getting old, he thought. Strange trails and excitement no longer please me.

Deliberately he cleared his mind of curiosity. There must be at least a dozen boys named Cal in those hills, he told himself. And words spoken in delirium meant little.

At dinnertime he tramped back up the long grassy slope to the farmhouse, stopping to play with Giles and Lonnie in the back yard. He was smiling as he entered the kitchen, vaguely pleased with himself and at peace in his mind. "I hear our patient's better," he said to his wife.

Elizabeth smiled, but with little humor. "That might be a matter of opinion."

They went together to the sickroom, where the girl glared at them with hot, angry eyes.

"Well," Owen said heartily, "the doctor says you're going to get well."

She snarled like a cat and turned her face to the wall.

"That's what I mean," Elizabeth said, looking at her husband. "Her name is Leah Stringer, but she didn't tell me that. The boy did, just before he left." When she saw the surprised look on her husband's face, she said, "He rode off right after the doctor left this morning."

Owen took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It looked like Dunc Lester had left them with the responsibility of looking after the hostile girl. Elizabeth went back to the kitchen to feed the children, but Owen rubbed his face thoughtfully, and did not move. Stringer... The name was beginning to mean something to him.

He went to the other side of the bed and took a chair where the girl would have to look at him. "Several years ago," he said, "I used to know a Cherokee missionary named Mort Stringer. He had a little girl, and, if I remember right, her name was Leah. You're Mort Stringer's daughter, aren't you?"

The girl glared and said nothing.

"Now why," Owen mused aloud, "would a person want to shoot a preacher's daughter? Would you tell me that, Leah?"

She turned her head and faced the other way. Elizabeth returned to bring her husband to the table, but she paused when she saw the look of concentration on Owen's face. "Owen, do you know this girl?"

"I think so," he said. "Her father was a preacher. He quit the Cherokee mission before statehood and moved into the hills with his family. He was a good man, as I remember."

The girl turned her head again and looked at Owen out of those wild, animal-like eyes. She was frightened, and Owen did not know how to reassure her. She was bitter with grief, angry, sick, and alone. And Owen

could not think of any word that would comfort her. The girl had raised a barrier of distrust between them and Owen could not break it down.

Leah Stringer stayed with them eight days. On the morning of the ninth day, when Elizabeth opened the door to take the girl her breakfast, she was gone.

Chapter Seven

Two days later Owen was surprised to see Arch Deland riding across the farmyard toward the barn. It was near sundown, that time of long shadows and of pine-smelling breezes sweeping down from the wooded hills.

Owen came forward with two large buckets heavy with strained milk.

"Pretty late for you to be riding these hills alone, isn't it?" he kidded Deland.

The deputy grinned. "I'm not as thickheaded as some people think. Since I had to come this way on business, I figured I might as well make it close to suppertime."

Owen was always glad to see his old friend. He helped Arch stable his horse in the barn, then the two men took the buckets of milk back to the house. Arch joked with Elizabeth, and teased the children until they were almost wild before finally handing over a bag of striped peppermint sticks. The old man seemed perfectly at ease and happy, but Owen, who knew him well, could look behind those pale blue eyes and see that Deland was worried.

At last, when they were alone in the parlor, smoking their pipes, Owen said, "You mentioned you had business out this way, Arch. What kind?"

"Routine investigation of a gunshot wound. Your patient still here?"

Owen shook his head, then told the deputy everything he could remember about the girl and the boy who called himself Dunc Lester.

"To tell the truth," he finished, "I was glad when we woke up that morning and found that Leah Stringer had left us. She wasn't the easiest girl in the world to live with."

"What about the Lester boy?" Arch asked. "Have you seen any more of him?"

Owen shook his head. "And I don't expect to."

"Was this boy a member of the Brunner gang?"

The bluntness of the question surprised Owen. "I don't know. What makes you ask?"

"Doc Linnwood's report that he turned in to the sheriffs office. He said the boy looked suspicious, and the girl was spouting some pretty queer things while she was out of her head. He recommended that both of them be held for investigation."

Owen was puzzled and faintly angry. "Linnwood didn't say any of this to me." Then he felt the cold finger of uneasiness on his neck. Had Linnwood thought that he was deliberately giving aid to members of the Brunner gang? Was that the reason he had kept his report to the sheriff secret?

Now he could understand the worry behind Arch Deland's eyes. "Well," he said, "you've waited too long to make an investigation, because they're both gone. Why didn't Will Cushman go to work on this sooner?"

The deputy smiled. "The report was put on the sheriff's desk, but Will was off visitin' in Talequah until this mornin'."

"That's Will's bad luck. There's no way I can help him now."

"I know," Arch said heavily. "But I wish there was..." There was something on his mind and he was searching for a way to say it. At last he said, "Owen, do you figure to come to town next Saturday?"

"Yes. The Stringer girl had us tied down this week, but we'll have to go in Saturday to buy supplies."

Deland shook his head. "Don't do it, Owen," he said soberly. "Anyway, don't bring Elizabeth and the children. You don't know how worked up the town is gettin' about this thing." He chewed on his pipestem, his face bleak and expressionless.

Owen could feel slow anger tighten the muscles of his throat. "What are they saying?" he asked quietly.

The deputy shifted uncomfortably in the chair, avoiding Owen's eyes. Then, showing his own anger for the first time, Deland blurted, "It's a raw deal all around! Ben McKeever started it, I guess, but he couldn't have kept it goin' by himself. The people wanted to believe it. They have to have

somebody to be mad at, so they picked you. If they're mad enough at somebody, I guess they figure they can forget the wide yellow stripes down their own backs!"

"What are they saying?" Owen asked again, softly.

"They're sayin' that you're still mad about Will Cushman beatin' you out for the sheriff's office. They're sayin' that you're givin' help to the Brunners just to make Will's job tougher."

That was as far as Arch Deland could go. He looked up and saw Elizabeth standing in the doorway, her eyes flashing with indignation and anger. She came into the room and stood behind her husband's chair. "Mr. Deland," she said icily, "did you come here to start trouble?"

The deputy blinked. "No, Elizabeth. I came to stop the trouble before it started, if I could."

"It doesn't sound like it, from what I heard. It sounds to me as though you're more interested in spreading McKeever's lies than in stopping trouble."

Owen looked sharply at his wife and then at Arch. "That's enough," he said flatly. "It looks like you're the only two friends I've got left in this county. I don't want you fighting each other."

But there was tenseness in the room and fear in Elizabeth Toller's eyes. When she turned and left the room, Owen said, "I'm sorry, Arch. Women get upset sometimes and say things they don't mean."

"I know." Deland smiled sadly. "You're a lucky man, Owen. Elizabeth loves you and that makes her protective. She thinks I'm with the others, tryin' to get you to go after the Brunners." He shook his head, still smiling, then stood up. "It's later than I thought. I guess I won't be able to stay for supper, after all."

Owen did not try to stop him, for he knew that they would only be uncomfortable now. They walked together to the barn, where Owen helped his friend with the rig.

"Elizabeth will see this in a new light tomorrow," Owen said.

"Sure." Deland nodded and rode off into the gathering dusk.

Where is it going to stop? Owen wondered angrily. He had never been faced with this kind of problem before. His enemies had always been in the minority and on the wrong side of the law; but now he felt like an outlaw himself.

At that same moment, several miles to the east, another man had his own and angry thoughts. From his place on the high, rocky shelf of the Cooksons, Dunc Lester gazed down on a small, irregular clearing that had once been his family's farm. A few days ago there had been a fine stand of young corn on that sheer slope; there had been a sturdy cabin, stockade sheds, a brush arbor. Now there was nothing.

Now there was only a scattering of ashes and a shapeless pile of charred logs where the cabin and sheds had been. The young corn had been trampled to death under the hoofs of many horses. The Lester cow lay near one of the burned sheds, a bloated, stinking corpse being picked at by a cluster of sluggish buzzards.

For days Dunc had prowled these hills like some maddened animal, looking for Ike Brunner. But Ike and the gang had disappeared. They had vacated Ulster's Cave without a trace, and had vanished into the darkness of the hills.

And now, exhausted with fatigue and the knowledge of his own helplessness, Dunc had returned to this shelf overlooking the clearing. Incredibly long shadows of the hills stretched out over the land, and a blood-red sun settled slowly behind the edge of the western world. It had been almost eleven days since he had left the girl in the hands of the ex-marshal and his wife, it seemed more like eleven years. He felt like an old man, his bones aching, his clothing torn and filthy, his brain numb with fatigue. All the Lesters were strong, stubborn men, but Dunc was almost ready to admit that he did not have the strength to fight Ike Brunner alone.

Still, his anger kept him going. For all he knew, his entire family might be dead; his ma and pa, his married sister and brother-in-law, his two young

brothers and baby sister. There was no sign of life at all down there, except for the buzzards.

Dunc rubbed his sagging face and swore softly. He had not dared go down to the clearing itself because the Tanis family lived just around the slope, and Gabe Tanis was a member of the gang. A lifelong friendship with the Tanises meant little now, for there was no telling what kind of lies Ike had spread among the hill people.

And yet he couldn't just sit here on this shelf and do nothing, Dunc told himself. Damn that girl, anyway! he thought. But he knew it wasn't the girl he hated. He'd do the same thing all over again if he had to.

And he couldn't hate men like Gabe Tanis, either, for they all had their own reasons for wanting to fight, and they thought the Brunners were helping them. Dunc had thought it himself. But if they had seen the things he had seen, heard the things he had heard...

Wearily he got to his feet as darkness closed down on the hills. No use thinking about that, he warned himself. They wouldn't believe me.

And now, Tanises or no Tanises, he had to go down to that clearing and see for himself what had happened. Maybe, he thought, there'll be something down there that'll tell me where Ike has taken the gang.

Leading the shaggy, brush-scarred little bay down the rocky slope, Dunc tried to prepare himself for whatever he would find down there among the ashes. The buzzards heard him coming through the timber and beat the air frantically with their heavy wings.

As he broke out of the woods a pale high moon shone down on the clearing, and Dunc Lester stood there for a moment, sick and heavy within his soul. There was nothing familiar in this silent place heavy with the smell of death and charred logs. It was impossible to believe that this was where he had lived out most of his young life, that he had helped his pa plow and plant these fields, that he had helped build the house and sheds. In this place his oldest sister had been married, here the youngest had been born. Now there was nothing.

He tramped the fields that he had hoed a hundred times. He scattered the ashes and burned timbers of the house and sheds. He found nothing but the dead cow; even the work mule was gone.

For a moment he felt lighter and breathed freer. At least the family was still alive somewhere. But where?

Suddenly all caution vanished. Dunc turned sharply to the edge of the clearing where the bay was waiting. He took down his shotgun, broke it to make sure that it was loaded, then climbed to the saddle and took the rocky, deep-rutted trail toward the Tanis place.

Soon he could smell wood smoke from the Tanis chimney, then the orange glow of the coal-oil lamp burning in the Tanis cabin. Riding to the back of the cabin, Dunc called sharply:

"Gabe, you there?"

Almost immediately the back door was thrown open and Gabe's woman stood in the cabin entrance holding a long-barreled rifle in her two big hands.

"Who is it?"

"Dunc Lester, Sarah Sue. I want to talk to Gabe."

"Dunc Lester!" The two words told Dunc all he needed to know about what the hill people thought of him. "Gabe ain't here," she said harshly. "And a lucky thing for you he ain't!"

"I want to find out about my family."

Sarah Sue Tanis was a long-faced, leather-tough woman in her early forties. She had often cared for Dunc when he was little more than a baby, but she wasn't remembering that now. "There ain't no Lesters in these hills," she said, her voice filled with hate. "We're decent, God-fearin' folks up here, and there ain't no room among us for preacher killers or their families!"

"Preacher killers?"

"I reckon you know what I'm talkin' about, Dunc Lester. Ike Brunner told us how you shot old Mort Stringer down in cold blood and then shot

young Cal in the leg when he tried to stop you! All over that no-account girl of the preacher's."

Anger welled up in him until he felt limp and sickish. But all he said was "Is that the reason you people burned us out?"

She said nothing, but grinned in self-righteous hatred.

"Where's my family? Where'd you run them off to — you and all the other decent, God-fearin' folks around here?"

"You might look in Arkansas," she snapped. "I don't reckon you'll find them in Oklahoma."

An overpowering sense of helplessness dulled the edge of Dunc's anger. He knew there was no use talking to Sarah Sue Tanis o/her husband. Because Ike Brunner had brought them corn in dry years, because he had brought doctors for their sick and filled their heads full of lies, they now believed everything he told them.

Sarah Sue hadn't shot him with that long-barreled rifle because it would be too much like shooting one of her own kin, but that wasn't saying that she wouldn't shoot him the next time he came. He reined the bay around and rode toward the dark timber.

He camped that night under a sandstone overhang not far from Ulster's Cave. Wolflike, he crouched under the shelter of rock listening to the sounds of the night, wondering what he was going to do next. If he was smart, he told himself, he would light out for Arkansas and look for his folks. He would forget that he had ever lived in these hills or had been hooked up with the Brunners. That would be the smart thing to do. The only healthy thing.

But he didn't feel smart. And he didn't think he would soon forget the Brunners in Arkansas or anywhere else. And besides, there was that girl of Mort Stringer's, who had haunted his mind since the first moment he had seen her.

It was a funny thing, saving a person's life like that. It made a man feel almost like God to hold a life in his hands, knowing that it was within his

power to save it or let it go. Dunc wondered if that was the reason Leah Stringer was so constantly in his mind these days, in spite of all the other things he had to plague him.

At last he untied a small gunny sack that he had brought behind his saddle, took out a handful of parched com, and began to eat. The corn had come from Owen Toller's barn, and Dunc had parched it himself when he got back to the hills. On long hunting trips or forced marches, Indians could live for weeks on corn like this. And so could a white man, if he had to.

Dunc cracked the hard, half-burned kernels between his teeth, chewing and swallowing automatically, his mind on other things. When, several days ago, he had first discovered what the gang had done to his family and to the farm, a wildness had seized him, and he had been driven by it ever since. Now, at last, fatigue had subdued the wildness. Hopelessness had blunted his anger. What was left was a quiet, pulsating hate that he knew would be with him always. All these hills were now his enemies. And Ike Brunner could not be found.

Now that he could be more rational in his mind, Dunc realized that he was probably lucky that he had not been able to find Ike Brunner. In a fight with the gang, he wouldn't have lasted five minutes.

But this knowledge did not ease the tension within him, or put down his lust for revenge.

And still it was not revenge alone that drove him and would not let him rest. At last he was beginning to understand a little of what Ike and Cal Brunner were doing to these hill people. If the Brunners would lie to them about one thing, it stood to reason that they would lie again. Dunc thought about this. For the first time in his life he began to wonder if the hillfolks necessarily had to be always right, and the lowland people always wrong. Ike Brunner's argument that they had the right to plunder from the rich sounded good to people who were hungry and tired of being pushed around, but how much real truth was there in the argument?

To a hill boy like Dunc Lester, this was a strange trail for the mind to take. It was like a deer trace in the woods that twisted and turned and circled in

upon itself and led nowhere. Still, he had glimpsed something here that bothered him. He had set out with hate for the Brunners alone, but now he was beginning to doubt the motives of his own people. His own family, for that matter.

Had his pa tried to stop him when he decided to join the Brunner gang?

Dunc smiled with vague bitterness as he remembered. His pa had given him his blessings and the only saddle horse that the family owned. "Son," he had said, soberly shaking Dunc's hand, "we're proud of you. These Brunner boys, they've got the right idea on how to handle these outsiders!" Dunc's ma had made up a grub sack for him, and her faded eyes had glistened with pride. Her son was joining the gang. Dunc's father had presented him with his most prized possession, the, shotgun, and his brother-in-law had pitched in with a saddle.

Oh, it had been quite a day, Dunc remembered, when he first rode off to join the Brunners. He had never seen soldiers marching off to war, but that was the way it must have been, on a smaller scale.

This was a shocking line of thought for his mind to be taking, but the facts were much too clear to be ignored. A monster of the people's own making was loose in the hills. This, Dunc knew, was the core of the matter that had been gnawing at his conscience.

Then from some dark room of his mind came the memory of how, long ago, Gabe Tanis had found a young wolf pup in the woods and had brought it home. Wolves were bad in those days; they would come right up to the cabin and attack the livestock. Gabe claimed he was going to bring this wolf up like a pet and teach it to fight off the other wolves. He fed the pup the best of everything and spent hours every day training it, and people came from all over to see the pup and praise Gabe for his ingenuity. The only way to fight a wolf is with another wolf, Gabe said. But when the pup grew up it turned on Gabe and bit him through the hand, and finally it had to be shot.

Maybe, Dunc thought, the Brunner gang is working out like Gabe's wolf. At first it seemed like a good idea, but now it had turned. In one quick bite

it had devoured the Lester farm and family. The harmless pup that everybody liked to pet and feed had grown into a full-sized wolf.

Dunc Lester slept fitfully that night beneath his roof of stone, and awoke the next morning stiff and sore and still bewildered in his mind. He swore at himself for showing himself to Sarah Sue Tanis. His position was much more dangerous now, for members of the gang would be out looking for him.

After a brief breakfast of more parched corn, he un-hobbled the bay and got the animal saddled. Where he would go now, he was not sure. He felt empty and defeated.

The small sound of a distant rifle punctured the quiet of the morning. Dunc came erect in the saddle, listening hard. Had some of the gang spotted him? Were they shooting at him?

This prospect did not seem likely, considering the distance separating him and the rifleman. Possibly it was a hunter after small game, but it was pretty early in the day for that. After a moment Dunc reined the bay around and headed cautiously in the general direction of the sound, and after a few minutes he heard a second shot and this time was able to pinpoint the direction as due north, somewhere in a heavily wooded draw between his hill and the neighboring one.

Cautiously Dunc dismounted near the bottom of the slope, studying the woods about him. Now he saw that he was close to what had been the second outpost when the gang had occupied Ulster's Cave. He thought about this for a moment. Could it mean that the gang had moved back to this neighborhood?

Now he heard the sound of hoofs and falling rocks as another horse made its way down the side of the opposing hill. Dunc led his bay deeper into a stand of timber and tied it there. Unbooting the shotgun, he moved forward to some high ground where he could lie on his stomach and look down on the draw.

He could see nothing, but he could still hear the horse coming through the woods. Suddenly the sound of a coyote lay on the still morning air, and

Dunc flattened a little harder against the ground as the voice echoed and reechoed between the hills.

For a moment there was complete silence. Then a voice called out, "I seen you, goddamn it! There's no use tryin' to hide!"

