

Law of the Hunted Ones

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Chapter 1

PATMAN SAW IT first. The sudden flash of sun on metal; then, on the steepness of the hillside, it was a splinter of a gleam that hung unmoving amidst the confusion of jagged rock and brush. Just a dull gleam now that meant nothing, but the first metallic flash had been enough for Virgil Patman. He exhaled slowly, dropping his eyes from the gleam up on the slanting wall, and let his gaze drift up ahead through the narrowness, the way it would naturally. But his fists remained tight around the reins.

He muttered to himself, „You damn fool.“ Cover was behind, a hundred feet or more, and a rifle can do a lot of pecking in a hundred feet.

The boy doesn't see it, he thought. Else he would have been shooting by now. And then other words followed in his mind. Why do you think the boy's any dumber than you are?

He shifted his hip in the saddle and turned his head halfway around.

Dave Fallis was a few paces behind him and to the side. He was looking at his hands on the flat dinner-plate saddle horn, deep in thought.

Patman drew tobacco and paper from his side coat pocket and held his mount in until the boy came abreast of him.

„Don't look up too quick and don't make a sudden move,“ Patman said. He passed the paper along the tip of his tongue, then shaped it expertly in his bony, freckly fingers. He wasn't looking at the boy, but he could sense his head come up fast. „What did I just tell you?“ He struck a match and held it to the brown paper cigarette. His eyes were on the match and he half-mumbled with the cigarette in his mouth, „Dave, hold on to your nerve. There's a rifle pointing at us. Maybe two hundred feet ahead and almost to the top of the slope.“ He handed the makings across. „Build yourself one like it was Sunday afternoon on the front porch.“

Their horses moved at a slow walk close to the left side that was smooth rock and almost straight up. Here, and as far as you could see ahead, the right side slanted steeply up, gravel, rock and brush thrown violently together, to finally climb into dense pines overhead. Here and there the pines straggled down the slope. Patman watched the boy put the twisted cigarette between his lips and light it, the hand steady, up close to his face.

„When you get a chance,“ Patman said, „look about halfway up the slope, just this side of that hollow. You'll see a dab of yellow that's prickly pear, then go above to that rock jam and tell me what you see.“

Fallis pulled his hat closer to his eyes and looked up-canyon before dragging his gaze to the slope. His face registered nothing, not even a squint with the hat brim resting on his eyebrows. A hard-boned face, tight through the cheeks and red-brown from the sun, but young and with a good mouth that looked as if it smiled most of the time, though it wasn't smiling now. His gaze lowered to the pass and he drew on the cigarette.

„Something shining up there, but I don't make out what it is,“ he said.

„It's a rifle, all right. We'll take for granted somebody's behind it.“

„Indian?“

„Not if the piece is so clean it shines,“ Patman answered. „Just keep going, and watch me. We'll gamble that it's a white man—and gamble that he acts like one.“

Fallis tried to keep his voice even. „What if he just shoots?“ The question was hoarse with excitement. Maybe the boy's not as scared as I am, Patman thought. Young and too eager to be afraid. You get old and take too damn much time doing what kept you alive when you were young. Why keep thinking of him, he thought, you got a hide too, you know.

Patman answered, „If he shoots, we'll know where we stand and you can do the first thing that comes to your mind.“

„Then I might let go at you,“ Fallis smiled, „for leading us into this jackpot.“

Patman's narrow face looked stone-hard with its sad smile beneath the full mustache. „If you want to make jokes,“ he said, „go find someone else.“

„What're we going to do, Virg?“ Fallis was dead serious. It made his face look tough when he didn't smile, with the heavy cheekbones and the hard jawline beneath.

„We don't have a hell of a lot of choices,“ Patman said. „If we kick into a run or turn too fast, we're likely to get a bullet. You don't want to take a chance on that gent up there being the nervous type. And if we just start shooting, we haven't got anything to hide behind when he shoots back.“

He heard the boy say, „We can get behind our horses.“

He answered him, „I'd just as soon get shot as have to walk home. You got any objections to just going on like we don't know he's there?“

Fallis shook his head, swallowing. „Anything you say, Virg. Probably he's just out hunting turkeys...“ He dropped behind the older man as they edged along the smooth rock of the canyon wall until there was ten feet between their horses.

THEY RODE STIFF-BACKED, from habit, yet with an easy looseness of head and arms that described an absence of tension. Part of it was natural, again habit, and part was each trying to convince the other that he wasn't afraid. Patman and Fallis were good for each other. They had learned it through campaigning.

Now, with the tightness in their bellies, they waited for the sound.

The clop of their horses' hooves had a dull ring in the awful silence.

They waited for another sound.

Both men were half expecting the heavy report of a rifle. They steeled themselves against the worst that could happen, because anything else would take care of itself. The sound of the loose rock glancing down the slope was startling, like a warning to jerk their heads to the side and up the slanting wall. The man was standing in the spot where Patman had pointed, his rifle at aim, so that all they could see was the rifle below the hat. No face.

„Don't move a finger, or you're dead!“ The voice was full and clear.

The man lowered the rifle and called, „Sit still while I come down.“

He turned and picked his way over the scattered rock, finally half sliding into the hollow that was behind his position. The hollow fell less steeply to the canyon floor with natural rock footholds and gnarled brush stumps to hold on to.

For a moment the man's head disappeared from view, then was there again just as suddenly. He hesitated, watching the two men below him and fifty feet

back up the trail. Then he disappeared again into a deeper section of the descent.

Dave Fallis' hand darted to the holster at his hip.

„Hold onto yourself!“ Patman's whisper was a growl in his heavy mustache. His eyes flicked to the hollow. „He's not alone! You think he'd go out of sight if he was by himself!“

The boy's hand slid back to the saddle horn while his eyes traveled over the heights above him. Only the hot breeze moved the brush clumps.