Although Dunc could not see him, he knew that the voice belonged to Wes Longstreet, the young Arkansas hellion that had belonged to the gang since its beginning. Dunc peered hard into the green umbrella of leaves and branches that spread out below, trying to see who Wes was after. He could see nothing, and the forest was quiet.

Then there was the sound of a second horse, and a second voice called, "You got her spotted, Wes?"

Dunc heard his breath whistle between his teeth. That voice belonged to Cal Brunner! Wes called back something that Dunc couldn't understand, and then there was silence again and Dunc guessed that the two men had met and were planning what to do next.

Now he heard the two horses moving aimlessly and knew that Wes and Cal had dismounted to make the hunt on foot. But who were they hunting? As far as Dunc knew, he was the only one the gang had it in for. Maybe, he hoped, one of the other members had found out how the Brunners were using the gang for their own ends and had made a break for it.

But he doubted this, knowing how stubborn a pack of hill boys could be when they got their heads set on something. Right now they were set on the idea that Ike and Cal were their friends, and it would take a lot more than guesswork to jar them loose from that.

He could hear the two men thrashing around in the brush at the bottom of the deep draw. "See anything yet?" Cal shouted.

"Not yet," Wes called.

"Goddamn it!" Cal swore, and this time Dunc heard the rough edge of anxiety in the younger brother's voice. "Ike'll be fit to kill if he finds out we let her get away!"

Her? This was the first time Dunc had noticed that they were referring to the hunted person as a woman. He pondered on this, a certain tenseness straining at his nerves, a vague new worry appearing in the lines of his hard, young face. On his belly, he slipped over the top of the ridge and began crawling forward.

At last Wes Longstreet called wearily, "Hell, we'll never find her in all this brush."

"We've got to find her!" Cal shouted angrily.

"I don't understand this. Why's Ike so het up about Mort Stringer's girl, anyway?"

"None of your goddamn business!" Cal snarled.

The two took up their search again, cursing and thrashing among the tall, tough saplings and thick weeds. Dunc Lester lay flat on the cool ground, the chill of winter spreading through him.

He told himself that it couldn't be Leah Stringer that they were looking for. Leah was back at the ex-marshal's place, where he had left her; she had to be there!

But all the time he knew that she wasn't. She was down there in that draw somewhere, hiding in the weeds like a frightened rabbit. How she got there, Dunc didn't know. But he could feel her presence now in the singing of his nerves.

Damn it to hell! he thought angrily. I'm not goin' to take any more chances on account of that fool girl. She gets herself into these messes; let her get herself out!

And even as he thought it he began crawling forward again, dragging the clumsy shotgun along at his side. At the bottom of the draw he rolled quietly into a deep gully and lay there for a moment, listening. The gully, which had recently carried the runoff of spring rains down to the mouth of the Canadian, was still muddy and soft at the bottom, and Dunc took a moment to clean the sticky clay from his shotgun and revolver.

His common sense told him to stay right where he was and let the girl shift for herself, but he could no more do it than he could stop breathing. Because of him, Leah Stringer was still alive, and some stubborn streak in his Lester nature would not let him lie still and see all his effort go for nothing.

So he continued his crawling, this time to the north, along the sides of the boggy wash, cursing himself and the girl every inch of the way.

He could hear the two men clearly now, their swearing and tramping in the tangle of underbrush. Sooner or later, if they kept it up, they would flush Leah, no matter what kind of hiding place she had. Dunc thought of this and knew that the chances were a hundred to one against his being able to help her.

Suddenly he stopped his crawling, holding the shotgun hard in his two big hands. "Wait a minute!" Wes Long-street called.

The hills fell silent. Even the tall pines seemed to hesitate for a moment in their eternal swaying to listen. "There she is!" Wes shouted.

Dunc came suddenly to his feet, clawing his way up the slick side of the gully. The blunt, hard punch of a rifle jarred the stillness, and now Wes and Cal went crashing through the brush, converging toward a single point.

Dunc glimpsed Leah Stringer's faded short dress flashing among the trees. He yelled to her, but she was too intent on her flight to hear the warning. Swearing again, Dunc fought his way back to the gully, slipping and sliding as he struggled to get downstream fast enough to cut her off. Once more he glimpsed the fleeing girl and yelled again.

This time she saw him. She paused for a moment, her eyes wide and senseless with fear. "Down here!" Dunc yelled. "Get in the gully!"

Poised on tiptoe, breathless and frightened, she reminded Dunc of a young doe, or some white exotic bird about to take flight.

"It's me!" Dunc yelled again. "Get down in the gully!"

She must have acted on animal instinct, for there was no recognition in her eyes. She wheeled, turned toward the wash, and fell gasping with her face

pressed to the wet, sticky clay. Dunc took her arm and tried to bring her to her feet, but she turned on him snarling, baring her teeth like a cornered timber wolf. Hell's fire! Dunc thought savagely as she clawed him. He heard Wes and Cal crashing down on them, only a few yards from the gully, and then he did something that no Lester had ever done before. He struck a woman.

With studied, controlled violence, he lifted the girl with his left hand. He dropped the shotgun for a moment against the bank of the gully and struck her quickly, feeling the tingle in his hard knuckles as his fist cracked sharply against her chin. He let her drop face down in the mud and did not think about her again for several minutes.

Calmly now, he recovered the shotgun and wiped the side plate on his trousers as Cal and Wes broke into the clear by the gully, Cal in front but limping badly on his wounded leg. He did not shout to them, for he knew that this was no time for talking. Methodically he lifted the shotgun and fired quickly from the shoulder at Cal Brunner.

With strange unconcern, Dunc watched Cal crumple against the thin air as though he had run into a stone wall. His arms flew out as the heavy buckshot tore into him.

Wes Longstreet was a dangerous hothead, but he was no fool. He jumped sideways with the instinct of a wild dog, fell in the heavy brush, and clawed his way back toward the trees. After a moment he yelled, "Goddamn you, Dunc Lester, you killed Cal!"

Dunc reloaded the shotgun and waited to see if Wes was going to force the play.

"Ike'll get you for this!" Wes cried wildly.

"I reckon," Dunc said mildly, "I'm in no more trouble than I was before." He spoke more to himself than to the man in the brush.

Wes fired once, twice, three times with his pistol, and Dunc lowered his head and let the bullets scream harmlessly over the gully. Carefully he lifted the shotgun again and fired into the brush. Wes swore and beat a hasty retreat into the woods.

Dunc stood still for a moment, thinking. He and the girl had to get out of here, and they had only one horse to do it with. There wasn't much chance of getting one of the horses that Wes and Cal had come on unless he could kill Wes first, and that was not likely. Wes Longstreet would stay where he was and come after them later, when he got his nerve worked up again.

Then Dunc began thinking in another direction. If they had to use just one horse, then it would be a lot better if Wes had no horse at all! Without looking at the girl, he hurried upstream again, stopping every few paces to listen.

Soon he heard the horses that Wes and Cal had set free to graze. There was little chance of getting to them, because he would have to cross a clearing and give Wes a „ clear shot with his rifle. But there was something else he could do.

Dunc drew his pistol and methodically emptied it at the horses, and the animals stood erect, quivering nervously, as the bullets whined like bees about them. Then Dunc raised his shotgun and fired. The horses bolted as the heavy slugs ripped through the brush, and Dunc smiled faintly as he watched them racing toward the higher peaks. That should keep Wes Longstreet grounded for a while.

Now he went back to the girl and saw that she had recovered from the blow. He thought for a moment that she was going to run from him. When he got close enough, he grabbed her.

When she began to fight him, Dunc took her by the shoulders and shook her angrily. “Ma'am,” he said tightly, “if you're just bound and determined to get yourself killed, it's all right with me. Now, do you want to go with me or do you want to wait here for Wes Longstreet to come after you? Wes ain't as good a shot as Ike Brunner, but then, maybe he'll have a better target.”

The fight seemed to go out of her. She dropped her head, leaning against the bank of the gully, and great hopeless tears welled up at the corners of her eyes and flowed down her muddy face.

It made Dunc uncomfortable to see her crying like that not making a sound, as though she were the last person left in the world. To give himself something to do, he loaded the shotgun again and blasted once more at the brush where Wes Longstreet had been, but he was sure that Wes was no longer there. At last he turned back to Leah Stringer. "I guess it's Cal Brunner," he said heavily. "You hate me for killin' him, even though he was tryin' to kill you."

She made no sound at all.

"Well," he said with as much gentleness as he could summon, "I guess we might as well get out of here." He put one arm around her, clumsily, and fed her like a small child to the far end of the wash.

The two of them camped that night in a wild-plum thicket, a full day's ride to the west. They were in the foothills now, far below and to the west of Ulster's Cave, about half a day's ride to Reunion. This was a mild country of gentle slopes and rounded peaks, of broad meadows and green valleys and not so much timber. Low-country farmers were beginning to cultivate the land up here, and occasionally you could see one of those sturdy Cherokee houses built of logs and stone, with their enormous outside chimneys, and those big rugged barns that the Indians had built here before the Civil War.

Dunc Lester was not comfortable here among all this evidence of modern civilization, but it was better than being in the hills, waiting for Ike Brunner to kill him.

He had cleared out a place in a dry wash for him and the girl, and hobbled the weary bay in the thicket. There was no use in building a fire, for there was nothing to cook. As the sun disappeared and night came down on them, Dunc opened the sack of parched corn and they ate silently. Leah Stringer had not said a word since he had brought her out of that gully almost twelve hours ago; neither had she fought against coming with him after that first outburst, nor had she cried. It was almost as though she had stopped caring what happened to her.

She had ridden behind the saddle with Dunc for twelve hours with a wound that had opened and started to bleed, but she did not complain; she did not even notice it until Dunc stopped and rebound it for her. For twelve hours he had felt the nearness of her; he had felt her cold arms around his waist and wondered what he was going to say to her when this time of silence ended.

Now the girl lay as still as death at the bottom of the wash, and Dunc sat uneasily with his back against the red-clay wall.

"Leah," he said at last.

"Yes."

"We're pretty well out of the hills. I guess it'll be a while before Ike can find us. Is there any place in particular you want to go when we start out tomorrow mornin'?"

"No."

In his awkward, manlike way he could guess at the bitterness that was choking her. He felt the impulse to reach out and touch her, to comfort her as he had seen his ma comfort the young ones when they got hurt. But he had never had much to do with girls before, and he was shy.

"Leah?"

She said nothing.

"Leah, my ma used to say that hate is a poison that you have to spit up or it will kill you. I don't reckon it would actually kill a body, but I've seen it do some pretty funny things." He was thinking of burned-over fields and buildings on his home place, and his family forced to flee. "If you feel like talkin'," he said, "I reckon I'm a pretty good listener."

For a long while she made no sound at all. Then she turned over and her pale face looked up at the darkening sky.

"He was the only thing I ever loved," she said at last, her voice toneless and dead. "The only thing I ever got a chance to love. My pa went out of his head almost whenever he saw a boy look at me. He said I was evil, and maybe he was right. He said I was born to sin, and maybe he was right

about that, too. When I laughed it made him mad. When I wanted to have a good time he claimed the devil was tempting me. So we moved away from the Indian mission, to the hills, where he claimed temptation would be removed." Her eyes moved and she looked at Dunc for the first time. "I wanted to die," she said.

"My whole world, my whole life," she went on flatly, "was locked up in that clearing, walled in by trees and hills. When Ma died there was nobody but Pa, and I think he died a little, too. And then Cal came. He came ridin' out of the woods one day, tall and handsome, and when he smiled at me I didn't care if it was sin or not. And I guess it was. Sin, I mean."

Dunc swallowed and looked up at the darkness.

"He said he'd marry me," she said, and her voice was little more than a whisper. "He said he'd take me to Arkansas and we'd live in a town where there was lots of people. But he never did it. He kept sayin' wait, and then one day Pa caught us together and shot Cal."

The way she said it, it sounded completely impersonal, as though she were reading it from a book. Then she seemed to think of something. "Did you know that Ike Brunner killed my pa?"

Dunc nodded. "That's why Ike wanted you dead. He didn't want you to tell."

"But Cal," she said, still bewildered. "He tried to kill me too. I came back to the hills to find him, but when I did, he tried to kill me."

"Cal always did what his brother told him."

"But not any more."

"No."

"You killed him."

"Yes."

She turned her face away from him. She made no sound, and he could not see very well in the darkness, but somehow he knew that she was crying again, and he hoped that some of her bitterness would be lost in the tears.

Chapter Eight

Owen Toller returned early from Reunion that Saturday. Before sundown Elizabeth saw him driving the team hard up the sharp incline toward the farm gate, and there was something about the way he stood spread-legged on the wagon bed, crouched forward at the waist, that sharpened the worry that had been nagging at her throughout the long afternoon.

He took the team straight to the barn, unhitched and unharnessed, then came to the house carrying a small box of supplies. Elizabeth tried not to see the hard, grim lines at the corners of her husband's mouth as Lonnie raced to the kitchen and clutched at Owen's leg.

"Daddy, what did you bring me?"

"I'm afraid I ran short of time today," Owen said, trying to pry his son loose.

"Did you bring some gum drops?"

"No, I didn't," Owen said shortly. "Now let go of my leg."

The small boy's face began to break up at the harshness in his father's voice. With sudden gentleness Owen said, "I'm sorry, Lonnie, but I couldn't get around to everything today, I'll make it up to you next time."

Elizabeth's gaze darted from the face of her son to that of her husband. Quickly she said, "Your daddy's busy, Lonnie. Don't bother him now." She moved the bewildered boy to the door and out of the kitchen.

Owen said, "Elizabeth, I need a can of lye, some yellow soap, and a pan of hot water."

His wife frowned in surprise. "What on earth for, Owen?"

"Never mind, just get them for me, will you?" He turned and walked stiffly to the bedroom, where he changed into his work clothes. Elizabeth had the things laid out for him when he came back to the kitchen. He gathered them up without saying another word and took them out to the barn.

An almost uncontrollable anger choked him as he attacked the job before him. One word, three feet high, was painted in brazen yellow along the full

length of the wagon bed. Owen tried not to look at it as he stirred the full can of lye into the pan of hot water, as he shaved the yellow soap into the lye water and mixed it with the stub of a broom until the rich suds slopped over on the ground. Then he lifted the foaming mixture to the wagon bed and began scrubbing the first letter with the broom stub.

He worked furiously, as though it were a matter of life and death, and under the savage scrubbing the giant letter C slowly began to disappear. When the C was completely obliterated, he attacked the letter O, then the W, working along the entire length of the wagon bed. Letter by letter, the glaring yellow-painted word COWARD disappeared from the surface of the weathered plank's.

At last he was through and stood panting, with sweat dripping from his forehead. The word was no longer there, but it still maddened him when he thought of it. While his back was turned someone had painted it there. The painter had been afraid to say the word to his face!

Slowly his rage deserted him and left him only sickness. These upright citizens who paint dirty words while a man is not looking—were they the ones he had once fought to protect? How could they have the gall to expect him to protect them now?

A good deal of Owen's anger had disappeared in the savagery of his work. But within him was something more dangerous than anger—a cold bitterness that threatened to destroy every principle he had ever believed in. Giving in to this bitterness would mean that he had thrown away the best, strongest, most productive years of his life, for it would mean that civilization was not worth saving or fighting for. It would prove that government by the people was as senseless in theory as it too often was in practice, for the people themselves were obsessed by greed and selfishness and cowardice and incapable of governing themselves. It would indicate that any form of law was idiocy.

If he accepted this conviction, born in bitterness, he must also accept the following truth, that his own ideals were idiocies. Owen Toller was not an unintelligent man; he had not risked his life a hundred times as a law-

enforcement officer without reason or principle. But now a war raged within his own mind and conscience.

That night, after the children had been put to bed, Owen sat beside the flickering light of a coal-oil lamp, staring hard and unseeing at the printed page of the Reunion Reflex. On the other side of the parlor Elizabeth did her sewing beside another lamp. Owen still fought his silent battle.

At last, after a long wordless hour, Owen put aside the paper and seemed to notice his wife for the first time. "I guess I haven't been easy to live with," he said soberly. "I'm sorry."

Elizabeth glanced up from her work, but there was nothing for her to say.

"I've been doing some thinking," Owen said quietly. "I guess I've been trying to keep things from you, and that's not right."

Elizabeth made herself smile. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"I want to. You've got a right to know how we stand in the community." He shook his head. "I'm afraid it isn't good. You heard what Arch Deland said the other day, and today I found out that it's true. They're beginning to hate me, Elizabeth. Today while I was marketing on Main Street one of them painted something on the wagon bed. The word was 'coward,' and the letters were three feet high and spread out the length of the wagon. The paint was yellow."

Elizabeth sat in shocked silence.

"So that's the way it is," he said tightly. "They're worked up like people going to a lynching or a witch burning. To hide their own cowardice, they had to find a goat, and I'm it."

His wife made a small sound in her dry throat. "Owen, are you sure it's as bad as you say?"

"I'm sure. I saw it in the faces of people who have been my friends for years. They aren't worth protecting!" he said angrily. "Even if they had put me in the sheriff's office, I think I'd quit, because they simply aren't worth the bother. But they aren't the ones who have to pay because of a gang like

the Brunners. Oh, they might beat their breasts when a load of freight comes late, but it's people like the Ransoms that suffer. And the hillpeople too. I've known them, and they're no worse than any other people. That boy that brought the wounded girl here — maybe he was a gang member, but he wasn't truly bad."

Restlessly Owen came to his feet, paced the length of the small parlor. He strode to the front door and stood looking out at the night.

"I don't know...." he said at last. "Maybe they're all right. Ben McKeever, Judge Lochland, the man who painted 'coward' on my wagon bed. If the railroad brought a spur line in here it would bring work and settle the country and maybe there wouldn't be any room left for people like the Brunners. Maybe McKeever was right about all that. And maybe Judge Lochland was right when he said the Brunners' stock in trade was hate, which they peddled to the hillpeople."

Owen turned away from the door, frowning deeply.

"Elizabeth, Judge Lochland said it was a fact of history that civilization has managed to advance, despite fear and timidity, because it has always found a man of strength to fill the breach in times of crisis. Do you believe that?" Elizabeth Toller, who had majored in history at a famous seminary in Missouri, answered, "I don't know, Owen."

"Maybe he was right," Owen said quietly, "although I can't imagine why he came to me with the story."

Elizabeth Toller looked at her husband then and tried to see him through the wise eyes of Judge Lochland. She realized that Judge Lochland had penetrated the exterior of the man and had discovered a quality that she had not recognized before. Perhaps it was not heroic in the classical sense; and yet there was strength here that she had not suspected, and moral power that she had never seen unleashed. Here was a man, but one who walked taller than other men she had known; that was why she loved him, and why she feared for him.

It was strange, but this brief insight into the bigness of the man whom she had married five years ago did not make her feel smaller by comparison; she grew a bit within her own mind to meet him.

Now, as Owen looked at her, worried by his own thoughts, Elizabeth came very erect in her chair and worked busily at her sewing. For a moment she had opened the gate of reality. She had seen her husband as others, with clearer eyes, had seen him. And she knew that a five-year dream was nearly over.

She sat quietly for a moment and discovered that her fear was not quite so formidable, now that she had faced it squarely. At last she put her sewing aside.

"Owen," she said firmly, "what do you think you should do?"

He looked puzzled, coming slowly from the depths of his own thoughts. "What should I do?"

"Do you think it's your duty to go after the Brunners?"

He blinked. "What kind of question is that? Being a husband and a father are my duties."

She stood up then and came to him. "Owen, I'm not thinking of the word that was painted on the wagon bed today, or what others might think of us. I'm not thinking of Ben McKeever and his threats, or of Judge Lochland and his appeals out of history; what they think isn't important. But what you think of yourself is. What do you think, Owen?"

He seemed almost angered at the question, but she was looking squarely into his face and he could not escape it. "I told you what I think," he said shortly. "My duty is here with my family. What do you want me to think?"

She smiled, but not with humor or with relief. "I want you to think there is nothing in the world as important as your wife, and the children, and the farm. I wouldn't be a woman if I didn't want that. And I want you to understand, the way I do, that the Brunner gang is none of your affair. They're a long way from here and they're no concern of ours. And besides, there are men like Will Cushman who are paid to take care of such trouble.

"Those are the things I want," she continued. "But I married you because you had a mind and ideals of your own. You were a law-enforcement officer, but I brought you to a farm, and I want to hold you here because I love you and I'm afraid." She shook her head and smiled again, and this time the smile was real. "You don't understand women very well, do you, Owen?"

"I guess not, if I can't understand my own wife."

"I just want you the way you are, with all your ideals and your strength. And at the same time I want you safe beside me. I'm beginning to understand that I can't have both."

She hadn't expected him to understand immediately what she was trying to tell him. But he did. For one moment he held her hard against him and said, "Thank you, Elizabeth. I never doubted for a minute that I was free to do whatever I might have to do, but thanks anyway for telling me."

That was the last they spoke of it that night. The next day Owen was out before sunup to do the morning milking, and when he came back to the kitchen with the heavy foaming buckets, he said, "Do you think you've got enough supplies to last out the week?"

And Elizabeth knew that he had made his decision. She looked at him but her voice had deserted her and she could only nod.

Later, when she went into the parlor, she saw that Owen had changed into the blue serge vest and trousers of his Sunday suit. He had brought in a straw suitcase and was now taking out a cartridge belt and holster. He buckled the belt around his waist and then began unwrapping several oily rags from around a beautifully blued, walnut-gripped Colt's single-action revolver.

He seemed uneasy when he looked up and saw his wife standing in the doorway. He said, "If you try, it won't take much to talk me out of this."

"I won't try, Owen."

"Then I guess I'll get started for Reunion pretty soon. I want to talk to Judge Lochland." With sudden impatience he tightened and refastened the

buckle of the cartridge belt. "I wish I could explain why I'm doing this," he said, "but I don't think I can."

"There's no need to explain, Owen."

"I don't know...." He shook his head. "Yesterday I caught myself hating people for the first time in my life; hating them just because they were people, with the normal fears and prejudices that you find in everybody. It was the first time that ever happened to me. Then I began to wonder if it was myself that I really hated, and if I was taking it out on others. Do you understand that, Elizabeth?"

She nodded. "Yes, I think so."

"Here I am fitted for just one job in all the world; I trained for it from the time I was big enough to hold a rifle. In all this county I'm the only man who might have a chance of going into those hills and breaking up the Brunner gang before other Frank and Edith Ransoms get killed."

"There's no need to explain," Elizabeth said again!

But Owen went on, as though he hadn't heard her. "I got to thinking about it last night. I've tried making excuses to myself because I was afraid. The person who painted that word on the wagon was not entirely wrong, because when I look up at those hills, they scare me. I think of you and Lonnie and the baby and tell myself I've got no right to take this chance."

He paused, then added: "Elizabeth, have I got that right?"

There was no answer to that. There was no rule book that said how much a man owed to himself and how much he owed to others. She put her arms around him and held him hard for one brief moment. "If I stopped you now," she said, "you would no longer be the same man I married and I think that frightens me more than anything."

Chapter Nine

It was Sunday and close to noon when Owen drove the team through Reunion's deserted Main Street and tied up in front of the courthouse. Judge Lochland would probably be in church, but someone ought to be in the sheriff's office.

Arch Deland was napping at the sheriff's desk when Owen came in. The old deputy opened his eyes and started to grin, but the expression faded when he saw the revolver at Owen's hip.

"Hello, Owen. What's the hardware for?"

"Is the sheriff around?"

"Will? He ought to be comin' out of church any minute now."

"Would you mind catching him? I'm ready to be sworn in, if he still wants me for a deputy."

Arch Deland dropped his boots from the desk in surprise. "Owen, that's a mighty poor joke!"

"It's no joke at all. If they still want me to go after the Brunners, I'm ready to give it a try." He saw what Arch's next question was going to be. "Elizabeth and I have talked it out."

The deputy said nothing for one long moment. At last he shrugged. "I don't know what's got into you, but there's somebody you better see before you light out for the hills." He took down a ring of keys from the wall and stood up. "Owen, I want you to have a talk with one of our prize boarders."

Puzzled, Owen frowned as he followed Deland out of the office and down the ringing basement corridor toward the cells of the county jail. "There he is," the deputy said, pointing at one of the barred cages, and Owen made a small sound of surprise when he saw the bushy, uncombed hair, the hard young face and angry eyes.

"You recognize him?" Deland asked.

"Yes. His name is Dunc Lester."

"Is he the one that came to your place with the hurt girl?"

Owen nodded.

"That's what I thought," Arch said. "We've got the both of them. The girl's locked in the jury room upstairs."

This was a turn that Owen hadn't expected. He walked forward to the cell door and the boy sat up on his plank bunk, glaring. "Hello, son," Owen said quietly. "What have they got you in for?"

The boy made no sound, but Deland said, "Will's holdin' him on suspicion of bein' a member of the Brunner gang. On top of that, he tried to fob a crossroads store up by Willow Creek this mornin', but we caught him. Him and the girl was tryin' to get away on one scrawny brush pony."

Owen gazed steadily at the tough, dirty, ragged young man, who looked as if he hated all the world. "Let me talk to him, Arch. Alone."

"You're welcome to try. We haven't been able to get a word out of him since they brought him in." The deputy unlocked the cell door, then locked it again when Owen was in. "You sure you don't want me to stick around?"

"I'm sure." Owen stood in the center of the tiny cell, his gaze still fixed on Dunc Lester's face. "That was a fool thing for you and Leah to do," he said mildly.

The boy rose slowly from the bunk, took hold of the iron bars, and gripped them as though he meant to tear them out with his bare hands. "I reckon it ain't the first fool thing I ever did!"

"Are you in trouble, Dunc? I don't mean just this." He glanced around at the cell. "Have you got the hillpeople down on you for some reason?"

Dunc shot a blazing glance at him but made no sound. "Are you in trouble with the Brunners?" Owen pushed.

"I don't know any Brunners!"

Owen smiled faintly. "Son, you came to me once and I gave you what help I could; it might be that I could help you now if you told me what the trouble was."

"I can take care of my own trouble!"

"And what about the girl? Can she take care of hers?" Owen saw that he had struck a soft spot in Dunc Lester's armor. "Dunc, why did you try to rob that store at Willow Creek?"

The boy stood rigid, part of his anger diluted with worry. "We ran out of grub," he said at last.

"You ran out of grub," Owen repeated quietly. "You have friends in the hills, Dunc, don't you? You have a family up there, somebody you could go to for food?"

Dunc wheeled away from the cell door, his face a cruel, hard mask. "Sure, I've got friends, only right now they're lookin' to kill me on sight!" Then he realized that he had said something that he hadn't meant to say. His trouble with the gang was personal and he had no intention of bringing outsiders into it. He turned away, his jaws locked as tight as a bear trap.

"I think you could help me, son," Owen pressed quietly. "The people around here want me to break up the gang.

I've decided to try."

"If you're bound to get yourself killed," Dunc said harshly, "that's as good a way as any."

"You won't give me a hand, then?"

"No."

"You'd rather rot away in jail?"

"Yes."

"And what about the girl? Don't you care about her?" Dunc Lester said nothing, but turned and glared. Thoughtfully Owen took his pipe from his vest pocket, tore shreds of tobacco from a piece of cut plug, and tamped it carefully into the bowl, "You know what I think, Dunc? I think you're in

trouble with the gang, probably because of the girl. Now, you must think a good deal of Leah Stringer to get yourself in the kind of fix you're in. Who shot her, son? One of the Brunner boys?" Dunc held his hard silence.

"Do you think they'll let her alone, just because you managed to get her out of the hills, Dunc? You ought to know that Ike Brunner doesn't give up that easy. It may take some time, a month, or a year, but if the Brunners have something serious against that girl, they'll find her." He paused, then added, "As long as the Brunners are free, that is. And you can't help her, son, here in jail."

This was a brutal truth that had Dunc Lester worried, and Owen knew it. For the first time in his violent young life he had come to know complete helplessness.

Now he was trying to convince himself that he didn't care about Leah, but the ring of truth was not there. He fixed his hard gaze on Owen's face, and at last he said, "Could I talk to her?"

Owen nodded. "I think I could fix that with Arch Deland."

"What will happen to her if I go with you after Ike Brunner?"

"You don't have to go with me; I just want to know where they are. I'll have the girl sent out to my farm and she can stay with my wife until you're able to meet her."

Dunc thought that over and seemed satisfied. "How many deputies are you takin' with you?"

"None. I figure a bunch of men would only scatter the gang and give the Brunners a chance to get away."

Dunc Lester grinned faintly. "There's just one Brunner. Cal's dead." He did not say how the young outlaw died, and, tactfully, Owen did not ask. "Maybe you're right about scatterin' the gang," Dunc went on, "but just one man would never stand a chance of comin' out of those hills alive."

"If he knew where Ike's headquarters was, he might."

"But he won't know," Dunc said flatly. "They used to be at Ulster's Cave, but they moved after I pulled out with Leah. I'll go with you."

This was more co-operation than Owen had expected, and his professional caution warned him to be careful. "Would you mind telling me why you suddenly changed your mind about helping?"

The question seemed to catch the boy off guard. "I'm not sure," he said. "You offered to help Leah. You did it once, so I guess you'll do it again. And you're no dude sheriff lookin' for rewards or runnin' for office."

Owen smiled. "Those reasons are as good as any, I suppose." He rattled the bars for the deputy. "Arch, can you let this boy talk to the Stringer girl?"

"It's against Will's orders."

"I'll stand responsible to the sheriff."

Arch shrugged. "Well, I never liked this job much, anyway. But one of us will have to stay with them."

"I'll do it," Owen said. He waited for Deland to unlock the cell door, then took the key to the jury room and nodded to Dunc. The boy stepped cautiously out of the cell, his eyes darting suspiciously from one face to the other. "It's no trap," Owen said, "I'm just taking you up to talk to Leah. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

Yes." And some of his suspicion seemed to vanish. There was curiosity in his glance, but he was slowly learning that all outsiders were not so completely mean as Ike Brunner had made them out.

Owen could feel that the boy trusted him, and he grinned at Arch Deland's dubious frown. "If Will comes in while we're gone, ask him to wait."

They went up the basement stairs to the ground floor, and up another flight to the courtroom. "I'll have to stay with you until I arrange for your release with the sheriff," Owen said.

They walked the length of the courtroom to a door behind the judge's bench. Owen unlocked the door and the two of them stepped inside. Leah was at one end of the jury table, her face buried in her arms, as though she were asleep. She made a startled little sound when the door opened.

"It's all right, Leah," Dunc Lester said. "The marshal here's goin' to help us."

Owen had not guessed that this hard young man could be so gentle. The girl came to her feet, her eyes wide, and Dunc went to her and took her hands. "Everything's goin' to come out fine," he said softly. "The marshal's goin' to send you out to his place to stay with his wife." He kept talking for a long while, and it wasn't what he said so much as the sound of his voice that seemed to quiet her.

At last the girl looked at him, and it was almost as if she had never seen him before. "I'm glad they let you talk to me," she said.

"Thank the marshal for that."

"Is he goin' to take you back to jail?"

"No. I'm goin' with him back to the hills."

"Ike'll kill you!" There was a new kind of fear in her voice.

"Don't you believe it," the boy said. "I'll be back before you know it. Leah... will you wait for me?"

The girl looked at him for a long time with a surprised expression, and suddenly she threw her arms around Dunc Lester's neck. Owen didn't hear what else they said; he went outside and waited for the boy on the other side of the door.

When he came out, he said, "I think she'll be all right."

"I'm sure she will," Owen said thoughtfully, and they turned to the stairs and went back down to the basement.

Arch Deland had just got the boy back in his cell when Will Cushman came into the office on his way home from church. "Well!" the sheriff said, surprised at seeing Toller in the room. "What brings you to Reunion, Owen?"

"To have you swear me in as a deputy. If you still want me for the job."

Cushman blinked, frankly pleased. "Good! The people of this county will be forever grateful, Owen."

"There's one condition," Owen continued. "That boy you have locked up — I want him sworn in with me."

The sheriff's face grew suddenly red. "That's impossible, Owen! The boy's an outlaw!"

"And a member of the Brunner gang," Owen finished, "which is why I want him with me. And the girl you have upstairs—I want her released and sent out to my farm to stay until I get back."

Will Cushman wanted to protest, but his good sense gained the upper hand. Being county sheriff hadn't been exactly pleasant these past few weeks, with all the county officials demanding action and political enemies demanding his scalp. To break up that gang he was ready to do almost anything—except go after them himself.

Uneasily Cushman took out a clean white handkerchief and wiped his face. "All right, Owen," he said. "Whatever you say. When do you want to be sworn in?"

"This is as good a time as any, I suppose."

It was midafternoon when they rode out of Reunion—Owen Toller, whose fame and daring lay behind him, and Dunc Lester, whose anger had brought him to manhood before his time. They had county horses and county rigs; a strong but shaggy roan for Owen and a hammer-headed gray for the boy. A big-footed work horse had been fitted out as a pack animal, loaded with grub packs, cooking utensils, blankets, and ammunition.

Arch Deland saddled with them at the county corral and said, "I'll ride a piece with you, Owen, if you don't mind."

Owen studied his old friend with grim amusement, noting the booted carbine on the deputy's saddle, the saddlebags bulging with odds and ends of clothing and boxes of rim-fire cartridges. "How far do you figure a piece is?" Owen asked, grinning faintly.

Deland shrugged. "Till I get tired, maybe. I figure Will won't miss my services much."

They camped that night in a hollow between two hills. They fried bacon and warmed canned beans in the fat and ate together out of the iron skillet.

When darkness came down, Dunc Lester said, "We better put out the fire." Arch and Owen looked at each other, and the old deputy said, "We're still in the foothills, son, a full day's ride to high ground."

The boy didn't bother to answer, but scooped up handfuls of dirt and smothered the fire, and for the rest of the night they were a little more alone, and the chill of early spring was in the air.

They did not talk much after the fire had been put out. Before that time Dunc had told them a little of what had happened; about the home place, and old Mort Stringer, but he never mentioned the girl. After the fire was out they did not speak of Ike Brunner and the gang, but each of them would look, from time to time, at those dark hills ahead of them. They knew how news traveled in this country. Before long Ike Brunner would know all about them, these three volunteers who had set out from Reunion to bring in the leader of the gang.

Maybe, Owen Toller thought, the three of us will have a chance. The longer he thought about it, the more certain he was that three was the right number. One more would have been too many, but three men could travel almost as quickly and quietly as one, provided all of them were familiar with the country, as they were.

Resting against his saddle, Owen smiled faintly at the darkness. The bitter humor of the situation occurred to him, and he thought, We are the volunteers. A wild young outlaw, a farmer, an aged deputy. Out of all the people in this county, it finally boiled down to just the three of us.

But soon his mind took another turn and he realized that the word "volunteer" hardly applied to any of them. Be truthful, he warned himself; look at yourself and the others. And now he saw himself and Dunc and Arch in a truer perspective, and he understood that none of them had entered this thing for unselfish reasons. No, he thought quietly, we have our reasons. Our own battles to fight.

Dunc Lester had the girl, he himself had his anger, and Arch Deland had his memories. To the old deputy civilization was a cage with no doors. Statehood had brought the end of an era; it had cut off the purpose in Arch

Deland's life, which, in a way, was worse than dying. It had left an old man with nothing to do and, except for his memories, empty.

Now it seemed strange to Owen that he had not detected this lack of purpose and emptiness in his old friend.

Owen himself had felt it at times, but in Elizabeth and the children he had found something else to take the place of the life he had left behind. Something finer and better than anything he had known before.

For the first time in his life, Owen experienced pangs of pity for his friend, for he understood now that Arch had volunteered because he sought to return to the past, where he had been a man of consequence.

And what about myself? Owen asked silently. Certainly I am no hero. The very thought made him uncomfortable. But why did I leave my family to undertake a fool thing like this, anyway?

He was not searching for the past, like Arch Deland, for he held the future in his hands. And he was no wild hill boy bursting with hate and fear and the love of a girl, like Dunc Lester. But he had come.

Owen pondered this slowly. He hated like death to admit that Ben McKeever and all the others had defeated him and brought him to heel, but perhaps that was the answer after all.

Chapter Ten

After a hard climb they reached a crest known as Hogback the next afternoon. Dunc Lester had guided them around the scattered hill-country farms, through heavy timber, along rocky trails that could hardly be seen a few feet away. Owen and Deland were not strangers to this country. As a haven for outlaws, the Cooksons ranked second only to the western wastelands of the Panhandle, and as U.S. deputies they had ridden this high wilderness often. Still, they did not know the land as Dunc Lester did, and Owen was grateful that the boy had come.

Now the three of them paused in a small clearing to blow the horses, and Dunc got down and walked stiffly to the far edge of the ridge, and there was bleakness in his eyes as he stood there, gazing hard at the land below.

Arch brought the pack horse up to graze, and Owen got down and loosened the cinch on his roan. The two men looked at each other, then at the boy.

"What is it?" Owen called.

"Maybe you'd like to see."

When Owen and Arch reached the place where the boy stood, they saw below them a small blackened clearing and the charred remains of a cabin and a few outbuildings.

"What is it?" Deland asked.