The man moved toward them on the trail ahead with short, bowlegged steps, his face lowered close to the upraised rifle. When he was a dozen steps from Patman's horse, his head came up and he shouted, „All right!“ to the heights behind them. Fallis heard Patman mumble, „I'll be damned,“ looking at the man with the rifle.

„Hey, Rondo!“ Patman was grinning his sad smile down at the short, bowlegged man with the rifle. „What you got here, a toll you collect from anybody who goes by?“ Patman laughed out, with a ring of relief to the laugh. „I saw you a ways back. Your toll box was shining in the sun.“ He went on laughing and put his hand in his side coat pocket.

The rifle came up full on his chest. „Keep your hand in sight!“ The man's voice cut sharply.

Patman looked at him surprised. „What's the matter with you, Rondo? It's me. Virg Patman.“ His arm swung to his side. „This here's Dave Fallis. We rode together in the Third for the past five years.“

Rondo's heavy-whiskered face stared back, the deep lines unmoving as if they had been cut into stone. The rifle was steady on Patman's chest.

„What the hell's the matter with you!“ Patman repeated. „Remember me bringing you your bait for sixty days at Thomas?“

Rondo's beard separated when his mouth opened slightly. „You were on the outside, if I remember correctly.“

Patman swore with a gruff howl. „You talk like I passed sentence! You damn fool, what do you think a Corporal of the Guard is—a judge?“ His head turned to Fallis. „This bent-legged waddie shoots a reservation Indian, gets sixty days, then blames it on me. You remember him in the lock-up?“

„No. I guess—“

„That's right,“ Patman cut in. „That was before your time.“

Rondo looked past the two men.

„That wasn't before my time.“ The voice came from behind the two men.

HE WAS SQUATTING on a hump that jutted out from the slope, just above their heads and a dozen or so feet behind them, and he looked as if he'd been sitting there all the time. When he looked at him, Fallis thought of a scavenger bird perched on the bloated roundness of a carcass.

It was his head and the thinness of his frame that gave that impression. His dark hair was cropped close to his skull, brushed forward low on his forehead and coming to a slight point above his eyebrows. The thin hair pointed down, as did the ends of a shadowy mustache that was just starting to grow, lengthening the line of his face, a face that was sallow complexioned and squinting against the brightness of the afternoon.

He jumped easily from the hump, his arms outstretched and a pistol in each hand, though he wore only one holster on his hip.

Fallis watched him open-mouthed. He wore a faded undershirt and pants tucked into knee-high boots. A string of red cotton was knotted tight to his throat above the opening of the undershirt. And with it all, the yellowish death's-head of a face. Fallis watched because he couldn't take his eyes from the man. There was a compelling arrogance about his movements and the way he held his head that made Fallis stare at him. And even with the shabbiness of his dress, it stood out. It was there in the way he held his pistols. Fallis pictured a saber-slashing captain of cavalry. Then he saw a black-bearded buccaneer. „I remember when Rondo was in the lock-up at Fort Thomas.“ His voice was crisp, but low and he extra-spaced his words. „That was a good spell before you rode me to Yuma, wasn't it?“

Patman shook his head. The surprise had already left his face. He shook his head wearily as if it was all way above him. He said, „If you got any more men up there that I policed, get 'em down and let me hear it all at once.“ He shook his head again. „This is a real day of surprises. I can't say I ever expected to see you again, De Sana.“

„Then what are you doing here?“ The voice was cold-clear, but fell off at the end of the question as if he had already made up his mind why they were there.

Patman saw it right away.

It took Fallis a little longer because he had to fill in, but he understood now, looking at De Sana and then to Patman.

Patman's voice was a note higher. „You think we're looking for you?“

„I said,“ De Sana repeated, „then what are you doing here?“

„Hell, we're not tracking you! We were mustered out last week. We're pointing toward West Texas for a range job, or else sign for contract buffalo hunters.“

De Sana stared, but didn't speak. His hands, with the revolving pistols, hung at his sides.

„What do I care if you broke out of the Territory prison?“ Patman shouted it, then seemed to relax, to calm himself. „Listen,“ he said, „we're both mustered out. Dave here has got one hitch in, and I've got more years behind me than I like to remember. But we're out now and what the army does is its own damn business. And what you do is your business. I can forget you like that.“ He snapped his fingers. „'Cause you don't mean a thing to me. And that dust-eatin' train ride from Willcox to Yuma, I can forget that too, 'cause I didn't enjoy it any more than you did even if you thought then you weren't going to make the return trip.“

„You're as bad as Rondo here. You think 'cause I was train guard it was my fault you got sent to Yuma. Listen. I treated you square. There were some troopers would have kicked your face in just on principle.“

De Sana moistened his lower lip with his tongue, idly, thinking about the past and the future at the same time. A man has to believe in something, no matter what he is. He looked at the two men on the horses and felt the weight of the pistols in his hands. There was the easy way. He looked at them watching him uneasily, waiting for him to make a move.

„Going after a range job, huh?“ he said almost inaudibly.

„That's right. Or else hunt buffalo. They say the railroad's paying top rate, too,“ Patman added.

„How do I know,“ De Sana said slowly, „you won't get to the next sheriff's office and start yelling wolf.“

Patman was silent as his fingers moved over his jaw. „I guess you'll have to take my word that I've got a bad memory," he said finally.

„What kind of memory has your friend got?" De Sana said, looking hard at Dave Fallis.

„You got the biggest pistols he ever saw," Patman answered.

Rondo mounted behind Patman and pointed the way up the narrow draw that climbed from the main trail about a quarter of a mile up. It branched from the pass, twisting as it climbed, but more decidedly bearing an angle back in the direction from which they had come. Rondo had laughed out at Patman's last words. The tension was off now. Since De Sana had accepted the two men, Rondo would too, and went even a step further, talking about hospitality and coffee and words like this calls for a celebration, even though the words were lost on the other three men.