"Nothin' now. It used to be our home place."

Owen and Arch looked at each other quickly and frowned. "I think we'd better move back in the timber," Owen said. "If Ike Brunner is as smart as he's supposed to be, he'll figure you'll come back to this place and have it watched."

"I was here before," Dunc said, "and nothin'-happened. The Tanis place is on the other side of the slope, but they can't see us from here."

"Is Tanis a member of the gang?"

Dunc nodded, and Arch Deland was already headed back toward the horses at an awkward trot. "What's the matter?" the boy asked, vaguely disturbed.

Then, before Owen could answer, they heard something over to the right, in a heavy growth of scrub oak and pine. Owen was running almost instantly toward a rock outcropping to his left, calling to the old deputy:

"Arch, get the horses back in the timber!"

Before the words were out, a rifle spoke sharply in the afternoon, and one of the horses reared and screamed. Owen swore softly, knowing that the boy had led them blindly into a trap. "Arch!" he yelled again, and then the rifle spoke for the second time and a bullet screamed past Owen's head and went ripping into the woods.

Arch Deland hit the ground and rolled into some brush. Owen saw him get up and head toward the horses, but the sickness in his stomach told him that the horses were gone. He could hear them crashing through the timber in panic.

Owen hit the ground and scrambled toward the outcropping. Dunc Lester had bolted toward the edge of the clearing and now had shelter in the woods.

Suddenly the hills were quiet, except for the echoes of rifle fire resounding down through the draws and valleys. Owen had drawn his revolver, but there was nothing now to shoot at. He heard the horses crashing down the sheer rock-strewn slope behind them, but there was no time to worry about that now. Crouching, Owen shoved himself away from the rock and headed for the woods, and this time he saw the curl of gun smoke rise up near the far end of the ridge.

Another rifle exploded, much nearer this time. Arch Deland had seen the smoke too and was going to work with his carbine. Deland fired once, twice, three times, and the lead slugs ripped noisily into the scrub-oak thicket. Then, once more, all was silent.

Owen had reached the woods by this time and could see the deputy resting his carbine across the rump of his dead horse.

Long, tense minutes passed and the silence held. Then they all heard the sound of a horse far below, and Owen came to his feet and ran to the far end of the ridge. Dunc Lester came up, and finally Arch Deland, and the three of them watched helplessly as the horsemen disappeared into the timber below.

Owen glanced at the boy. "Did you know him?"

The muscles of the youth's throat drew tight in anger and he balled his hard fists as though to hit someone. "Yes. It was Gabe Tanis."

"Your neighbor?"

"For almost as long as I can remember."

Arch Deland sighed wearily. "I guess that doesn't mean much when you're a member of the gang." He glanced back across the clearing at his dead horse, and smiled bitterly. "It's goin' to be a long walk wherever we go."

Thoughtfully Owen reloaded from his cartridge belt.

"Maybe Ike will loan us some horses," the deputy said wryly.

Dunc Lester glanced hard at the two men. "Maybe Ike Brunner won't have anything to say about it. Gabe's leavin' a pretty wide trace through the woods, and my guess is it'll lead us right to the gang headquarters."

Owen had been thinking the same thing, and he had also been wondering how far away it was and how long it would take Ike to bring enough men to wipe them out. A little nervous ripple went up his back like a cold finger. He was not frightened, but he was acutely aware of the odds against them.

Weeds will take my crops in a matter of days, he thought, and here I am afoot on some damn hilltop when I ought to be home! And a longing for Elizabeth and the children rose up in his throat and almost choked him.

"I guess it's up to you, Owen," Arch Deland said. "What do we do now?"

"First we'll see what we've got left to work with."

They went back to the fallen animal and counted out cartridges that Deland had brought along. There were two boxes of .45's that would fit

Owen's and Deland's revolvers, and a box of 30-30's for Arch's carbine, but no ammunition for Dunc Lester's shotgun or ancient .44.

"Well," Arch said, "there's a thousand-to-one chance that we might be able to round up our horses."

But this was not to be the day for miracles. They climbed laboriously down to the bottom of the sheer incline and at last found their pack animal, which had broken its neck in a fall. But the frightened saddle animals were probably still running, and the men had no time to look for them.

"At least," Deland said, "we've got a sizable stock of ammunition."

Together they tore into the bulky pack and scattered their store over the ground. Owen went through it quickly but carefully, sorting out what they needed most and discarding all the rest. At last he had a pile of ammunition, blankets, jerked beef, and hardtack. The slab of bacon, canned goods, corn meal, and cooking utensils had to be left behind.

They worked fast now, for there was no way of knowing how far away Ike Brunner had moved his new hideout. They divided the necessary supplies into three equal piles, according to weight, then ripped the tarp into three squares and made their own individual packs. Arch Deland grunted as he slipped his arms through the rope loops and hoisted his bundle to his shoulders.

Owen looked sharply at the old deputy. "If that's too heavy, Arch, we'd better split the supplies again." But Deland grinned. "I've toted a lot heavier than this in my time."

They inspected the ground one last time to make sure they had forgotten nothing, then Owen nodded and the three of them humped forward under the weight of their packs and started up the rocky slope.

The June sun seemed unbelievably hot as they continued their long climb. Arch Deland was already blowing hard, and Owen wondered uneasily if he had made a mistake in not making a search for the horses. They could have found them, in time.

But time was important, and he knew that he had done the right thing. Still, he did not like the high, hot color of Deland's face as the old deputy stumbled after them on that trackless slope. At last they reached a point where they could see the valley to the east and the point where Gabe Tanis had entered the woods.

Once they reached the woods, they would have some small measure of protection, but here on the hillside they were glaring targets for a long-range rifle. Owen knew they ought to keep pushing hard until they reached the trees, but he could hear Arch Deland's hoarse breathing and was worried.

At last Owen lifted his hand. "We'll take a minute here and rest."

Dunc Lester scowled. "I reckon that won't be very smart."

Owen shot him one blinding glance and the boy understood. Not so strangely, Dunc had taken a liking to this thin scarecrow of an old man who claimed to be a former U.S. marshal, like Owen Toller. He dropped his pack and helped Deland off with his. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Fine," the deputy panted. "Just a little winded." Owen squatted down with his back against a giant fish-shaped boulder and accused himself of stupidity for letting Arch come with them in the first place. The deputy grinned wearily, knowing what Owen was thinking.

"I'll get my second wind in a minute, Owen. I'll try not to cause any more trouble."

Owen felt his face go warm, and he did not know what to say. He nodded. "Sure, Arch."

But he knew that it had been a mistake. Arch's great experience and proven courage could have been a tremendous asset; but now that they were afoot in this wild country, it was a different story. This was work for strong, young men like Dunc Lester, and Owen felt the muscles of his own legs quiver with the unaccustomed strain of the climb. He smiled wryly to himself. I too am an old man, he thought. Oh, not so old as Arch Deland, but too old for the job I've cut out for myself.

And he looked beyond the tall green timber to the boulder-strewn peaks that lay before them, and once again he felt that nervous little ripple go up his back.

They rested there on the hillside for several minutes and then shouldered their packs once more, casting humpbacked shadows on the ground, and started down toward the umbrella of forest in the valley.

When they had covered about half the distance to the timber, Owen came suddenly alert as the mournful, chopped howl of a coyote rose up beyond a distant hill. Owen shot an uneasy glance at Deland, and the deputy understood. It was not a common thing to hear a coyote in this country. Wolves, yes, but the coyote usually preferred the plains below, the sloughs and washes of the prairies.

Then Owen noticed that Dunc Lester's hard young face seemed even harder than usual. "That's a sentry from one of Ike's outposts," he said quickly. They listened again and the sound seemed to come from the north and a bit to the east, where a rock-strewn chain of peaks rose up slightly above the surrounding hills.

"Do you know that country, Dunc?"

The boy shrugged. "Killer Ridge, it's called, but I've never been there. Nothing up there but boulders and rocks and maybe a little scrub oak and spruce."

"How about caves?"

Dunc raked the entire chain with a glance. "There's caves and tunnels all over these hills, and I guess Killer's got them too."

Arch Deland said, "Could that coyote call have been Gabe Tanis giving the signal to one of Ike's sentries?"

Dunc nodded. "I'd bet on it. It won't be long before Ike has the gang out lookin' for us."

Once more they started their dangerous descent, and this time Dunc carried Deland's rifle as well as his own shotgun. Owen saw that they were going to enter the timber several hundred yards below the trace that Gabe

Tanis had taken, which made him breathe a bit easier. If that was the trail the gang used, he'd just as soon wait a while before exploring it further.

Once in the green, clean-smelling stand of pine, the three felt more at ease. They found a green mossy clearing deeper in the woods, and from this place they could see most of the valley and the rocky slope they had descended. Here they dropped their packs and sprawled in the dark shade, gasping for breath.

Owen was struck by the sorry sight they made. But this was the game as it had to be played, as the wolf played it, as he had played it himself many times. Three men could not possibly meet the Brunners head on in battle, and more men would scatter the gang and the game would be lost. There was just one way to take Ike Brunner, and that was to isolate him from his men and take him alone. It was not a good system, for it eliminated plans, and too often the hunter became the hunted, as they were now. But it was the only system possible when the hunters were few and the hunted many. And by this system a small handful of government marshals had managed to keep control of the entire Indian Territory for almost eighty years, and men like Owen Toller and Arch Deland knew its strength as well as its weakness.

So now they waited. And they watched the valley below and after a while they heard the clatter of hoofs and the clang of iron shoes against the rocks, and soon a cluster of horsemen broke into the open where Gabe Tanis had entered the woods.

They did not look like much, these horsemen. Most of them were kids near Dunc Lester's age, with a scattering of bitter-faced old-timers almost as old as Arch Deland. Some of them wore homespun, which was becoming more and more rare in this new state, but most of them wore bib overalls and hickory shirts and heavy sodbuster shoes. They were dirty and patched and ragged and did not look like much of an army, despite a formidable array of shotguns and rifles and pistols..

But you could not judge an army by its dress. Lee's Virginians had fought in bare feet and rags. The Quahada Comanches wore breechclouts and feathers, but Custer had called them the finest light cavalry in the world.

So Owen did not judge these horsemen by their clothing, but by their faces and what he saw written in their eyes. He did not like what he saw there. Anger and hopelessness and violence. Owen had seen that look before, but at first he could not remember where.

Then his memory took him back all the way to his childhood, and he knew where he had seen that look before. His father had been a trader at Camp Supply and Owen had been very young. But he still remembered those times of trouble, when the Plains Indians began to feel the white man's civilization closing tighter and tighter around them, and they rebelled.

Of course, Owen hadn't understood it at the time, but he could still see that helpless anger in the eyes of Comanches and Kiowas and Cheyennes who came to the post to trade. It was the same look he saw now in the faces of these hillpeople, and the look that he had seen more than once in Dunc Lester's eyes.

He felt that he understood these people better. For perhaps these people were the last of the rugged individualists, outlasting the Indians even, but now they saw that they could not hold back the outsiders forever. Perhaps they knew they could not win, which would explain the hopelessness of their anger. But that would not stop them from fighting.

Owen continued to search the distant faces of the horsemen as more of them came out of the timber, and now he recognized the gangly figure of Gabe Tanis, who was talking excitedly to a tall, big-boned man astride a gawdy paint. Dunc Lester made an abrupt, animal-like sound.

"There he is!"

"Ike Brunner?"

"The one talkin' to Gabe."

Arch Deland had watched quietly, saying nothing. Now he turned to Owen. "He's got quite an army with him. Eighteen men, by my count."

"Eighteen good men," Dunc said tightly, to no one in particular. Then, to Owen, "Ike must of sent out the call. Usually he doesn't keep more'n six or

eight men at the hideout." He wiped his hand across his mouth. "So I guess they knew all about us, even before Gabe flushed us."

Now Tanis was pointing up at the slope where they had been a short time ago, and Ike Brunner kneed his paint to the head of the column. Arch Deland was squinting thoughtfully over the sights of his carbine. "The range is too much," he said regretfully. "If I had a long barrel it would be easy."

"It's just as well," Owen grunted. "We couldn't handle all of them."

Soon the horsemen had disappeared on the other side of the slope and Owen knew that they would soon find the dead saddle animal and pack horse and figure out what had happened. He stood up wearily and lifted his pack. "We'd better move back into the timber. I doubt if they'll think to look in this direction for a while."

They started east again up a hard, steady grade. Here the timber became more scattered, and giant boulders reared up out of the ground. Ahead of them they could see the bleak, scrubby line of Killer Ridge, and the broken land in between. They continued their march for almost two hours before they heard the Brunner horsemen returning.

They took cover behind rocks and counted the riders as they topped a crest far to the south. "Ten of them," Arch Deland said. Owen nodded. "Including Ike Brunner. That means there are still eight of them out there somewhere looking for us." He looked up at the sun and saw that dusk was drawing near.

They went on a short distance until they came on a gaping cave in the side of a hill. The place was grown up in blackjack and spruce, and they broke through the thicket and stood for a moment, gaping in wonder at the dark hole that seemed to reach endlessly back into that great mound of rock.

"We'll wait here till dark," Owen said. The three of them sank to the ground near the mouth of the cave, and long, cool shadows lay over them as they rested. Dunc Lester was the first to get up, and he stood off at a distance, gazing darkly at the ridge. At last he said, "It won't be easy gettin' up there."

"We'll have to find a way," Owen said. "Ike's not going to get far from his headquarters by himself."

Arch Deland fought his breathing back to normal, but he made no attempt to get to his feet. "Sayin' that ridge is where Brunner's got his hideout," he said, "and sayin' we manage to get up there somehow without gettin' killed... suppose we do all of that, and get our hands on Ike Brunner in the bargain. Then how're we goin' to get back again? Have you thought about that, Owen?"

Owen shot the old deputy a quick glance. "Yes, I've thought about it."

"You figured how we're goin' to do all that without gettin' our fool selves killed?"

"No." Deland laughed. "I haven't either. It poses an interesting problem, doesn't it?"

Owen grinned, showing his relief. Arch Deland might not be so strong in body, but you didn't have to worry about his nerve.

Dunc Lester said shortly, "I think I'll take a look around."

Owen and Deland glanced at each other as the boy picked up his shotgun, swinging it like an ax to clear a path through the thicket. They watched him climb quickly from rock to rock up the side of the hill until he had disappeared.

Chapter Eleven

Dunc Lester lay as still as a sunning I lizard as the three horsemen passed less than a hundred yards away. The lead rider was Wes Longstreet; the others were Pat Fulsom and Homer Clinkscale, two boys from up Verdigris way. Warily Dunc watched them over the knobbed front sight of his shotgun, but they did not look in his direction. They were headed toward Ulster's Cave, probably thinking that was where he had taken the marshal and the old deputy.

Wherever they were headed, Dunc was thinking, they sure meant business. Wes Longstreet looked fit to be tied, and Dunc guessed that the young Arkansawyer had caught the brunt of Ike's rage when Cal was killed.

Dunc glanced about him to get his own position straight. Over to the east, in the general direction in which the three riders were headed, a hill farmer named Manley Cooper had a cabin and a little piece of ground. But, as far as Dunc knew, Cooper had never had anything to do with the gang. Cooper came from hardheaded Dutch stock and didn't have much to do with anybody, which was why he lived up there so far away from anybody.

Dunc was vaguely puzzled when he saw the horsemen ride straight on a course that would take them across Cooper's land, and he thought, Ike ain't goin' to like that at all!

At last the three riders disappeared around the far side of the slope, still holding their course, and Dunc shrugged. It was no skin off his nose. He turned his mind to other things.

From a distance he could have been mistaken for part of the great sandstone slab on which he lay, and the working of his mind seemed almost connected to the immobility of his lean, hard body. Dunc Lester was thinking, and the process was difficult and slow.

For the entire day he had been cussing himself for a damn fool. The three of them didn't stand a chance in a thousand of cutting Ike Brunner away from the herd; and even if they did, it could easily turn out that Ike was a better man than all three of them put together. The marshal was all right,

but to Dunc's way of thinking Owen Toller did not have the steel it took to fight a man like Brunner. A wife and family and five years of inactivity had softened him.

Then, as so often happened these days, he found himself thinking of Leah Stringer. It was a funny thing how a man's thoughts could get stuck on something and fix him so he could hardly think of anything else. That was the way it was with him. He could close his eyes and right off he could see her; he could almost feel the silkiness of her hair and the warmth of her hard young body.

That's the way it was and there was very little that he could do about it. It was a fact that he wanted Leah Stringer, and he wanted a cabin of his own here in the hills, and maybe a piece of ground. And he also wanted his folks to come back and live in peace with their neighbors. It didn't seem like so much to ask. A few weeks ago it would have been a simple thing, only of course he hadn't known Leah then.

What it all boils down to, he thought angrily, is Ike Brunner. That was the knowledge that always stopped him when he began to think that the job was foolish and impossible. He had much to fight for. And this made his understanding of Toller and Deland all the more difficult. What were they fighting for? What stake did they have in these Hills?

This thing worried him, for it was beyond his understanding why these two outsiders should risk their lives hunting Ike Brunner.

Dunc lay there until he became aware of the long shadows and failing light. Quickly he took up his shotgun, dropped like a cat from the stone slab, and began beating his way once more toward the east. He moved quickly and silently, so intent in his study of the ridge that he forgot for a moment about the Cooper place.

Not until he was almost upon the clearing did he begin to sense that something was wrong there. He was instantly aware of his position, and the silence here was unusual, in some way disturbing. Darkness was coming quickly and Dunc knew that he should be starting back for the cave, but this deathlike silence bothered him. Suddenly he reversed his

direction and started climbing toward a point from which he could see the Cooper clearing.

When he reached it he knew what it was that had bothered him, and he knew the reason for the uneasy silence. Manley Cooper's cabin and log outbuildings had been burned to the ground, his small field of tobacco and potatoes trampled. There was no sign of life anywhere.

Well, Dunc thought wryly, it looks like somebody else got in Ike Brunner's way. He did not feel any particular emotion on viewing the ruins, for the Coopers had stayed to themselves and Dunc hadn't known them very well. But it did set him to thinking. First the Lesters, now the Coopers.... Maybe some of the folks were beginning to doubt that Ike Brunner was their savior, after all.

It was well past dark by the time Dunc made his way back to the cave. Arch Deland was there by himself.

"Where's the marshal?" Dunc asked.

"Went out to look around, like you. Did you find anything?"

Then they heard movement in the brush below, and Dunc and Deland wheeled around, shotgun and rifle at the ready. "Owen?" the deputy called quietly.

"Yes." After a moment Owen broke out of the thicket, wiping his face on his sleeve. "Looks like the ridge is our place, all right," he said wearily. "I think I've found the way the gang gets up there, but there's not much chance for us. There must be three outposts up there, and there's a narrow pass near the top." He sat down near the mouth of the cave and looked at Dunc. "Did you learn anything, son?"

"I was up at the east end," Dunc said. "We'd never get to the top with horses, but we might be able to make it on foot."

"Good!" Owen broke open the grub sack and took out some jerked beef. "The closer we can get to the hideout, the better off we'll be. I don't think Ike will be looking for us in his own back yard."

"Which doesn't say he might not stumble on us," Arch Deland said mildly.

"That's a chance we'll have to take. We'll eat and get some rest and then try it Dunc's way, at the other end."

"It won't be easy at night," Dunc said.

"It would be tougher in the daytime."

For several moments they said nothing, chewing the tough dried beef as they rested. At last Dunc said, "I saw something kind of funny while I was out. There's an old farmer and his family that used to live over there to the east; his name's Cooper. I came past there and the placer was burned out."

Owen's head came up with interest. "You mean the Brunners burned him out?"

"It looked that way. Just like my family's place, burned to the ground."

Arch Deland smiled faintly, but not with humor. "So Ike is having to resort to force." He looked at Owen. "One thing leads to another when you start that kind of thing. This could be the beginnin' of the end for Ike Brunner."

"Yes," Owen said, but all of them knew that the end could be a long time coming. Eventually Ike would go too far, burn out the wrong family, kill the wrong man, and all the hills would turn against him. But that might take months, and in the meantime Ike would be free to loot and kill as he pleased.

"Well," Owen said at last, standing up, and the others knew what he meant.

"It shouldn't be so tough," Deland said. "It's getting darker all the time."

The three men shouldered their packs again, picked up their guns, and Owen said, "You'd better lead the way, Dunc."

They moved in Indian file away from the cave, climbing up the rocky slope, and soon Owen and Deland were fighting to control their breathing. They stumbled on for perhaps an hour, the clawlike arms of blackjack tearing at them as the trail grew more treacherous. From time to time they stumbled over rocks or roots hidden in the dark shadows and fell. After each fall Arch Deland was slower to get up.

"We'd better rest a minute," Owen said at last, and the three of them dropped to the ground and did not speak for several minutes.

Then the white underbelly of the moon showed through the curtain of clouds, and they caught a glimpse of Killer Ridge in the distance. "A long piece to travel without a horse," Arch Deland said with grim humor.

"A horse would never make it, anyway," Owen said. "Well, we'd better get started if we want to make it before sunup."

They started again, and this time it was a bit easier, for they began the long downgrade march to the east. Dunc pointed out the direction of the Cooper place, but Owen merely grunted, and Arch Deland was too winded, to speak.

Owen was quick to hear the sound of hoofs. The three men halted and stood like statues on the dark slope, and the horses seemed to be coming right toward them. They could see nothing.

Then suddenly the moon came out again and the hill was bathed in light, and to Owen's eyes the light was brighter than any sun's. The three horsemen, only about twenty yards away, reined lip sharply. One of the men swore harshly and a pistol shot roared among the hills.

Abruptly the night exploded with the thunder of guns, and the horses reared crazily and pranced excitedly along the rocky slope.

Someone shouted a warning, but Owen did not recognize his own voice. He went down on one knee and fired once, twice with his revolver, and almost at the same instant Dunc Lester's shotgun roared. They heard a scream and a horse went racing wildly down the hillside. Still firing, two of the riders jumped from their saddles and raced toward the protection of brush and rocks.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the moon vanished. Darkness covered them like a blanket, and for a moment all was silent.

Owen reached out blindly, crawled through the brush until he felt the cold solidity of stone, and rested briefly against the boulder and tried to think.

Then, only a few feet away, he heard Dunc Lester cursing savagely to himself.

"Where's Deland?" Owen called quietly.

Dunc stopped his cursing. "I thought he was with you."

A chill settled around Owen Toller's heart. "Arch," he called softly.

There was no answer. He called again, and this time a flash of fire stabbed at the night, but the old deputy made no sound. Calmly Dunc Lester leveled his shotgun and fired at the flash, and then all was quiet again. Owen reached out and touched the boy's arm. "Watch with your ears," he said.. "Try to keep them where they are and don't let them get us in a cross fire."

"Where're you goin'?" Dunc asked.

"To find Arch."

He slipped away from the boulder, feeling out the back-trail with his hands. Then his hand touched a hard leather object and he knew that it was Arch Deland's boot.

"Arch, are you all right?"

He crawled closer and now he felt the stickiness of warm blood just below the buckle of the deputy's cartridge belt. He took a limp hand but felt no pulse. He pressed his ear to Deland's chest and heard the beat. Owen sagged for a moment on his hands and knees while relief washed over him.

"Owen."

The voice was weak and sounded far away, and it was the most welcome sound Owen had ever heard. "Yes, Arch, it's Owen."

"Is it all over?"

"Not by a long shot!" And he made himself laugh. "You were born to die in bed!"

"I mean the fight. Is it over yet?"

"Not yet, but I think we got one of them. They must be part of the Brunner gang. We just stumbled onto them."

The deputy tried to laugh and ended by coughing. "I guess you've got things to do. Don't let me keep you."

"I'll move you up the hill a bit," Owen said quietly. "Behind the boulder."

But a thin, involuntary sound escaped Deland's throat when Owen tried to lift him. Very gently Owen laid the old deputy back down. "On second thought, maybe you'll be better off right where you are. We'll have this thing cleaned up in a minute; then we'll take care of you right."

"Sure," Deland said. "Don't worry about me."

Owen heard the bleakness in that weak voice and felt sick with helplessness. Until this moment he had tried to keep his mind clear and free of emotion, but now he was seized with an anger blacker than the night. He smoothed the ground under Arch's head and tried to make him a bit more comfortable, and that was all he could do. There was very little that he could do about the wound; the bullet had come from a rifle and the hole was small and clean and the bleeding had already stopped.

"Take it easy, Arch," Owen said tightly.. "I'll try not to drag this out." Then he picked up the deputy's carbine and crawled back up the hill to where Dunc Lester was waiting.

"How is he?" Dunc asked.

"Rifle bullet in the groin. I couldn't tell how bad."

Dunc cursed again. "Goddamn it, I ought to of remembered! I saw them when I was out scoutin', but I forgot to tell you."

"Are they Brunner's men? Did you recognize them?"

"Sure, they're Wes Longstreet and two boys from up toward the Verdigris. Wes is one of Ike's top hands; been with him ever since the gang was formed."

"Where are they now?"

"They haven't moved, far as I can tell. The last gun flash came from about thirty yards straight ahead." He sounded vaguely uneasy, but not frightened. "I can't say I like this much. Ike's outposts can't miss hearin' all this shootin', and pretty soon they're goin' to be comin' out to see what it's all about."

"They can't find us in the dark."

"You don't have to see too well to locate a battle."

"Well," Owen said grimly, "we'll have to end the battle." He checked the carbine and reloaded his revolver. "You stay here. I'll be back before long." Dunc started to protest, but Owen had already slipped around the boulder and disappeared in the brush.

The guns up ahead ripped the night wide open. Quickly Dunc blasted his shotgun at the flashes, then grabbed his ancient revolver and emptied it. Suddenly it was quiet again.

Dunc felt weak, and the sweat was cold on his face. He peered into the darkness until his eyes began to jump, but there was no sign of the marshal anywhere. What the hell's he tryin' to do? Dunc raged to himself. Does he want to get his fool self killed?

The seconds dragged slowly by and little ripples of nervousness crawled up Dunc Lester's back as he reloaded shotgun and revolver. Seconds were getting more precious all the time. Why did I ever get in this mess in the first place? he wondered angrily. And for a moment his cornered savagery went out in all directions, and he hated Toller and Ike Brunner alike. Now that fool marshal's got himself killed, he thought. And the old deputy's shot in the groin and can't move. What the hell am I goin' to do?

Then his sharp, trained ears picked up a whisper of sound in the darkness, a gentle, almost silent movement of stones and brush. Dunc's rage deserted him and he felt only relief. Toller was out there somewhere, still alive.

Still the seconds ticked away. They were tied to this particular piece of ground. Brunner's men wouldn't let them leave. All they could do was wait for the rest of the gang to find them. And that would be the end.

But Dunc had recovered from his moment of panic. For one wild moment he had considered desertion, but he had recognized the impossibility of such action, simply because he had so much at stake here, too much to run away from.

Several yards in front of Dunc Lester, Owen lay perfectly still, hardly breathing, in a dark thicket of scrubby blackjack. A short distance away Brunner's men were waiting, but Owen could not see them. Vaguely he could make out the shapes of many boulders, but there was no way of knowing behind which boulders the gunmen were waiting. I've come as far as I can, he thought, without giving myself away.

He reached out with his right hand and found a small stone the size of his fist. His rage lay tight within him like a coiled steel spring, and he thought, I hope Dunc's ready. I hope he doesn't shoot me in the back.

Then he flipped the stone over to his right and suddenly the darkness was ripped and torn by gunfire. Owen smiled bitterly, spotting the two guns and the boulder, and then the noise was compounded by the bellowing of Dunc Lester's shotgun, and then by the boy's revolver. In that brief interval of quiet, before Dunc could start up again, Owen leaped to his feet and rushed the boulder recklessly.

To make things worse, the moon chose that particular moment to appear again, and Owen experienced the brief terror of a man racing naked through a nightmare. But perhaps, after all, the moon was the thing that saved him. Dunc Lester held his fire and Owen crashed through the brush with all the noise of a range cow in stampede.

The sudden noise and his abrupt appearance in white moonlight must have startled the two gunmen for just an instant, and an instant was all that Owen asked for. Suddenly before him loomed the flushed, youngish face of one of the gang members. He's just a kid, Owen thought. But there was no time to think of it further. Surprised, the young man curled back his lips in rage and swung his heavy saddle gun to face the charge.

He did not get to complete the turn. Owen triggered Deland's carbine once, and the face fell away.

Another man appeared from behind the boulder, and this one was also young and angry, and his hair was the color of burnished copper. Owen knew that this must be Wes Longstreet, for his pale blue eyes held the bitterness of great age, although his body was young and tough.

Snarling, the young hothead fired once with a revolver, and the heavy slug smashed sickeningly against the boulder. With elaborate deliberateness that came of long experience in deadly matters, Owen let Wes have the first wild shot, and then he gently squeezed the grip of the carbine, firing from the hip, but carefully, and he knew that it was over.

As it sometimes happened, even among older and more experienced men than Owen Toller, a sickness rose up inside him and left him weak and sweating. It was all over. Only the echoes of the shooting remained in the hills. Owen let himself sag against the cold bulk of stone and wondered vacantly how long it had been since he was last forced to kill a man. This was something a man never got used to.

"Marshal!" Dunc Lester called, his voice high-pitched and excited.

"Yes," Owen answered wearily.

"Are you all right?"

Dunc, holding his shotgun across his chest, came crashing through the waist-high growth of brush. He stared at Owen as though he had never seen him before. He looked down at one of the sprawled bodies.

"Wes Longstreet," he said with a touch of awe. "Wes was a quick man with a gun."

"But excitable," Owen said flatly.

Together they left the two bodies and found the third several yards down the slope, this one riddled with buckshot from Dunc's shotgun. "Homer Clinkscale," Dunc said.

He walked a little more heavily and his shoulders were not quite so straight as they went back to see about Arch Deland.

The old deputy lay exactly as Owen had put him, his faded eyes gazing blankly at the dark underbellies of the flying clouds. "It's over?" he asked weakly.

"Yes," Owen said.

Deland smiled. "You haven't lost your touch, Owen." The ex-marshal and the hill boy knelt beside the deputy. Death stared frankly and unafraid from Deland's old eyes. Owen said, "Dunc, break open the packs and tie the tarps together for a sling stretcher. I'll cut some poles." A kind of vague outrage appeared on the deputy's face.

"Don't be a fool, Owen!" His voice was little more than a whisper. "I'm done for and you know it." With great effort he moved one hand and let it fall across his chest. Dunc got up and began to open the packs.

Deland said, "Get out of here, Owen, you and the boy. Ike will have the gang on top of you in a matter of minutes."

"He's got no shooting to guide him now. He can't find us in the dark."

"He'll find you," he said, as though this were the one ling in the world that he was sure of.

Owen wouldn't let himself think of that. For the moment he dismissed Ike Brunner from his mind and thought only of his old friend. I shouldn't have let him come! he accused himself. But it was too late for accusations; somehow they had to get Arch to a place where they could care for him. Slowly he got to his feet and tried to establish their position in his mind. Once he had known these hills as well as an outsider could ever know them... but that was five years ago. The few old-timers—men like Mort Stringer, whom he might have counted on—were now gone from this country or dead.

"Dunc," he said at last, "don't you have any friends you can trust?"

Owen could feel the bitterness of the boy's grin. "I guess Gabe Tanis was the closest friend I had."

"How about Manley Cooper, the man whose place was burned out? He sure can't have much love for the Brunners. Do you think he'd help us?"

"Maybe, if we could find him. But he's probably headed toward Arkansas with his family by this time." Then the boy frowned, worrying at the beginning of a thought. "I remember," he said, "that old Cooper had a brother down south of here."

"Do you think he'd put us up until Arch gets better?"

Dunc shrugged. "That depends on how strong he stands with Ike. It wouldn't hurt to try, though. We have to head in that direction anyway, unless you want to go right over the top of Killer Ridge."

It seemed as though a shell of numbness had closed around Owen's brain. He had lost all interest in Ike Brunner; he no longer remembered the principles that had driven him into these hills in search of a killer. He wanted to forget that they had been important to him.

He borrowed Dunc Lester's knife and found two spruce saplings, long and reasonably straight, for stretcher poles. He worked steadily, cutting and trimming and notching until his work-toughened palms were raw.

Chapter Twelve

The night was endless. Minutes were hours and hours centuries as Owen and Dunc Lester struggled blindly down that tortuous grade to the south. It seemed to Owen that his arms were slowly stretching to incredible length from the pull of the stretcher, but they did not dare to stop, except for brief intervals, even though their muscles quivered and their chests were filled with fire.

At every step Owen expected to hear Brunner's horsemen charging down on top of them, but the night remained mysteriously silent, disturbed only by their stumbling and tortured breathing. At seemingly regular intervals, Owen, who carried the forepart of the stretcher, blundered into tall boulders, or stumbled in thickets and over rocks, and once he fell sprawling into a dry wash and Arch Deland rolled limply from the stretcher. At some point in that endless night the deputy had passed into unconsciousness.

At last it seemed that they had become lost in space and time, and had somehow blundered onto a devil's treadmill that had no beginning and no hope of an end. Reason had lost its power and only instinct was left to them; the instinct of the hunted. For a long time Owen worried at the riddle of the silent hills. Where were Brunner and the gang? Certainly someone had heard the firing and known that something was wrong. Owen had prepared himself for the dangerous game of run and hide and run again, trusting to the night for protection. But the gang did not come.

In some perverse way this worried him more than an attack would have done. Ike was not deliberately letting them escape – of that he was certain.

Eventually, as the eastern hills became capped with the first light of dawn, they were forced to stop for several minutes of rest. They sprawled on the cool ground beneath a dark umbrella of pine and dragged huge quantities of air into their lungs. Finally Owen shoved himself to his knees, and only then did he notice that his palms were bloody hooks still shaped to fit the stretcher poles. Deland's old face sagged in uneasy rest. His forehead was hot; his lips were cracked and dry. The deputy did not move when Owen spoke to him. "How is he?" Dunc asked. "Feverish. But his heart seems

strong." Dunc looked at his own bloody hands for a moment, then sat up and studied the grayish hills. "We slipped off the trace," he said. "We'll have to bear more to the west." But that wasn't the thing that bothered him. He got to his feet and walked unsteadily to a small rise and again studied those dark-green mounds that seemed to grow slowly out of the darkness. "I wish I knew what Ike was up to," he said. He waved his arm in a wide arc from east to west. "They're out there somewhere."

Owen frowned. "You don't see anything, do you?"

"I don't have to." Then he added, "My ma came from Indian stock," as if to explain how he knew.

And Owen could not dispute it, for he had had the same feeling for hours.

"You know what I think. Marshal?" Dunc asked, and then went on without waiting for an answer. "I think the gang must have found Wes Longstreet's party and Ike's developed a sudden respect for lowland shootin'. Maybe that's why they're hangin' back, maybe they're playin' for time."

Owen did not wholly agree, but this did not lessen his respect for Dunc's judgment of hillpeople. He asked, "What else do you think, Dunc?"

"Well, it's just guessin', of course, but I figure maybe Ike's beginnin' to have trouble holdin' the gang together. We counted eighteen men yesterday, and he used to have thirty or more. Now with Longstreet and Fulsom and Clinkscale dead, he's left with fifteen. Ike's no coward, but he's smart, and he won't risk losing any more men if he thinks he can take us without a fight."

Owen thought about this, thinking the boy might be right. The gang's morale was going to take a drop when they found those three bodies, but he still didn't know how Brunner meant to take them without a fight.

At last they took up the stretcher and resumed their stumbling march to the south. Owen's only thought was for Arch Deland; not until he got the wounded deputy to safety could he turn his mind to Ike Brunner.

If Dunc Lester had thoughts of his own, he did not voice them. For good or bad, he had thrown in with the marshal, and this seemed no time to split their meager forces.

Near noon both men fell in exhaustion. "We'll never make it," Dunc Lester said hoarsely.

"How far is it?"

"A mile. Maybe two. I don't think I can lift that stretcher again."

"We'll make it," Owen rasped.

They lay quiet, soothed by the sound of running water. Finally they staggered to the bank of a narrow stream and drank their fill of cold, iron-tasting water. Owen filled his hat and took it back to the stretcher, where he dribbled a few drops between the deputy's cracked lips and bathed his hot face.

Dunc Lester watched dispassionately. He had liked Arch Deland, but the old man was as good as dead. It seemed a criminal waste of time and effort to use yourself up on a dead man.

But Owen closed his eyes and senses to the things that Dunc Lester saw and knew. The skin of Deland's face had gone yellow, as dry as parchment. The eyes were glazed, the breathing shallow, the heart fluttery.

Owen would not see these things. Arch, he told himself, had escaped death a thousand times, and he would escape it this time. He would not consider the enormous odds against them; he had to believe that Deland would pull through once they got him to a place where he could be cared for. And that was what he believed.

Owen took hold of his end of the stretcher. "You ready, son?"