The words had no meaning but they filled in and lessened the tension.

Chapter 2

DE SANA WAS still standing in the pass when they left, but when Fallis looked back he saw the outlaw making his way up the hollow. When the draw reached the end of its climb they were at the top of the ridge, looking down directly to the place where they had held up.

Here, the pines were thick, but farther off they scattered and thinned again as they began to stretch toward higher, rockier ground.

De Sana was standing among the trees waiting for them. He turned before they reached him and led the way through the pines. Fallis looked around curiously, feeling the uneasiness that had come over him since meeting De Sana. Then, as he looked ahead, the hut wasn't fifty feet away. It was a low structure, flat-roofed and windowless, with rough, uneven logs chinked in with adobe mud. On one side was a lean-to where the cooking was done. A girl was hanging strips of meat from the low ceiling when they came out of the pines, and as they approached she turned with a hand on her hip, smoothing a stray wisp of hair with the other.

She watched them with open curiosity, as a small child stares at the mystery of a strange person. There was a delicateness of face and body that accentuated this, that made her look more childlike in her open sensitivity. De Sana glanced at her and she dropped her eyes and turned back to the jerked meat.

„Put the coffee on," De Sana called to her. She nodded her head without turning around. „Rondo, you take care of the mounts and get back to your nest."

Rondo opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it and tried to make his face look natural when he took the reins from the two men and led the horses across the small clearing to the corral, part of which could be seen through the pines a little way off. A three-sided lean-to squatted at one end of the small, fenced area.

„That's Rondo's," De Sana pointed to the shelter. Walking to the cabin he called to the girl again. This time she did not shake her head.

Fallis thought perhaps the shoulders tensed in the faded gray dress.

Still, she didn't turn around or even answer him.

The inside of the cabin was the same as the outside, rough log chinked with adobe, and a packed dirt floor. A table and two chairs, striped with cracks and gray with age, stood in the middle of the small room. In a far corner was a straw mattress. On it, a blanket was twisted in a heap. Along the opposite wall was a section of log with a board nailed to it to serve as a bench, and next to this was the cupboard: three boxes stacked one on the other. It contained a tangle of clothing, cartridge boxes and five or six bottles of whiskey.

The two men watched De Sana shove his extra pistol into a holster that hung next to the cupboard. The other was on his hip. He took a half-filled bottle from the shelf and went to the table.

„Looks like I’m just in time.“ Rondo was standing in the doorway, grinning, with a canteen hanging from his hand. „Give me a little fill, jefe, to ease sitting on that eagle’s nest.“

De Sana’s head came up and he moved around the table threateningly, his eyes pinned on the man in the doorway. „Get back to the pass!“ His hand dropped to the pistol on his hip in a natural movement. „You watch! You get paid to watch! And if you miss anything going through that pass...“ His voice trailed off, but for a moment it shook with excitement.

„Hell, Lew. Nobody’s going to find us way up here,“ Rondo argued half-heartedly.

Patman looked at him surprised. „Cima Quaine’s blood-dogs could track a man all the way to China.“

„Aw, San Carlos’s a hundred miles away. Ain’t nobody going to track us that far, not even *Pache Police*.“

De Sana said, „I’m not telling you again, Rondo.“ Rondo glanced at the hand on the pistol butt and moved out of the doorway.

But as he walked through the pines toward the canyon edge, he held the canteen up to his face and shook it a few times. He could hear the whiskey inside sloshing around sounding as if it were still a good one-third full. Rondo smiled and his mind erased the scowling yellow face. Lew De Sana could go take a whistlin’ dive at the moon for all he cared.

THE GIRL’S FINGERS were crooked through the handles of the three enamel cups, and she kept her eyes lowered to the table as she set the coffeepot down with her other hand, placing the cups next to it.

„Looks good,“ Patman said.

She said nothing, but her eyes lifted to him briefly, then darted to the opposite side of the table where Fallis stood and then lowered just as quickly. She had turned her head slightly, enough for Fallis to see the bruise on her cheekbone. A deep blue beneath her eye that spread into a yellowish caste in the soft hollow of her cheek. There was a lifelessness in the dark eyes and perhaps fear. Fallis kept staring at the girl, seeing the utter resignation that showed in her face and was there even in the way she moved her small body. Like a person who has given up and doesn’t much care what happens next. He noticed the eyes when her glance wandered to him again, dark and tired, yet with a certain hungriness in their deepness. No, it wasn’t fear. De Sana picked up the first cup as she filled it and poured a heavy shot from the bottle into it. He set the bottle down and lifted the coffee cup to his mouth. His lips moved, as if tasting, and he said, „It’s cold,“ looking at the girl in a way that didn’t need the support of other words.

He turned the cup upside down and poured the dark liquid on the floor.

Fallis thought, What a damn fool. Who's he trying to impress? He glanced at Patman but the ex-corporal was looking at De Sana as if pouring coffee on the floor was the most normal thing in the world.

As the girl picked up the big coffeepot, her hand shook with the weight and before her other hand could close on the spout, she dropped it back on the table.

„Here, I'll give you a hand,“ Fallis offered. „That's a big jug.“

But just as he took it from the girl's hands, he heard De Sana say, „Leave that pot alone!“

He looked at De Sana in bewilderment. „What? I just want to help her out with the coffeepot.“

„She can do her own chores.“ De Sana's voice was unhurried. „Just put it down.“

Dave Fallis felt heat rise up over his face. When he was angry, he always wondered if it showed. And sometimes, as, for instance, now, he didn't care. His heart started going faster with the rise of the heat that tingled the hair on the back of his head and made the words come to his mouth. And he had to spit the words out hard because it would make him feel better.

„Who the hell are you talking to? Do I look like somebody you can give orders to?“ Fallis stopped but kept on looking at the thin, sallow face, wishing he could think of something good to say while the anger was up.

Patman moved closer to the younger man. „Slow down, Dave,“ he said with a laugh that sounded forced. „A man's got a right to run things like he wants in his own house.“

De Sana's eyes moved from one to the other, then back to the girl and said, „What are you waiting for?“ He kept his eyes on her until she passed through the doorway. Then he said, „Mister, you better have a talk with your boy.“

Fallis heard Patman say, „That's just his Irish, Lew. You know, young and gets hot easy.“ He stared at the old cavalryman—not really old, but twice his own age—and tried to see through the sad face with the drooping mustache because he knew that wasn't Virg Patman talking, calling him by his first name as if they were old friends. What was the matter with Virg? He felt the anger draining and in its place was bewilderment. It made him feel uneasy and kind of foolish standing there, with his big hands planted on the table, trying to stare down the skeletal-looking gunman who looked at him as if he were a kid and would be just wasting his time talking. It made him madder, but the things he wanted to say sounded too loudmouth in his mind. The words seemed blustering, hot air, compared to the cold, slow-spoken words of De Sana.

Now De Sana said, „I don't care what his nationality is. But I think you better tell him the facts of life.“

Fallis felt the heat again, but Patman broke in with his laugh before he could say anything.

„Hell, Lew,“ Patman said. „Let's get back to what we come for. Nobody meant any harm.“

De Sana fingered the dark shadow of his mustache thoughtfully, and finally said, hurriedly, „Yeah. All right.“ Then he added, „Now that you're here, you might as well stay the night and leave in the morning. If you have any stores with you, break them out. This isn't any street mission. And remember, first light you leave.“

Later, during the meal, he spoke little, occasionally answering Patman in monosyllables. He never spoke directly to Fallis and only answered Patman when he had to. Finally he pushed from the table before he had finished. He rolled a cigarette moving toward the door.

„I'm going out to relieve Rondo,“ he said. „Don't wander off.“

FALLIS WATCHED HIM walk across the clearing and when the figure disappeared into the pines he turned abruptly to Patman sitting next to him.

„What's the matter with you, Virg?“

Patman put his hand up. „Now just slow it down. You're too damn jumpy.“

„Jumpy? Honest to God, Virg, you never sucked up to the first sergeant like you did to that little rooster. Back in the pass you read him out when he started jumping to conclusions. Now you're buttering up like you were scared to death.“

„Wait a minute.“ Patman passed his fingers through his thinning hair, his elbow on the table. He looked very tired and his long face seemed to sag loosely in sadness. „If you're going to play brave, you got to pick the right time, else your bravery don't mean a damn thing.“

„These hills are full of heroes, and nobody even knows where to plant the flowers over them. Then you come across a man fresh out of Yuma—out the hard way, too—“ he added, „a man who probably shoots holes in his shadow every night and can't trust anybody because it might mean going back to an adobe cell block. He got sent there in the first place because he shot an Indian agent in a hold-up. He didn't kill him, but don't think he couldn't have—and don't think he hasn't killed before.“

Patman exhaled and drew tobacco from his pocket. „You run into a man like that, a man who counts his breaths like you count your blessings, and you pick a fight because you don't like the way he treats his woman.“

„A man can't get his toes stepped on and just smile,“ Fallis said testily.

Patman blew smoke out wearily. „Maybe your hitch in the Army was kind of a sheltered life. Brass bands and not having to think. Trailing a dust cloud that used to be Apaches isn't facing Lew De Sana across a three foot table. I think you were lucky.“

Fallis picked up his hat and walked toward the door. „We'll see,“ he answered.

„Wait a minute, Dave.“ Fallis turned in the doorway.

„Sometimes you got to pick the lesser of evils,“ the older man said.

„Like choosing between a sore toe or lead in your belly. Remember, Dave, he's a man with a price on his head. He's spooky. And remember this. A little while ago he could have shot both of your eyes out while he was drinking his coffee.“

Patience wasn't something Dave Fallis came by naturally. Standing idle ate at his nerves and made him move restlessly like a penned animal. The Army hitch had grated on him this way. Petty routines and idleness. Idleness in the barracks and idleness even in the dustsmothering parade during the hours of drill. Routine that became so much a part of you it ceased being mentally directed.

The cavalry had a remedy for the restless feeling. Four-day patrols.

Four-day patrols that sometimes stretched to twenty and by it brought the ailment back with the remedy. For a saddle is a poor place for boredom, and twelve hours in it will bring the boredom back quicker than anything else,

especially when the land is flat and vacant, silent but for a monotonous clop, blazing in its silence and carrying only dust and a sweat smell that clung sourly to you in the daytime and chilled you at night. Dave Fallis complained because nothing happened—because there was never any action. He was told he didn't know how lucky he was. That he didn't know what he was talking about because he was just a kid. And nothing made him madder. Damn a man who's so ignorant he holds age against you!

Now he stood in the doorway and looked out across the clearing.

He leaned against the doorjamb, hooking his thumbs in his belt, and let his body go loose. The sun was there in front of him over the trees, casting a soft spread of light on the dark hillsides in the distance. Now it was a sun that you could look at without squinting or pulling down your hat brim. A sun that would be gone in less than an hour.

He saw the girl appear and move toward the lean-to at the side of the hut. She walked slowly, listlessly.

Fallis left the doorway and idled along the front of the hut after she had passed and entered the shelter. And when he ducked his head slightly and entered the low-roofed shed, the girl was busy scooping venison stew from the pot and dishing it onto one of the tin plates.

SHE TURNED QUICKLY at the sound of his step and almost brushed him as she turned, stopping, her mouth slightly open, her face lower than his, but not a foot separating them.

He was grinning when she turned, but the smile left his face as she continued to stare up at him, her mouth still parted slightly and warm looking, complementing the delicately soft lines of nose and cheekbones. The bruise was not so noticeable now, in the shadows, but its presence gave her face a look of sadness, yet adding luster to the deep brown eyes that stared without blinking.