Dunc shook his head, not in a negative response, but in bewilderment at the marshal's unreasoning singleness of purpose. And yet it was that very thing about the marshal that made Dunc believe that there was a bare chance that they might come out of this alive. He abandoned the hope of bringing in Ike Brunner. All he wanted now was escape, and he knew that

he must depend on Owen Toller's strength for that. Slowly he bent down, took the bloody stretcher poles in his raw hands, and lifted.

It was midafternoon when they finally sighted the Cooper cabin. They eased the stretcher to the ground and Dunc said, "Maybe I'd better go on ahead and see how things stand."

Owen nodded, then sat beside the stretcher and fanned the flies and insects away from Deland's masklike face. He thought, It's almost over, Arch. Soon we'll have you fixed up with a bed and some food and maybe even some white hill whisky. He deliberately ignored any possibility that Ike Brunner might disrupt his plans.

He watched Dunc Lester walk unsteadily down the long green slope. The cabin, a sturdy boxlike structure of logs and mud, was set in a lush draw between two hills. Behind the cabin there was an outhouse, a stockade shed, and perhaps five acres of broken land. Tender shoots of corn and green tobacco grew out of the reddish earth, but Owen noticed that the young crop had grown up in weeds and that the shed was empty. There was no sign of livestock of any kind, and the only show of life was a ribbon of wood smoke curling up from the mud chimney.

Dunc disappeared around the back of the cabin and several minutes passed. Then two men appeared in the yard and began the climb up the long slope. One man was thick and heavy, his work-rounded shoulders hunched powerfully as he plodded forward. The other was loose-jointed and gangly, and he walked with the spring of youth, on the balls of his feet. Both men carried long-barreled shotguns in the crooks of their arms. They walked directly to the stretcher, and there was caution and distrust in their eyes as they looked first at Owen and then at the unconscious deputy. The younger man rested the stock of his shotgun on the ground and shook his head. "He sure looks like a goner to me."

The older man had his thoughtful eyes fixed on Owen. "Young Lester claims you're a marshal from Reunion." It was more an accusation than a statement.

"Just a deputy," Owen said heavily. "My friend here has been hurt. Could we put him up at your cabin for a while?"

"You got Ike Brunner's bunch after you?"

Owen saw that lying would not help. He nodded. "Yes, I guess we have."

"Then we can't help you," the man said shortly. "Nobody can." He looked tired; there were deep lines of weariness around his eyes and around his mouth. "You can't fight Ike Brunner. I know."

"I'll fight him," Owen said flatly, rising to his feet, "When the time comes."

Surprisingly, the man laughed. "It looks like you haven't had much luck so far." Suddenly the laughter went out of him and grimness took its place. "My name's Harve Cooper, and this here's my boy, Morris. We haven't got much use for outsiders, Marshal... but then, we're not exactly friends of Ike Brunner's, either. So I guess you can use the cabin if you want to. Me and my boy won't be here much longer, anyway."

With a physical effort Owen pulled himself out of his exhaustion and studied the faces before him. In their eyes he saw suspicion and anger and fear. "Do you mean," Owen asked slowly, "that Ike is forcing you out of the hills?"

"Mister," Morris Cooper said, "when Ike Brunner tells you to do somethin', you do it."

What surprised Owen was the tone of pride in the young man's voice. Although he hated Ike Brunner, he received satisfaction in the knowledge that the gang leader could not be taken by an outsider.

"That's enough talk," Harve Cooper said sharply to his son. "Give me a hand with the stretcher."

The two Coopers placed their shotguns across Arch Deland's chest, took up the stretcher, and began a slow, steady march toward the cabin. Owen did not offer to help; he felt that the last of his strength had slipped away from him, and he followed behind, stumbling like a drunken man.

When they reached the cabin yard, Owen became aware of the rank, sourish odor of a whisky still off in the trees somewhere, and then he saw

how the place had been stripped of everything that could be moved. All the rugged, hand-hewn furniture had been moved out of the cabin, along with clothing and bedding, cooking pots, and a conglomeration of plows and tintype pictures and hand-loomed rugs, all the things that a family gathers over a period of years. Everything was stacked outside now and the cabin was bare.

The two Coopers took Deland into the cabin and put him down in front of the fireplace, where Dunc Lester was waiting. "I reckon the rest is up to you, Marshal," Harve Cooper said, and he and his son walked out to the yard. "He doesn't look much better," Dunc Lester said, kneeling beside the stretcher.

"At least he can rest," Owen said heavily. But he knew that would not be enough. At last reality began closing in around him and he felt his own helplessness. "If we only had a horse, maybe I could get Doc Linnwood in Reunion."

"If we had a horse, and if Ike Brunner would let you through, and if Deland wasn't goin' to die before sundown anyway, maybe we'd have a chance," Dunc said, facing the cruel wall of facts.

"How can you be so sure he'll die?" Owen demanded angrily.

"I've seen the look before. There's nothin' we can do." Then Harve Cooper came through the doorway carrying a red chunk of venison haunch and an iron pot half filled with water. "I had this meat ripenin' in the woods," he said, "but I guess I won't be needin' it now."

"Thanks," Owen said. "A strong broth is what Arch needs; that will snap him out of it."

Cooper hung the pot on a hook in the fireplace. He glanced briefly at Deland, shrugged, and walked out again. "I've been thinkin'," Dunc said quietly. "I had a little talk with Morris Cooper and he told me how things were here. Remember Manley Cooper's place, the one that was burned out? Well, it seems like Ike tried to bring Manley in with the gang, seein' as he lived so close to their hide-out. But Manley wouldn't listen."

"Did Ike kill him?" Owen asked vacantly.

"I don't think so. The family got out before the place was burned. But it's like I was afraid of; Harve and Morris are afraid Ike Brunner'll turn on them because of Manley."

Owen had guessed this much. "Yes. They're afraid of Ike, so they run."

"Sure they run!" Dunc's eyes flashed in quick anger. "My own family ran, because they had enough sense to know you can't fight a gang like Ike's! If I'd had any sense myself I never would have come back here!"

"Where would you have gone?" Owen asked quietly.

"Anywhere. A man doesn't have to live in these hills."

"And what about Leah Stringer? She knows that Ike killed her father; she could testify to it if Ike ever came to trial. Do you think Ike is going to forget a thing like that?"

"I don't care whether he forgets or not! Leah and I can go where he can't find us."

Owen looked at him. "Yes," he said quietly, "I guess maybe you could."

"All right," Dunc went on, dropping some of his anger. "This is what I've been thinkin'. Harve had his brother take a load of the stuff and the womenfolks down to the foothills yesterday, and he's supposed to bring the wagon back today and pick up the rest of it. The furniture and stuff they've got piled outside. Now Ike's got nothing special against Harve and Morris, so he'll probably let them get through. What's to keep us from hidin' in the wagon and goin' with them?"

"The ride would kill Arch," Owen said.

"He's goin' to die anyway, Marshal! I tell you this is our one chance to get out of these hills alive!"

Owen walked to the door and stared out at the green peaks. They did not frighten him now, and he knew that he was not going back without Ike Brunner. He had reached a point—because of exhaustion, perhaps—where he was no longer angered at people who would not fight for their own rights, but this did not lessen the drive within him. The actions of the

Coopers and the Lesters could not change him from the kind of man he was. "All right, Dunc," he said. "You go with the Coopers."

"What about you?"

"I'll come later." He was weary of explaining his actions and motives to others who never understood. Elizabeth had understood; that was the only thing that counted. He said, "There'll be no hard feelings, son. You go on with the Coopers." And he walked outside.

Dunc Lester felt a slow, warm shame crawl over him. He hated what he could not understand, and he could not understand the first thing about this man Owen Toller. And the old deputy who lay dying – why? For what reason?

Slowly his sense of shame overrode and subdued his hatred. He thought of Leah and wondered what he could say to her if he went back. How would it be, living out the rest of his life looking over his shoulder and expecting to see Ike Brunner there?

Several minutes must have passed before he became aware of a certain uneasiness, a kind of unnatural silence in the cabin that made his skin crawl. Some slight, unnoticed sound that had been in the cabin a few seconds before was now absent, and a long moment passed before he realized that the old deputy had stopped breathing.

Dunc stood very still. He had expected this, but you had to meet death face to face before you could actually believe it. Good-by, old man, he thought, and he felt a bit harder and older than he had an instant before.

Dunc stepped to the door. "Marshal," he said quietly.

Owen turned and from the expression on his face Dunc knew that Owen understood without being told that his friend was dead.

Dunc stood to one side as Owen walked heavily into the cabin. Very gently Owen covered the old deputy's lax, gray face with the piece of tarp that had formed the stretcher, and then he stood quietly for a long while, saying nothing.

Dunc Lester moved uneasily. "Anything you want me to do, Marshal?"

"Yes. See if you can borrow a shovel and a grubbing hoe from the Coopers."

The Coopers knew that they had no part in this play, and they stood quietly beside the cabin as Dunc and Owen hacked and dug in the root-filled ground beyond the clearing. It was a long job and a hard one, but both men worked steadily, pausing only to wipe the sweat from their eyes. As he labored, Owen did not let himself think beyond the immediate present. The very least that Arch deserved was a good grave, and he meant that he should have it.

When at last the job was over, when the grave was deep enough and the sides reasonably even and smooth, the two men stood swaying, resting on their tools.

At last Owen broke the silence. "I never heard Arch say where he wanted to be buried, but I think he'd like this place as good as any."

"It's just as well," Dunc said. "The sooner the buryin's done, the better. In this kind of weather."

When they got back to the cabin they found that the body had been neatly wrapped in glistening white sheeting and that Arch's boots had been removed. Harve Cooper said, "I could have made a box if there had been more time."

Owen nodded his thanks for the wrapping, for he knew that white sheeting was rare in the hills. Gently they lifted the body, which was amazingly light, and carried it slowly across the clearing, but the Coopers kept their place and made no move to follow.

While Dunc and Owen were filling the grave they saw a rickety mule-drawn farm wagon rattle noisily up to the Cooper cabin. As Owen rounded the grave mound with the shovel, the Coopers were hurriedly loading their belongings into the wagon.

Dunc Lester gazed thoughtfully at the hills, and then at the wagon. He recognized the driver as Sam Contrain, a distant cousin of the Coopers' from the south. Ike had nothing against the Contrains, and nothing in particular against Harve Cooper, so there was no reason why the gang

should try to stop them. It would be the easiest thing in the world to hide in the bottom of that wagon and get out of these hills alive.

But, for Dunc, the prospect of running had lost its glitter. He couldn't explain why, except that somehow he had got himself in debt to Owen Toller, and he knew that the time for paying was at hand.

Now he looked at Toller and saw a thin, tight line of a mouth, a steellike glitter to his eyes. Dunc Lester thought that he had never before seen a face so grim and hard, and yet there was little bitterness in it. Once before, when he had first seen Owen Toller, the dangerous potential of the man had occurred to Dunc, and it occurred to him again now. But he knew that it was no longer a potential, but a reality. As Owen stood there gazing at Arch Deland's grave there was a deadliness in his eyes that made Dunc cringe a bit within his own conscience.

At last Owen turned away from the grave and said quietly, "You'd better get started, son, if you want that ride."

Dunc wiped his face, more from nervousness than because it needed wiping. "I guess I've changed my mind, Marshal."

Owen stood almost painfully erect, his head thrown back. "Why?"

"I... I don't know exactly. You and your wife were decent to me and Leah, so I guess I wouldn't feel right about pullin' out on you."

"That's a poor reason for a man to risk his life," Owen said flatly. "Is that the only reason you can offer?" What the hell! Dunc thought with the beginnings of anger. It's my life, ain't it? Do I have to have a reason for it?

But the stone-cold features of Toller's face stopped the outburst before he could put his thoughts into words. Instead, he swallowed nervously and said, "Well, Ike Brunner's lookin' to kill me. He'll do it, too, if I don't kill him first."

And Owen said coldly, "If anything, that's a poorer reason than the first. I think you'd better go back with the Coopers."

Stiffly Owen turned on his heel and started back toward the cabin, and Dunc stood stunned at this sudden turn of things. He had expected Owen

to beg him not to go, but now things were turned around completely and he found himself begging for permission to stay. "Marshal!"

Owen paused and looked back. "Yes?"

"My common sense keeps tellin' me it's a fool thing to do, but I'd like to help out, if I can. Does the reason make any difference?"

"Yes," Owen said, and the hard lines around his mouth seemed to soften just a little. "Arch Deland died without a reason. Anyhow, the reason he had wasn't good enough. I don't want that to happen again if I can help it." He smiled the smallest smile that Dunc had ever seen. "You'd better catch the wagon, son."

Owen started again toward the cabin, and once again Dunc called out. And he walked up to him, staring up into the bleakness of those pale eyes. "Marshal, I'm not very good at sayin' things, but not long ago my folks were run out of these hills, and they hadn't done a thing to be run out for. Now it's the Coopers, and tomorrow maybe it'll be somebody else. It makes me mad when I think about it; it ain't right. And still I can't hate every member of the gang that burned us out. Maybe Gabe Tanis set the fire with his own hand, but Gabe was a good man until a few months ago, and it don't stand to reason that a good man can change overnight."

Dunc shook his head, as if puzzled by his own thoughts. "I don't know. Most of the gang members were hard-workin' farmers before Ike stirred them up. Ike told us that all outsiders were workin' to ruin us, and I guess most of us believed him. But you and your wife are outsiders and you don't want to ruin us, so Ike might be wrong about a lot of things. I don't know," he said again. "It looks like one bad apple is ruinin' the barrel. Sooner or later the railroad people or somebody is goin' to bring an army up here and they're not goin' to know good people from bad; they'll clean us out like they did the Indians. Everybody but Ike, that is. Ike'll have plenty of time to get away if they try to take him with a big posse."

It suddenly occurred to Dunc that probably this was the longest speech he had ever made in his life. It was not the incredible spring of words that amazed him, but the thoughts that had come out with the talk. And still

there were other thoughts in his mind, about Leah, and the place of his own that he wanted. But these things he had held close to himself and did not attempt to put into words. He finished rather lamely, "Well, Marshal, I guess that's all I've got to say."

And Owen looked at him in a strange way, a way in which no man had ever looked at him before, and he said, "All right, Dunc, we'd better get started."

A few minutes later the two of them watched the wagon pull away from the cabin and rattle over the deep-rutted trail toward the far end of the draw.

Owen went into the silent cabin, where the venison still simmered in the fireplace, and with precise, machine-like movements he checked Arch's carbine and his own revolver. The two men ignored the packs, but filled their pockets with jerked beef and ammunition.

"It's up to you, Marshal," Dunc said. "Do we head back toward Killer Ridge?"

"I don't think that will be necessary," Owen said, gazing steadily through the open doorway. "Ike has his men up there." He nodded toward a stone-capped bill perhaps a mile to the north.

"What?" Dunc went to the door and stared hard for several seconds before he saw the wisp of dust that indicated horses. "How long have you known about them?"

Owen shrugged. "Almost from the minute we reached this cabin. I doubt that Ike even bothered to trail us; he knew we had a wounded man and would make for this place."

Dunc was vaguely worried but not frightened. "Why didn't they make their move long ago?"

"Waiting for the Coopers to leave, I suppose. Now Ike's got us where he wants us. From his position on the hill he can see every move we make, and I suspect that he has some of his men down watching the lower end of the draw. Are you sorry you didn't go with the Coopers, son?"

"I'm not sorry about anything," Dunc said stiffly, "but I would like to have a fightin' chance. Do you aim to hole up in this cabin?"

Owen shook his head. "I'd guess that's just what Ike wants us to do; he could take his time and finish us off as he pleases." He pointed to the west, where ragged sandstone shelves jutted out from the sides of the hills. "I think we can make it. Ike's horses won't do him much good on those cliffs."

Chapter Thirteen

Ike Brunner grinned savagely as he watched the Cooper wagon pull away from the cabin. It angered him to see the Coopers getting away scot-free, for he realized that it was a dangerous precedent to set. First the Lesters, now the Coopers, and maybe tomorrow some other family would take a notion to defy his hold on these hills. That could be a dangerous thing.

But Ike had not gained control of these people by acting on angry impulses. There came a time when a man had to give a little and gather his strength before rushing in for the kill. He could feel the gang's nervousness through the reins of fear and obligation with which he held it together. It was no longer a game of hit and run with them; it was deadly serious. They were thinking of Wes Longstreet, quick with a gun and completely game. But Wes and two others had died during the night, and that was something to think about.

Ike lifted his hand. "Gabe!" he said sharply, and Gabe Tanis rode up to the sandstone crest where the gang leader sat his gaudy paint. Now that Ike's brother and Wes Longstreet were dead, Gabe Tanis had gravitated to the position of second in command. "There go the Coopers," Ike said. "They don't know how lucky they are to be alive."

Gabe glanced over the distance at the wagon, then looked at Ike. "You can push the boys just so far. They don't take to the notion of killin' their own kind."

"All right," Ike said grudgingly, "the Coopers go." He fixed his cold eyes on Gabe. "But not Dunc Lester."

"I reckon," Gabe said stiffly, "Dunc ain't one of us any more. A man that would kill a preacher, and then bring in the Reunion law to hunt us... I guess he ain't a hill boy any longer." He paused, wiping the corners of his tobacco-stained mouth. "Looks like they got the buryin' done."

Ike grinned. "All done. That leaves just two of them. Are the boys ready?"

Gabe nodded.

"You and Jed Hefflin take half the men," Ike said, "swing around this ridge, and come up the draw on the east side of the cabin. I'll take the other half and cut them off from the other side."

Gabe nodded again and started to rein around.

"Just a minute," Ike said. "Tell the boys they've got nothin' to worry about. There are just two of them down there and we've got them all to ourselves. We'll take our time; I don't want anybody else to get hurt."

As Gabe got the gang together, Ike studied the small green valley with satisfaction. The gang could cover the house from either end of the draw; with torches they could burn the cabin down and force Dunc and the Reunion marshal into the open. It would be like shooting rabbits in a trap.

For a moment Ike turned his attention on the gang — what was left of it. It was less than half the size it had been once. From Ike's cold face, few of the men could guess at the storm that raged inside him. From the day he had looked upon Cal's dead face, anger had boiled within him, ready to explode. Common sense had warned him that he shouldn't have burned Manley Cooper out, but rage had made him half crazy. It had to have an outlet, and Manley Cooper had been close at hand.

Now he had his rage under control, but not even Ike Brunner could tell when it would get out of hand. He could think of nothing but Cal. He had no plans for future raids, the gang was becoming hard to handle, and he had turned some of the hill people against him — and yet he could think of nothing but Cal, and of the sweet taste of revenge which would come only when he killed Dunc Lester with his own hands.

And this, he thought with grim pleasure, is the day. Maybe then, with Lester dead, he would think clearly again and pull the gang together.

By this time Gabe Tanis had split the men into groups of seven. One rode with Gabe and Jed Hefflin to the bottom of the slope and started the long swing to the east. The others, silent and sober, reined in around Ike.

"We'll circle this hill to the west," Ike told them, "and come into the valley at the near end of the draw. The Coopers are gone. Are there any questions?"

There were no questions.

"All right," Ike said coldly. "There's a Reunion marshal down there, but he won't amount to much. If we kill this one, it'll likely be the last county law dog we'll see up here." He paused, then added, "Dunc Lester's something else again! He killed a preacher; don't forget that. And he killed my brother, and he turned against his own people. I want him dead!"

The men stirred uneasily but made no comment. Ike pulled his paint around and the others fell into line behind him.

Strangely, it did not often occur to Ike that he was a rich man, that in various caves he had hidden enough money and loot to keep him in fine style for the rest of his life. He had wanted money once, he had even made plans to quit the gang and head for California or Mexico, where nobody knew him.

But, in these hills, he had found something that pleased him more than money. He had come to know power. He had gradually forgotten the plan for retirement; his ambition was only beginning to grow. Before I'm through, he thought, they'll forget that Bill Doolin ever lived! Or the Daltons! Or the Jameses!

Suddenly Ike came erect in his saddle, jarred out of his thoughts. Far below he saw the tiny figures of Toller and Dunc Lester racing across the clearing to the west. The gang leader blinked, unable to believe that the two men were deserting their log fortress. His entire plan was based on the assumption that they would hole up in the cabin and try to fight it out.

Now the plan amounted to nothing. Still, Ike was not worried, merely puzzled. Holding up the march, Ike put his sturdy paint up a hard slope to higher ground, and then he began to understand.

Silently he regarded the boulder-strewn hill with its dangerous footing and impassable shelves, and his estimate of the Reunion marshal began to grow. Ike came up in his stirrups and yelled to one of his men.

"Light out for the east and try to head off Gabe Tanis. Tell him to get his men over here!" He pointed toward the rock-capped hill to the west. "The rest of you follow me!"

They flogged their horses down the sheer slope, crashing through brush and timber in the draws and gullies. In the effort to cut off the escape, they had to completely encircle the stone-capped hill, and by the time they reached the eastern slope it was too late.

Lester and the marshal had already cleared the first jagged outcropping, and past that point there was no chance at all of using horses. Ike spilled from the saddle and raced on foot past the end of the shelf. He caught a glimpse of the marshal's broad back as the man clawed his way up toward the next outcropping, but by the time Ike had knelt to fire, the back had disappeared.

The prospect of a tougher fight did not displease Ike Brunner, but he knew that his men might not like it so well. He fired once futilely with his Winchester, and heard the ricocheting bullet scream harmlessly in the brilliant afternoon. Frantically he waved his men over toward the far end of the ledge, but by the time they got there the two had advanced to the stone shelf above.

The gang leader wiped his face and cursed. They would have to go up that hill after them; there was no other way. Wade Jeffers, a kid about Dunc Lester's age, yelled, "You got 'em spotted, Ike?"

"They're makin' for the top. Take four men around to the other side and see they don't come down on top of you." Then he thought of something and jogged over to his men. "Wait a minute. We'll split the gang into three parts, cover the hill on three sides. There are only two of them, so they won't be able to cover three points at once."

Jeffers frowned. "We're goin' up that hill after them?"

"How else would you get them down?"

The boy regarded the hill seriously and it was clear that he didn't like the idea. "It'll be dangerous. We'll be lookin' right into the barrels of their guns."

Ike Brunner's voice was icy. "When you joined this bunch," he said, "I never told you it was goin' to be easy. The two men on that hill have got to be killed or we're done for. Now," and he fixed his gaze on Wade Jeffers

alone, "if any man has any objections to the way I run this gang, I guess he'd better speak up."

Jeffers swallowed hard. "I didn't mean that, Ike."

"It's lucky you didn't. Now take four men and get on the other side of the hill. I'll send more when Gabe gets here."

The small rebellion was completely crushed. The men shuffled uneasily; if they had to choose between the hill and Ike's fury, they'd take the hill. When Jeffers turned to carry out his leader's orders, Ike said, "Three fast rifle shots will be the signal to start climbing, and we're not stoppin' till we get to the top, understand?"

They understood.

After Wade Jeffers had taken his men to the far side, Ike mounted his spotted pony and rode back about a hundred yards until he could scan the rocky slope from top to bottom. There was not much timber here, except for small stands of scrubby pine and blackjack near the base. The marshal and Dunc Lester were not to be seen, and Ike guessed that they had already reached the top. Well, he thought with grim satisfaction, that's as far as they'll ever get.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Gabe Tanis was leading the other half of the gang over the eastern crest and was headed toward the valley. Ike nudged the paint and rode around to the south, then to the north, leisurely searching out the best and most protected routes to the top. Well out of carbine range, he knew that he was in no danger.

At last he selected what he judged to be the three best routes and settled down to wait for Gabe's party to cross the valley. A kind of icy calm had settled within him as he calculated what it would cost to scale that hill. Three men, maybe. Four, if this happened to be their unlucky day. There was one thing that Ike had learned—a man had to pay for what he got in this world.

Now he heard the pound of hoofs behind him, and reined the paint around to face Gabe Tanis and the rest of the gang.

"We heard shootin'," Gabe said, wiping his sweaty face. Ike grinned. "You'll hear more. Dunc and the marshal pulled out of the cabin and made it up there." He pointed to the hill.

Gabe's eyebrows lifted, then he spat a stream of tobacco juice with the wind. "It'll be nearly hell," he said soberly, "goin' up after them."

Ike laughed abruptly. "You're not goin' yellow, are you, Gabe? Fifteen against two; what kind of odds do you want?"

Gabe regarded the hill for one long moment, then shrugged. "All right, Ike. Whatever you say."

Chapter Fourteen

The first bullet from the hilltop smashed abruptly at Ike Brunner's feet, showering powdered sandstone in his face. Quickly he clawed his way up to a stone overhang and lay panting. Gabe Tanis scrambled up and dropped beside him.

"I told you it wasn't goin' to be easy."

"Shut up!" Ike snarled. He had split the party into three groups, and two thirds of the gang was out of sight on the far sides of the slope. Ike moved to the end of the overhang, lifted his Winchester, and fired three quick shots toward the jagged ridge. Maybe it won't be easy, he thought, but they'll do as I say. They know I'll kill the man who tries to back down!

There were three more men near the base of the hill, and the carbine barked twice as they started up. Ike listened to the sporadic firing on the other side and smiled. Lester and the marshal were going to have trouble splitting themselves three ways for defense. Over to the right he heard a sudden burst of fire.

"They must have spotted Jeffers' bunch," Ike said. "Follow me!"

They fought for footing, clawed their way past a thicket of blackjack, and now the carbine and revolver fire shifted away from Jeffers and turned on Ike and his group. A lead slug screamed and spat into the thicket and started a small landslide as the five men huddled behind a massive boulder.

Ike laughed and lay on his Winchester. Suddenly there was another outburst of firing on their left. "What did I tell you?" Ike yelled at Gabe Tanis. "They'll go crazy tryin' to be everywhere at once!"

Ike crouched behind the boulder, then darted into the open, clawing at roots and loose rocks, pulling himself upward. The others came behind him, all making for the second big shelf, about forty yards away.

But something went wrong with Ike's plan. A steady, withering barrage of carbine fire caught the group in the open, midway between the boulder and the shelf of sandstone. Buckshot from Dunc Lester's shotgun tore into

blackjack trunks, ripped off branches, and scattered rocks. A slug tugged at Ike Brunner's sleeve and went screaming toward the valley. Someone cried out, but Ike did not look back until he reached the protection of the shelf.

Dragging huge gulps of air into his lungs, Gabe Tanis fell beside Ike, who was cursing savagely.

"Goddamn it, I told you, Ike—"

But Ike wheeled on him and Gabe fell back before his rage. "I heard what you told me! I don't want to hear it again!"

Gabe Tanis' anger leaked out of him like air escaping from a punctured balloon. Ike stood in an animal-like crouch, holding his Winchester like a club, and Gabe threw up his arm as though to ward off a blow.

Perhaps the blow would have come. Perhaps, in his rage, Ike would have killed him if the second outcry of pain hadn't come between him and his anger. Ike suddenly straightened and said, "Who got hurt?"

"I don't know," Gabe said nervously.

Ike shot him a withering glance and then crawled back to the lip of the shelf. He swore again, savagely, when he saw what those last forty yards had cost him. Herb Fowler, a leather-tough old-timer, crouched in the blackjack thicket some twenty yards away, clutching at his chest with both hands. As Ike watched, the old man let go and began to fall by slow degrees until at last he lay on his back, arms outstretched, motionless.

Ike wheeled, turning his anger on the hilltop. Not that he gave a damn about Fowler, but his death made the gang one man weaker than it had been before. That marshal! Ike thought darkly. That goddamn marshal! And for the first time the gang leader began to take a personal interest in Owen Toller.

Five men had started up that slope and only two had reached the shelf. Ike raked the base of the hill with angry eyes, but the two remaining men were not to be seen.

"What happened to Ross Kale and Sam Russell?" he demanded of Gabe Tanis. Then, without waiting for an answer, Ike leaped up and plunged

down the slope again. He hit the ground with his chest and rolled end over end, clutching at his Winchester, as a shotgun blast tore away his footing. He did not know that he was hurt until he stopped rolling, and then he saw the bright crimson spreading over his trousers a few inches above his right knee. He crawled into the thicket.

Quickly he ripped his shirt sleeve with his teeth, tore it off at the shoulder, and bound his thigh. "Ross!" he yelled. "Sam! Where are you?"

There was no answer. The carbine spoke again from the hilltop and the slug ripped savagely through the brush. Goddamn it, why didn't the bunch on the other side of the hill start moving? He would kill them, every one of them, with his two bare hands, if they backed out on him now!

By sheer power of will Ike Brunner made himself calm down and think of the problem at hand. If Ross and Sam were dead... But he would not cross that bridge before he reached it. He called out again, and again his only answer came from the marshal's carbine.

He couldn't push his luck much further. He had to get out of this thicket. He calculated the distance from the thicket to the boulder and prayed that the boys on the other side would start moving soon. Then his hard face split with a satisfied grin. Far to his right a cluster of rifle shots mushroomed in the afternoon. Wade Jeffers had got them moving.

He waited until he was sure that Dunc and the marshal had moved over to resist the new advance, then lifted himself in the brush and limped toward the boulder. He was right back where he had started from, with the protecting shelf still forty yards away. But behind the boulder he found his missing men.

Ross Kale was a youngster in his late teens, a tough, straw-haired kid who had joined the gang after the raid at Bellefront. Sam Russell was a gangly, chinless farmer in his late thirties. At first Ike thought they were both dead. They crouched behind the boulder, their arms over their heads.

For a moment Ike did nothing. A red haze of rage clouded his vision.

He stepped up to Russell and kicked him savagely with his good leg, and the farmer fell back on his side, his eyes and mouth flying open as his

breath left him. "Get up, goddamn you!" Ike said harshly. He hobbled over to Ross Kale and with a short, vicious swing of the Winchester clubbed the side of the kid's face with the walnut stock.

Ike turned to Russell. "I said get up!" he snarled.

But the gangly farmer was paralyzed with fear. He worked his loose mouth but only gibberish came out. "I can't! I just can't, Ike! Herb Fowler, he was standin' right beside me! We'll all be killed!"

Without another word Ike leveled his Winchester at the farmer's head and pulled the trigger. Russell was instantly dead, with most of his skull shot away, but he flopped and quivered for several seconds, and Ike watched without a flicker of emotion. At last he turned on Ross Kale.

"How about you, kid? You want to stay behind this boulder with Sam?"

The boy swallowed hard, his eyes popping. "Ike, for God's sake!"

"You want to go to the top of the hill with the rest of us?"

"Yes! Yes, anything you say!"

"Then get on your feet and act like a man!"

The numbness in Ike's leg was beginning to fade, and the pain put a new sharp edge to his anger. He grabbed the boy, jerked him to his feet, and shoved him into the open. "Up there where Gabe Tanis is! And don't stop."

Ross Kale didn't stop. Ahead of Brunner, with Ike's Winchester at his back, the kid clawed blindly up the rocky grade to the shelf. Gabe Tanis was waiting near the ledge to pull them up.

"Where's Sam Russell?"

"Dead," Ike said bluntly, "along with Herb Fowler."

If Gabe had heard the shot from Ike's rifle, he did not mention it. "I think somebody got the Reunion marshal," he said. "I haven't heard anything from the carbine since you reached the boulder."

"I guess it's time we headed for the top, then. I've got some business to finish with Dunc Lester." He glanced behind him and saw that the sun was

sinking behind the western hills. "We'll have to finish it before sundown. I don't want him to get away in the dark."

On the other side of the hill a revolver sounded three times, punctuated at the end by a shotgun blast. Ike jerked his head at Ross Kale. "You first, kid."

The boy's face was pale, his mouth a thin white line, but he did not hesitate. He slipped around the end of the shelf and started toward the crest of the hill when a sudden carbine blast knocked him off his feet. He came falling down in a shower of loose rocks, blood spurting from his left shoulder.

"I thought you said that marshal was dead!" Ike snarled.

Gabe Tanis shrugged, wiping his tobacco-stained mouth. "I said I thought he was shot. A man can be shot and still pull the trigger on a carbine."

They retreated again behind their protective roof of stone, and Ross Kale began to whimper when he saw the stream of blood flowing down his arm. "Shut up!" Ike said. "Or maybe you want me to shut you up for good!"

The boy ground his teeth and was suddenly silent. Gabe Tanis gazed thoughtfully at Ike, then at the boy, and finally went down on one knee and fashioned a clumsy bandage about Kale's shoulder. "Maybe," Gabe said quietly, "it would be better if we did wait till dark." Ike looked at the sun again and judged that darkness was less than an hour away. That's what they were fighting for, the two men up there on the hilltop. They were waiting for darkness and hoping that they could slip away in the night.

There were a lot of things to consider before charging that rocky ridge again. One man had already lost his guts, and it stood to reason that there would be others. Still, the odds were heavily in favor of Ike and the gang, and he did not intend to leave this job unfinished. Maybe, he thought, the marshal was hurt bad; maybe he would die. It was pleasant to think about, but nothing to be relied on.

Now Ike began to get a new idea. Suddenly he moved to the edge of the shelf and shouted:

"You up there on top! The marshal from Reunion! Can you hear me?"

Gabe Tanis blinked in surprise, but Ike gazed eagerly toward the sandstone cap and waited. At last a voice came down to them.

"I hear you, Brunner."

It was a weak voice, and this pleased Ike. He called, "We know you're shot, Marshal. I don't know how bad off you are, but you don't sound so good to me. I'd guess you might be needin' a doctor."

No answer came from the hilltop.

"I've got a proposition for you, Marshal," Ike called again. "You want to hear it?"

There was a short silence. Then, "All right. I'll listen."

Ike grinned. He knew that they were playing for time, but this didn't worry him now. "Here's my proposition, Marshal. You're free to come down any time you feel like it. I'll give my men orders not to fire."

"Thanks just the same, but I think I'd be safer where I am."

"With a bullet hole in you? You need a doctor, Marshal. You come down by yourself and I'll have two of my boys help you get back to Reunion. Nobody but us will ever know."

There was a long pause. All the hills seemed to listen. Then, "I'm afraid I can't take your word, Brunner. I'd be walking into a trap and you know it."

Ike smiled, feeling himself on firmer ground. "I've got nothin' against you, Marshal. You're just another law dog tryin' to do a job, as far as I'm concerned. But you don't have a chance in the world of breaking up my gang, so why be a fool and get yourself killed for nothin'?"

"Like you said, Brunner, I'm trying to do a job." Ike's face was a mask, showing nothing. His voice was almost amiable. "Get this through your head, Marshal: I don't care a damn about you, but I aim to settle a debt with Dunc Lester. If you want to stand in my way, you've got nobody to blame but yourself."

"That's right, Ike. Nobody but myself." Ike shifted his weight again, leaning heavily against the stone. The pain in his thigh spread slowly upward toward the hip. He had one more idea to try, and if that didn't work... Well, the sun was getting low.

"Marshal," he called again, "I want you to think about your wife and kids. You've got a family, haven't you? Think about them, Marshal, for just five minutes. And if you still insist on getting yourself killed..."

He let the words hang significantly. Gabe Tanis said, "How do you know he's got a family?"

"He didn't deny it, did he? He's got a family, all right, and he'll do some thinkin'."

"But will he come down?"

Ike eased himself to the ground, sitting with his wounded leg extended. "I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "If he's smart he'll come down."

"And if he does?"

Ike grinned and patted his Winchester. The minutes dragged by. No sound came from the hilltop, and Ike Brunner's hopes began to grow. This marshal was no ordinary low-country politician deputy; he had guts and plenty of hill sense, and he was dangerous. But every man had his weakness, and Ike had guessed that the marshal's weakness was his family. "No sign of him yet," Gabe Tanis said. Ike gazed at the long hill shadows. "Give him a little more time."

So they sat in uneasy silence for several more minutes, and still no sound came down from above. Painfully Ike shoved himself to his feet, knowing that they could wait no longer. "All right, Marshal," he called casually. "Your time is out. You come now or you don't come down at all."

Every man on the hill seemed to hold his breath, waiting for Owen Toller's answer. Then, when the answer came at last, it was not the voice of Owen Toller, but Dunc Lester's.

"The marshal's staying', Ike!"

The gang leader frowned. "Let him talk for himself."

"I'm talkin' for him," Dunc called harshly. "And I say he's stayin'!"

Ike's frown deepened, then suddenly it disappeared and he smiled savagely. "Gabe, could you spot Dunc's position?"

Gabe Tanis cocked his head as if he were still listening to Dunc Lester's words. "I can't be sure, but he sounded like he was right behind the top shelf."

Ike nodded. "That's what I figured, too. He's up there by himself, Gabe. The marshal's dead, or too weak to talk—it doesn't make any difference which."

This possibility had occurred to Tanis, but he was a careful, suspicious man. "Maybe you're right. Or maybe he's just playin' possum."

Ike Brunner laughed. "He's not playin' possum, Gabe. He's dead!" He checked his Winchester, moved to the end of the shelf, and fired three times toward the hilltop.

The gang leader's confidence seemed to affect every man on that rocky slope. They had listened to the exchange and had drawn their own conclusions. The marshal was dead. At the signal they leaped to their feet and began clawing their way toward that jagged cap of sandstone.