His hands came up to grip her shoulders, pulling gently as he lowered his face to hers. She yielded against the slight pressure of his hands, drawing closer, and he saw her eyes close as her face tilted back, but as he closed his eyes he felt her shoulders jerk suddenly from his grip and in front of his face now was the smooth blackness of her hair hanging straight about her shoulders.

„Why did you do that?“ Her voice was low, and with her back to him, barely audible.

Fallis said, „I haven't done anything yet,“ and tried to make his voice sound light. The girl made no answer, but remained still, with her shoulder close to him.

„I'm sorry,“ he said. „Are you married to him?“

Her head shook from side to side in two short motions, but no sound came from her. He turned her gently, his hands again on her shoulders, and as she turned she lowered her head so he could not see her face. But he crooked a finger beneath her chin and raised it slowly to his. His hand moved from her slender chin to gently touch the bruised cheekbone.

„Why don't you leave him?“ He half-whispered the words.

For a moment she remained silent and lowered her eyes from his face. Finally she said, „I would have no place to go.“ Her voice bore the hint of an accent.

„What's worse than living with him and getting beat like an animal?“

„He is good to me—most of the time. He is tired and nervous and doesn't know what he is doing. I remember him when he was younger and would visit my father. He smiled often then and was good to us.“

Her words flowed faster now, as if she was anxious to speak, voluntarily lifting her face to look into his with a pleading in her dark eyes that seemed to say, „Please believe what I say and tell me that I am right.“

„My father,“ she went on, „worked a small farm near Nogales which I remember as far back as I am able. He worked hard but he was not a very good farmer, and I always had the feeling that papa was sorry he had married and settled there. You see, my mother was Mexican,“ and she lowered her eyes as if in apology.

„One day this man rode up and asked if he may buy coffee. We had none, but he stayed and talked long with papa and they seemed to get along very well. After that he came often, maybe two three times a month and always he brought us presents and sometimes even money, which my papa took and I thought was very bad of him, even though I was only a little girl. Soon after that my mother died of sickness, and my papa took me to Tucson to live. And from that time he began going away for weeks at a time with this man and when he returned he would have money and he would be very drunk. When he would go, I prayed to the Mother of God at night because I knew what he was doing.

„Finally, he went away and did not return.“ Her voice carried a note of despair. „And my prayers changed to ones for the repose of his soul.“

Fallis said, „I'm sorry,“ awkwardly, but the girl went on as if he had not spoken.

„A few months later the man returned and treated me differently.“

Her face colored slightly. „He treated me older. He was kind and told me he would come back soon and take me away from Tucson to a beautiful place I would love... But it was almost two years after this that the man called Rondo came to me at night and took me to the man. I had almost forgotten him. He was waiting outside of town with horses and made me go with them. I did not know him, he had changed so—his face, and even his voice. We have been here for almost two weeks, and only a few days ago I learned where he had been for the two years.“

Suddenly, she pressed her face into his chest and began to cry silently, convulsively.

Fallis's arms circled the thinness of her shoulders to press her hard against his chest. He mumbled, „Don't cry,“ into her hair and closed his eyes hard to think of something he could say. Feeling her body shaking against his own, he could see only a smiling, dark-haired little girl looking with awe at the carefree, generous American riding into the yard with a war bag full of presents. And then the little girl standing there was no longer smiling, her cheekbone was black and blue and she carried a half-gallon coffeepot in her hands. And the carefree American became a sallow death's-head that she called only „the man.“ With her face buried against his chest, she was speaking. At first he could not make out her words, incoherent with the crying, then he realized that she was repeating, „I do not like him,“ over and over, „I do not like him.“ He thought, how can she use such simple words? He lifted her head, her eyes closed, and pressed his mouth against the lips that finally stopped saying, „I do not like him.“

She pushed away from him lingeringly, her face flushed, and surprised the grin from his face when she said, „Now I must get wood for in the morning.“

The grin returned as he looked down at her childlike face, now so serious. He lifted the hand-ax from the wood box, and they walked across the clearing very close together.

Virgil Patman stood in the doorway and watched them dissolve into the darkness of the pines.

Well, what are you going to do? Maybe a man's not better off minding his own business. The boy looks like he's doing pretty well not minding his. But damn, he thought, he's sure making it tough! He stared out at the cold, still light of early evening and heard the voice in his mind again. You've given him a lot of advice, but you've never really done anything for him. He's a good boy. Deserves a break. It's his own damn business how quick he falls for a girl. Why don't you try and give him a hand?

Patman exhaled wearily and turned back into the hut. He lifted De Sana's handgun from the holster on the wall and pushed it into the waist of his pants. From the cupboard he took the boxes of cartridges, loading one arm, and then picked up a Winchester leaning in the front corner that he had not noticed there before. He passed around the cooking lean-to to the back of the hut and entered the pines that pushed in close there. In a few minutes he was back inside the cabin, brushing sand from his hands. Not much, he thought, but maybe it'll help some. Before he sat down and poured himself a drink, he drew his pistol and placed it on the table near his hand.

Chapter 3

TWO CENTS KNEW patience. It was as natural to him as breathing. He could not help smiling as he watched the white man, not a hundred feet away and just above him on the opposite slope, pull his head up high over the rim of the rocks in front of him, concentrating his attention off below where the trail broke into the pass. Rondo watched the pass, like De Sana had told him, and if his eyes wandered over the opposite canyon wall, it was only when he dragged them back to his own niche, and then it was only a fleeting glance at almost vertical smooth rock and brush. Two Cents waited and watched, studying this white man who exposed himself so in hiding. Perhaps the man is a lure, he thought, to take us off guard. His lips straightened into a tight line, erasing the smile. He watched the man's head turn to the trees above him. Then the head turned back and he lifted the big canteen to his mouth. Two Cents had counted, and it was the sixth time the man had done so in less than a half hour. His thirst must be that of fire.

He felt a hand on his ankle and began to ease his body away from the rim that was here thick with tangled brush. He backed away cautiously so that the loose gravel would not even know he was there, and nodded his head once to Ve'a Oiga who crept past him to where he had lain.

A dozen or so yards back, where the ground sloped from the rim, he stood erect and looked back at Ve'a Oiga. Even at this short distance he could barely make out the crouched figure.

He lifted the shell belt over his head and then removed the faded blue jacket carefully, smoothing the bare sleeves before folding it next to Ve'a Oiga's on the ground. If he performed bravely, he thought, perhaps Cima Quaine will put a gold mark on the sleeves. He noticed Ve'a Oiga had folded his jacket so the three gold stripes were on top. Perhaps not three all at once, for it had taken Ve'a Oiga years to acquire them, but just one. How fine that would look. Surely Cima Quaine must recognize their ability in discovering this man in the pass. Less than an hour before they had followed the trail up to the point where it twisted into the pass, but there they stopped and back-trailed to a gradual rock fall that led up to the top of the canyon. They had tied up there and climbed on foot to the canyon rim that looked across to the other slope. They had done this naturally, without a second thought, because it was their business, and because if they were laying an ambush they would have picked this place where the pass narrowed and it was a hundred feet back to shelter. A few minutes after creeping to the rim, Rondo had appeared with a clatter of gravel, standing, exposing himself fully.

Ve'a Oiga had whispered to him what they would do after studying the white man for some time. Then he had dropped back to prepare himself. With Cima Quaine and the rest of the Coyotero Apache scouts less than an hour behind, they would just have time to get ready and go about the ticklish job of disposing of the lookout. Two Cents hoped that the chief scout would hurry up and be there to see him climb up to take the guard. He glanced at his castoff cavalry jacket again and pictured the gold chevron on the sleeve; it was as bright and impressive as Ve'a Oiga's sergeant stripes.

Now he looked at the curled toes of his moccasins as he unfastened the ties below his knees and rolled the legging part of his pants high above his knees and secured them again. He tightened the string of his breechclout, then spit on his hands a half dozen times rubbing the saliva over his arms and the upper part of his body until his dull brown coloring glistened with the wetness. When he had moistened every part of skin showing, he sank to the ground and rolled in the dust, rubbing his arms and face with the sand that clung to the wet skin.

He raised himself to his knees and knelt motionless like a rock or a stump, his body the color of everything around him, and now, just as still and unreal in his concentration.

Slowly his arms lifted to the dulling sky and his thoughts went to U-sen. He petitioned the God that he might perform bravely in what was to come, and if it were the will of U-sen that he was to die this day, would the God mind if it came about before the sun set? To be killed at night was to wander in eternal darkness, and nothing that he imagined could be worse, especially coming at the hands of a white man whom even the other white men despised.

WHEN TWO CENTS had disappeared down through the rocks, Ve'a Oiga moved back from the rim until he was sure he could not be seen. Then he ran in a crouch, weaving through the mesquite and boulders, until he found another place along the rim that was dense with brush clumps. From here, Rondo's head and rifle barrel were still visible, but now he could also see, down to the right, the opening where the trail cut into the pass. He lay motionless watching the white man until finally the low, wailing call lifted from down-canyon. At that moment he watched Rondo more intently and saw the man's head lift suddenly to look in the direction from which the sound had come; but

after only a few seconds the head dropped again, relaxed. Vea Oiga smiled. Now it was his turn.

The figure across the canyon was still for a longer time than usual, but finally the scout saw the head move slowly, looking behind and above to the pines. Vea Oiga rolled to his side and cupped his hands over his mouth. When he saw the canteen come up even with the man's face, he whistled into his cupped hands, the sound coming out in a moan and floating in the air as if coming from nowhere. He rolled again in time to see Two Cents dart from the trail opening across the pass to the opposite slope. He lay motionless at the base for a few minutes.

Then as he watched, the figure slowly began to inch his way up-canyon.

By the time the sergeant of scouts had made his way around to where trail met pass, Two Cents was far up the canyon. Vea Oiga clung tight to the rock wall and inched his face past the angle that would show him the pass. He saw the movement. A hump that was part of the ground seemed to edge along a few feet and then stop. And soon he watched this moving piece of earth glide directly under the white man's position and dissolve into the hollow that ran up the slanting wall just past the yellowness of the patch of prickly pear. And above the yellow bloom the rifle could no longer be seen. A splash of crimson spreading in the sky behind the pines was all that was left of the sun. Vea Oiga turned quickly and ran back up-trail. He stopped on a rise and looked out over the open country, patched and cut with hills in the distance. His gaze crawled out slowly, sweeping on a small arc, and then stopped. There! Yes, he was sure. Maybe they were three miles away, but no more, which meant Cima Quaine would be there in fifteen to twenty minutes. Vea Oiga did not have time to wait for the scouting party. He ran back to the mouth of the pass and there, at the side of the trail, piled three stones one on the other. With his knife he scratched marks on the top stone and at the base of the bottom one, then hurried to the outcropping of rock from which he had watched the progress of his companion. And just as his gaze inched past the rock, he saw the movement behind and above the white man's position, as if part of the ground was sliding down on him.

Vea Oiga moved like a shadow at that moment across the openness of the pass. The shadow moved quickly up the face of the slope and soon was lost among rock and the darkness of the pines that straggled down the slope.

CROSSING THE CLEAR patch of sand, Lew De Sana didn't like the feeling that had come over him. Not something new, just an intensifying of the nervousness that had spread through his body since the arrival of the two men. As if every part of his body was aware of something imminent, but would not tell his mind about it. As he thought about it, he realized that, no, it was not something that had been born with the arrival of the two men. It had been inside of him every day of the two years at Yuma, gaining strength the night Rondo aided him in his escape. And it had been a clawing part of his stomach the night north of Tucson when they had picked up the girl.