Ike Brunner forgot the pain in his leg. Drunk with the anticipation of victory, he fought his way from thicket to thicket, grabbing at roots and stones, his eyes always on that cap of rock. He grinned fiercely when Dunc Lester's pistol began its meaningless pattern of firing, first from one position and then from another. This, Ike Brunner knew, was the sound of panic. This was the lone coon nipping futilely at the pack of hounds.

Ike himself was the first to reach the top. And that was as it should have been. On his hands and knees, dragging his Winchester, he saw Dunc Lester on the other side of the hill. On one knee, Dunc had his back turned to Ike, firing with his pistol at the men advancing from the west. Deliberately Ike kept his every movement slow and precise, savoring every minute detail of the moment. He lifted his rifle and, smiling, brought it to bear on the boy's straight, broad back. He had eyes only for Dunc Lester,

the killer of his brother, and he did not see the marshal until Owen Toller spoke.

"Ike!"

And then it was too late.

The gang leader wheeled on his good leg, realizing that he had guessed wrong and that Gabe Tanis had guessed right. The marshal had played possum.

In that one split second Ike Brunner understood the situation as it actually was. He was alone and no one could help him. In that small fragment of time Ike saw the marshal standing there, his face pale and drawn, leaning against a massive boulder. He saw Owen Toller's shirt plastered with his own blood against his side, and he saw the deadly beauty of blue steel and polished walnut that the marshal had drawn from his holster and now held at his side. In that smallest part of a second Ike was aware of all these things and many more.

Toller said quietly, "Drop your rifle, Ike."

The gang leader's position was awkward. He rested heavily on his good leg and his Winchester was pointed down at the ground. To kill this marshal he would have to shift his weight quickly to his bad leg, lifting the rifle's muzzle at the same time, and fire from the hip.

I can do it, he thought. I can swing the Winchester faster than he can lift the revolver. But he hesitated. He didn't like what he saw in the marshal's face.

Toller said, "Drop it, Ike. I'll not let you kill me the way you killed Mort Stringer. Or the freight agent and his wife."

Ike darted a quick glance at the rocky ridge and saw that Gabe Tanis had reached the top behind Toller. Relief washed over him and he wanted to laugh. Gabe would kill the marshal, and Dunc Lester would be left for himself. Everything was working out perfectly!

But Gabe made no move to shoot. He merely stood there, waiting, a slow understanding appearing in his eyes. And at that moment Ike knew that he

could expect no help from Tanis. He had heard what the marshal had said about Mort Stringer.

In sudden rage Ike wheeled to throw all his weight on his bad leg. In the back of his mind he could hear his men clawing their way to the hilltop, but none of them could help him now. At the start of the turn he felt his wounded leg begin to buckle. His shot went wide.

Nothing changed in Owen Toller's eyes as he lifted the heavy revolver and fired.

A sheet of numbness covered Ike as the impact of the bullet drove him to the ground. All thoughts, all hate, all anger left him. He fell into darkness.

Gabe Tanis stood like a gaunt, ragged statue and knew that the gang leader was dead before he hit the ground. All the fight seemed to go out of him. A bleakness, too profound for sorrow, took hold of him. He had lost his stomach for killing; so many of his people were already dead. What the marshal had said about Mort Stringer kept ringing in his ears. He felt as though the ground had been cut from under him and he had no place on which to stand.

"Drop your rifle, Gabe," the marshal said, almost gently.

Gabe did not drop his rifle, but he did turn and called out in a hoarse, raw voice, "Hold it up, boys! Ike's been killed!"

Dunc Lester came running toward the marshal, but Toller motioned him back. A shocked silence fell around the hilltop. The king was dead.

Gabe Tanis rubbed his face as though he were coming out of a drugged sleep. He looked at Ike Brunner's lifeless body, then at Owen and Dunc.

Owen said, "I'll have to take you back to Reunion, Gabe."

Tanis shook his head sullenly. "I never killed anybody."

"Goddamn it, Gabe!" Dunc Lester shouted. "You've been tryin' plenty hard to kill me and the marshal!"

Almost carelessly, Tanis cradled his rifle in the crook of his arm. "Maybe." He shrugged. "Ike wanted it that way, and maybe we listened too close to

what he said." He turned his head and spat with the wind. "Boys," he said loudly, "I guess it would be best if you all went back to your homes."

Dunc Lester's eyes flashed angrily. "Marshal, you're not goin' to let them get away, are you?"

Owen smiled. He must have known that they were helpless to stop them.

Gabe Tanis wiped his mouth thoughtfully as he turned to go. "Dunc," he said, the words coming with great effort, "I never felt right about burnin' your folks out like we did."

Dunc glared with bitter eyes. At last Gabe turned, called again to the men, and began the slow descent to the bottom of the hill.

So this is the way it ends, Owen thought. His head was amazingly light; his side burned as though he had been branded with a running iron.

"Marshal," Dunc Lester said, "are you all right?"

Owen nodded. "It's just a flesh wound." He scanned the world around him in the light of a dying sun. "Son," he said, "I think we have witnessed the end of an era. Ike Brunner, in his way, served a purpose here. I think he taught the people something."

Dunc scowled, neither knowing nor caring what Owen was talking about. "What if they come back?" he asked. "We're not in much condition to fight them off again."

"They won't come back." He glanced at the sprawled body before him. "I believe that the days of brazen lawlessness are through. I believe these hills will see no more of gangs like Ike Brunner's." He did not know how he knew this, but he knew. Perhaps it had been something he had seen in Gabe Tanis' eyes. There had been a great weariness there, and some of the bitterness had burned itself out.

Uneasy and restless, Dunc had walked to the far side of the stone cap and stood staring down at the gathering darkness.

"Marshal, come here!"

Owen turned suddenly and almost fell. He braced himself against the boulder for a moment, giving his head time to clear. "What is it, Dunc?"

"Horses, Marshal! Two of them!"

Owen walked with elaborate steadiness to where Dunc was standing, and near the base of the hill he saw the two horses. They were hobbled and grazing quietly in a sparse stand of blackjack.

Dunc could not believe the obvious. "It's a trick, Marshal!"

Owen took a long time answering, but at last he shook his head and said, "No, I don't think so."

"You don't know this gang like I do!" Dunc insisted. "This is just the kind of thing they would try, leavin' those two horses down there to draw us off the hill. They're down there in some gully right now, I'll bet, waitin' for us!"

This was a possibility that Owen was forced to consider but he could not believe it. He walked heavily to the boulder and picked up Arch Deland's carbine. I won't believe it! he thought. I prefer to believe that Gabe Tanis left those horses for us, and that's what I'll believe.

"Where're you headed, Marshal?" Dunc called out in alarm.

"Down to see about those horses."

"But I tell you it's a trick!"

Owen smiled. "We'll soon know." He eased himself over the ledge, carefully favoring his wounded side. Dunc called out again, then cursed savagely and started down the hill beside him.

"Marshal, this is the craziest thing I ever heard of!"

And perhaps it is, Owen thought. But a time comes when a man must trust the instincts of others or the world becomes unbearable. He could not explain this to Dunc. If he had been asked to put his thoughts into words, he could not have done it. He only knew that he had done the job he had come to do, the job for which he had trained all his adult life; and he knew that now was the time to learn whether all his efforts and ideals had taught

him anything about the millions of humans like himself who populated the earth. He had to know if Arch Deland had died for nothing.

When at last they reached the bottom of the hill, Owen walked directly to the horses, and no sound at all was made in the surrounding woods. No rifle fire, no voices raised in hate or anger. All was quiet.

Dunc Lester said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

Chapter Fifteen

The long ride back to Reunion was made almost in complete silence, for each man was deep in his own thoughts and plans for the future. Owen, despite his weakness and the nagging throb in his side, rode erect and felt almost young again. He was going home, this time to stay. His mind was filled with his wife and the boys, of the crops that had to be worked, of the shed that needed roofing and the fence that needed repairing. As in a world of sleep, the miles that fell behind were forgotten.

Dunc Lester's thoughts were more complex. He still found it difficult to believe that Gabe Tanis had not set a trap. This affected his thinking not only about Tanis, but about all the other people that he had known. Now that Ike was dead, perhaps the hills would be a different place; perhaps his folks would come back and begin again. But he did not try to convince himself that old times would return and things would be again as they had been before.

Time did not reverse itself any more than water ran upstream. Times would change. Maybe the railroad would be brought in and some of the timber cut, and maybe the gap between the hills and lowlands would not be as great as it had been before—but maybe a change would be to the good.

Maybe, he pondered, the Lesters and the Tanises and all the others had lived too long by themselves. And maybe, he thought, it wouldn't do us no harm to mix with people like the marshal once in a while.

It was curious how his brief association with the marshal had changed his mind about a lot of things. He felt that he had grown simply by being with arid watching Owen Toller. He could not explain this, even to himself, but he knew it to be true.

He thought about all these things, and more, as they rode the long grade back to Reunion, but most of the time his thoughts were filled with Leah Stringer. He had it all planned in his mind what he was going to say when he saw her. He would tell her about the cabin he meant to build on the home place, and then he would ask her to be his wife and live with him.

And on a Saturday, or once a month at least, they would hitch up and go down to a settlement, like the foothill farmers did. She would have people to talk to and would not be lonesome, for his folks would be moving back, now that the Brunners were no more.

He liked to think about this, but sometimes he would get to worrying, thinking that maybe Leah wouldn't want him, or that she would want more than just a log-and-mud cabin in the woods. Once he had been pondering that problem and the marshal had looked at him steadily.

"Don't worry, son," he said. "I figure she'll still be waitin' for you."

Somehow that made him feel better, and he didn't worry about it much after that.

It was near noon of the second day when they sighted Reunion. Owen's impulse was to ride straight through and head for the farm and Elizabeth, but he knew that it could not be quite as simple as that.

They tied up in front of the courthouse. "I'll have to report to the sheriff," Owen said. "You can ride on to the farm, if you want to, son."

"I'll wait," Dunc said.

Owen had forgotten how much hunting and being hunted could change a man. Will Cushman didn't recognize them at first. Owen smiled and rubbed his hand over his gaunt and bearded face. "We're back, Will."

"My God! Owen!"

Will came out of his chair and around the desk, and took Owen's hand. "I was afraid you weren't coming back at all!"

"All of us didn't," Owen said gently, and the sheriff blinked.

"Arch Deland?" he asked.

Owen nodded.

Cushman frowned, then dismissed Deland from his mind completely. "You don't know how glad I am to see you, Owen. It's been pure hell around here." He glanced blankly at Dunc, then fixed his gaze on Owen. "Well, tell me what happened, man! What about the Brunners?"

"Dead," Owen said quietly.

"Both of them?"

Owen nodded.

Cushman's bland face broke into a wide smile. "By God!" he said happily. "That'll fix these wolves that've been nipping at my heels!" Suddenly he laughed and slapped his deputy's back, not noticing the blood-stiffened shirt or the pain that appeared in Owen's eyes. "This will show them! Do you know there's been talk around town of removing me from the sheriff's office? Well, they won't try it now!" He laughed again. "Now tell me all about it, man! What about the rest of the gang?"

"There is no gang any more," Owen said.

Cushman looked startled. "Good Lord! Don't tell me they're all dead!"

Owen glanced at Dunc and smiled faintly. "No. The gang has simply broken up. That's all I mean."

The sheriff smiled, extremely pleased at the way things had worked out. "I'll have to tell Ben McKeever about this. Ben will want to know." Then, at last, he noticed the bloodstained shirt. "Owen, are you hurt?"

"It isn't much. It's dried over now."

Cushman tried to look concerned, but he couldn't keep from looking pleased. "I'll tell you what you do, Owen. You wait here and I'll fetch Doc Linnwood. I want to see McKeever anyway, and Doc's place is on the way to the bank."

Suddenly Owen realized how tired he was and sank wearily into a straight-backed chair. He nodded to Cushman. Maybe it would be better to have Linnwood look at his side before he started home; he didn't want to worry Elizabeth any more than necessary.

After the sheriff was gone, Dunc Lester took a chair on the other side of Cushman's desk. "Marshal," he said slowly, "would you tell me somethin'?"

"What is it?"

"Why did you do it? Go huntin' for the Brunners, I mean. It wasn't your job. Nobody could have made you do it."

For some reason, Owen remembered what Judge Lochland had told him once about civilization and heroes, and he laughed. "Dunc," he said, "if you have to have a reason, maybe you'd better just put it down to damn foolishness."

"I think it was more than that," the boy said.

And the way he said it made Owen squirm uncomfortably, and he was glad to see Doc Linnwood's thick figure appear in the doorway. "So you made it back," the doctor said, shooting quick glances at Owen and Dunc. He stood quietly for a moment. "I'm sorry about Deland. He was a good man."

"Yes," Owen said. "Thanks."

"Well!" Linnwood said after another short pause. "I guess I'd better take a look at that side."

The doctor's big, blunt hands had the gentle touch of a woman as he helped Owen off with his shirt, then bathed and dressed the raw furrow about three inches above the left hip. "You're by way of becoming a hero, Owen." Linnwood smiled. "Cushman's got the whole town talking."

Owen smiled and said, "Are Elizabeth and the boys all right, Doc?"

"Fine. I was out that way yesterday."

Owen saw the eager look in Dunc Lester's eyes, and added, "How about Leah Stringer?"

"You wouldn't know her," Linnwood laughed. "Elizabeth decked her out in some of her own dresses, and damn if she didn't turn out to be a looker."

Dunc sagged with relief, but said nothing. The small talk continued for several minutes, and at last they heard the solid crack of boot heels on the rock flooring and Cushman and Bern McKeever came into the office.

"Well, Owen," the banker said heartily. "Will tells me you cleaned up the Brunners! That's just the thing I wanted to hear!"

"I had some help," Owen said quietly. "Arch Deland and Dunc Lester, here."

"Oh, yes." McKeever blinked at the quiet rebuke. "Too bad about Deland, but he was an old man. The important thing is that the Brunners are dead. It'll be a simple matter to take a posse into the hills and clean out the rest of the gang."

Owen and Dunc looked quickly at one another and then stared at the fat banker. "I'd sort of thought," Owen said mildly, "that the matter was closed. The gang is broken up. I don't think they'll give you any more trouble."

McKeever was clearly outraged at such an idea. "Toller, have you taken leave of your senses? They're a bunch of killers and thieves up there, every one of them. They've got to be brought to trial and punished. The sooner we clean them out of the hills, the better!"

The banker's fat jowls quivered in righteous indignation, and he shot a finger at Dunc Lester. "And that young hoodlum is to be treated the same as the others! He was one of the gang, and I'll permit no favoritism when it comes to justice!"

"Just a minute, Ben," Owen said quietly.

"You listen to me, Toller," the banker broke in. "What you've done was a big help, and we appreciate it, but we can't tolerate softness toward a gang of criminals."

Owen slipped into his shirt, looking at McKeever as he buttoned it. He said, "They're not criminals, Ben. They're just farmers, like myself."

"They're killers!" McKeever said angrily.

"The Brunners were killers," Owen corrected. But he knew that he had no legal ground to stand on, and he was not sure that his moral ground was as completely steady as he would have liked. And yet he had met Gabe Tanis face to face, and Ben McKeever hadn't. He could not believe that men like Tanis were willful criminals.

At last he said, "Ben... maybe you're right."

"Of course I'm right!"

Although Owen did not look in Dunc Lester's direction, he could feel the boy's instant hostility in the room. "If the gang was really disbanded," Owen went on, "it would be an impossible job weeding out the gang members from the others."

"They're all equally to blame, members or not," the banker said bluntly. "The gang could not have existed without the approval of hillfolks."

"Then all of them should be punished," Owen said, "rounded up like cattle and brought into Reunion to stand trial."

Ben was puzzled but pleased. "That's right, Owen! I thought you'd see it my way."

Dunc Lester came half out of his chair, his face flushed with anger. But before he could speak, Owen went on in his mild, disinterested voice. "It looks like Ben has the law on his side, Will," he said to the sheriff. "What you'll have to do is round up a big posse, scour those hills from top to bottom until you have every last family."

Will appeared suddenly uncomfortable at this turn of events. "Wait a minute, Owen," he said quickly. "I know how Ben feels about this, but it would take months, maybe years, to clean out those hills!"

"I know," Owen agreed. "They have pride. They'll fight every inch of the way together against a posse of outsiders. But they'll have to give in eventually. It might take five, ten years, but they'll finally have to give in."

"Five years!" Ben McKeever said. "Ten!"

"You have the hills to deal with," Owen explained. "Why, a few of those farmers could hold up a hundred-man posse almost as long as they wanted in one of their passes. Of course you'll have to plan on a long fight."

"But I hadn't planned on a long fight!" the banker sputtered. "Why, in five years the railroad would be dead and forgotten!"

"Justice doesn't always come the easy way," Owen told him.

McKeever wiped his red face with a crisp linen handkerchief. "Now, wait a minute, Will. We've got to look at this another way. We've got to think of the good of the community as a whole. We've got to think of the prosperity that a spur line would bring to Reunion. Owen, if we... well, say we kind of let this matter sit for a while, do you think those hillpeople would co-operate with the building of a railroad?"

Owen smiled so faintly that the expression was hardly noticeable. "Maybe," he said, "you'd better ask Mr. Lester. He knows the people better than I do."

McKeever came angrily erect, but he was much too smart to allow his emotions to control his business sense. "Well, son," he snapped, glaring at Dunc, "what do you say?"

Dunc had begun to see the purpose behind the queer turn of the marshal's talk. "I don't know," he said carefully. "Maybe they'd listen to me, and maybe they wouldn't." But his mind was thinking far ahead, and he was thinking that McKeever's railroad would mean work for the hill-people, something to fill the gap that the Brunner raids had opened. There would be sawmills and timber to cut, and roads and settlements would change the face of the hills. Dunc thought that all these things might be to the good.

He looked first at Owen, and the marshal nodded. Then to McKeever he said, "I can't promise it'll do any good, but maybe I can talk to them."

"You do that," the banker said quickly, wiping his face again. "I'd appreciate it, son."

Owen sat for one long moment, quietly at peace with the world and with himself. He felt no obligation toward anyone but Elizabeth and the boys, and he was eager to see them. He was anxious to experience the pungent smell of fresh-turned earth again. Duty—if that was the name for it—no longer held him. The glories of the past did not entice him as they enticed Arch Deland. What he had done, he told himself, was not so much. A million men before him had left their plows for various reasons, for causes as subtle as the act of breathing, to fight for certain beliefs that they could not put into words. And they would do it again in the future.

Owen Toller stood up and looked at Dunc. "Are you ready, son?"

The boy rose from his chair. "I'm ready." Owen unpinned his deputy's badge and laid it carefully on Will Cushman's desk. "Then," he said, "I guess it's time we went home."

THE END