He didn't understand the feeling. That's what worried him. The nervousness would come and then go away, but when it returned, he would find that it had grown, and when it went away there was always a part of him that had vanished with it. A part of him that he used to rely on.

One thing, he was honest with himself in his introspection. And undoubtedly it was this honesty that made him see himself clearly enough to be frightened, but still with a certain haze that would not allow him to understand. He remembered his reputation. Cold nerve and a swivel-type gun holster that he knew how to use. In the days before Yuma, sometimes reputation had been enough. And, more often, he had hoped that it would be enough, for he wasn't fool enough to believe completely in his own reputation. But every once in a while he was called on to back up his reputation, and sometimes this had been hard.

Now he wasn't sure. Men can forget in two years. They can forget a great deal, and De Sana worried if he would have to prove himself all over again. It had come to him lately that if this were true, he would never survive, even though he knew he was still good with a gun and could face any situation if he had to. There was this tiredness inside of him now. It clashed with the nervous tension of a hunted man and left him confused and in a desperate sort of helplessness.

Moving through the pines, thoughts ran through his mind, one on top of the other so that none of them made sense. He closed his eyes tightly for a moment, passing his hand over his face and rubbing his forehead as if the gesture would make the racing in his mind stop. He felt the short hair hanging on his forehead, and as his hand lowered, the gauntness of his cheeks and the stubble of his new mustache. He saw the cell block at Yuma and swore in his breath.

His boots made a muffled, scraping sound moving over the sand and pine needles, and, as if becoming aware of the sound for the first time, he slowed his steps and picked his way more carefully through the trees.

The muscles in his legs tightened as he eased his steps on the loose ground. And then he stopped. He stopped dead and the pistol was out in front of him before he realized he had even pulled it. Instinctively his knees bent slightly as he crouched; straining his neck forward he looked through the dimness of the pines, but if there was movement before, it was not there now.

Still, he waited a few minutes to make sure. He let the breath move through his lips in a long sigh and lowered the pistol to his side. He hated himself for his jumpiness. It was the strange tiredness again. He was tired of hiding and drawing when the wind moved the branches of trees. How much can a man take, he wondered. Maybe staying alive wasn't worth it when you had to live this way.

HE WAS ABOUT to go ahead when he saw it again. The pistol came up and this time he was sure. Through the branches of the tree in front of him, he saw the movement, a shadow gliding from one clump to the next, perhaps fifty paces up ahead. Now, as he crouched low to the bole of the pine that shielded him, the lines in his face eased. At that moment he felt good because it wasn't jumpiness anymore, and there was another feeling within him that hadn't been there for a long time. He peered through the thick lower branches of the pine and saw the dim shape on the path now moving directly toward him.

He watched the figure stop every few feet, still shadowy in the gloom, then move ahead a little more before stopping to look right and left and even behind. De Sana felt the tightness again in his stomach, not being able to make out what the man was, and suddenly the panic was back.

For a split second he imagined one of the shadows that had been haunting him had suddenly become a living thing; and then he made out the half-naked Apache and it was too late to imagine anymore.

He knew there would be a noise when he made his move, but that couldn't be helped. He waited until the Indian was a step past the tree, then he raised up. Coal-black hair flaired suddenly from a shoulder, then a wide-eyed face even with his own and an open mouth that almost cried out before the pistol barrel smashed against the bridge of his nose and forehead.

De Sana cocked his head, straining against the silence, then slowly eased down next to the body of the Indian when no sound reached him. He thought: A body lying motionless always seemed to make it more quiet. Like the deeper silence that seemed to follow gunfire.

Probably the silence was just in your head.

He laid his hand on the thin, grimy chest and jerked it back quickly when he felt no movement. Death wasn't something the outlaw was squeamish about, but it surprised him that the blow to the head had killed the Indian. He looked over the half-naked figure calmly and decided there was something there that bothered him. He bent closer in the gloom. No war paint. Not a line. He fumbled at the Indian's holster hurriedly and pulled out the well-kept Colt .44. No reservation-jumping buck owned a gun like that; and even less likely, a Sierra Madre broncho who'd more probably carry a rusted cap and ball at best. He wondered why it hadn't occurred to him right away. Apache police! And that meant Cima Quaine...

He stood up and listened again momentarily before moving ahead quickly through the pines.

He came to the canyon rim and edged along it cautiously, pressing close to the flinty rock, keeping to the deep shadows as much as he could, until he reached the hollow that sloped to the niche that Rondo had dug for himself.

He jumped quickly into the depression that fell away below him and held himself motionless in the darkness of the hollow for almost a minute before edging his gaze over the side and down to the niche a dozen yards below. He saw Rondo sprawled on his back with one booted leg propped on the rock parapet next to the rifle that pointed out over the pass.

There was no hesitating now. He climbed hurriedly, almost frantically, back to the pine grove and ran against the branches that stung his face and made him stumble in his haste. The silence was still there, but now it was heavier, pushing against him to make him run faster and stumble more often in the loose footing of the sand. He didn't care if he made noise. He heard his own forced breathing close and loud and imagined it echoing over the hillside, but now he didn't care because they knew he was here. He knew he was afraid. Things he couldn't see did that to him. He reached the clearing, finally, and darted across the clearing toward the hut.

Chapter 4

VIRGIL PATMAN PUSHED the glass away from his hand when he heard the noise outside and wrapped his fingers around the bone handle of the pistol. The light slanting through the open doorway was weak, almost the last of the

sun. He waited for the squat figure of Rondo to appear in this dim square of light, and started slightly when suddenly a thin shape appeared. And he sat bolt upright when next De Sana was in the room, clutching the door frame and breathing hard.

Patman watched him curiously and managed to keep the surprise out of his voice when he asked, „Where's Rondo? Thought you relieved him.“

De Sana gasped out the word, „Quaine!“ and wheeled to the front corner where the rifle had been. He took two steps and stopped dead.

Patman watched the thin shoulders stiffen and raised the pistol with his hand still on the table until the barrel was leveled at the outlaw.

„So you led them here after all.“ His voice was low, almost a mumble, but the hate in the words cut against the stillness of the small room.

He looked directly into Patman's face, as if not noticing the pistol leveled at him. „I must be getting old,“ he said in the same quiet tone.

„You're not going to get a hell of a lot older,“ Patman answered.

„But I'll tell you this. We didn't bring Quaine and his Apaches here. You can believe that or not. I don't much care. Just all of a sudden I don't think you're doing anybody much good being alive.“

De Sana's mouth eased slightly as he smiled. „Why don't you let your boy do his own fighting?“ And with the words he looked calmed again, as if he didn't care that a trap was tightening about him. Patman noticed it, because he had seen the panic on his face when he entered. Now he saw this calm returning and wondered if it was just a last-act bravado. It unnerved him a little to see a man so at ease with a gun turned on him and he lifted the pistol a foot off the table to make sure the outlaw had seen it.

„I'm not blind.“

„Just making sure, Lew,“ Patman drawled.

De Sana seemed to relax even more now, and moved his hand to his back pocket, slowly, so the other man wouldn't get the wrong idea. He said, „Mind if I have a smoke?“ while he dug the tobacco and paper from his pocket.

Patman shook his head once from side to side, and his eyes squinted at the outlaw, wondering what the hell he was playing for. He looked closely as the man poured tobacco into the creased paper and didn't see any of it shake loose to the floor. The fool's got iron running through him, he thought.

De Sana looked up as he shaped the cigarette. „You didn't answer my question,“ he said.

„About the boy? He can take care of himself,“ Patman answered.

„Why isn't he here, then?“ De Sana said it in a low voice, but there was a sting to the words.

Patman said, „He's out courting your girlfriend,“ and smiled, watching the dumbfounded expression freeze on the gunman's face. „You might say I'm giving him a little fatherly hand here,“ and the smile broadened.

De Sana's thin body had stiffened. Now he breathed long and shrugged his shoulders. „So you're playing the father,“ he said. Standing half-sideways toward Patman, he pulled the unlit cigarette from his mouth and waved it at the man seated behind the table. „I got to reach for a match, Dad.“

„Long as you can do it with your left hand,“ Patman said. Then added, „Son.“

De Sana smiled thinly and drew a match from his side pocket.

Patman watched the arm swing down against the thigh and saw the sudden flame in the dimness as it came back up. And at that split second he knew he had made his mistake.

He saw the other movement, another something swinging up, but it was off away from the sudden flare of the match and in the fraction of the moment it took him to realize what it was, it was too late. There was the explosion, the stab of flame, and the shock against his arm. At the same time he went up from the table and felt the weight of the handgun slipping from his fingers, as another explosion mixed with the smoke of the first and he felt the sledgehammer blow against his side. He went over with the chair and felt the packed-dirt floor slam against his back.

His hands clutched at his side instinctively, feeling the wetness that was there already, then winced in pain and dropped his right arm next to him on the floor. He closed his eyes hard, and when he opened them again he was looking at a pistol barrel, and above it De Sana's drawn face.

Unsmiling, the outlaw said, „I don't think you'd a made a very good father.“ He turned quickly and sprinted out of the hut.

Patman closed his eyes again to see the swirling black that sucked at his brain. For a moment he felt a nausea in his stomach, then numbness seemed to creep over his body. A prickling numbness that was as soothing as the dark void that was spinning inside his head. I'm going to sleep, he thought. But before he did, he remembered hearing a shot come from outside, then another.

CIMA QUAINÉ WALKED over to him when he saw the boy look up quickly.

Dave Fallis looked anxiously from Patman's motionless form up to the chief scout who now stood next to him where he knelt.

„I saw his eyes open and close twice!“ he whispered excitedly.

The scout hunkered down beside him and wrinkled his buckskin face into a smile. It was an ageless face, cold in its dark, crooked lines and almost cruel, but the smile was plain in the eyes. He was bareheaded, and his dark hair glistened flat on his skull in the lantern light that flickered close behind him on the table.

„You'd have to tie rocks to him and drop him in a well to kill Virgil,“ he said. „And then you'd never be sure.“ He glanced at the boy to see the effect of his words and then back to Patman. The eyes were open now, and Patman was grinning at him.

„Don't be too sure,“ he said weakly. His eyes went to Fallis who looked as if he wanted to say something, but was afraid to let it come out. He smiled back at the boy watching the relief spread over his face and saw him bite at his lower lip. „Did you get him?“

Fallis shook his head, but Quainé said, „Vea Oiga was crawling up to take the horses when De Sana ran into the corral and took one without even waiting to saddle. He shot at him, but didn't get him.“ He twisted his head and looked up at one of the Apaches standing behind him.

„When we get home, you're going to spend your next two months' pay on practice shells.“

Vea Oiga dropped his head and looked suddenly ashamed and ridiculous with the vermilion sergeant stripes painted on his naked arms. He shuffled

through the doorway without looking up at the girl who stepped inside quickly to let him pass.

She stood near the cupboard not knowing what to do with her hands, watching Dave Fallis. One of the half-dozen Coyotero scouts in the room moved near her idly, and she shrank closer to the wall nervously picking at the frayed collar of her dress. She looked about the room wide-eyed for a moment, then stepped around the Apache hurriedly and out through the doorway. She moved toward the lean-to, but held up when she saw the three Apaches inside laughing and picking at the strips of venison that were hanging from the roof to dry. After a while, Fallis got up stretching the stiffness from his legs and walked to the door. He stood there looking out, but seeing just the darkness.

Cima Quaine bent closer to Patman's drawn face. The ex-trooper's eyes were open, but his face was tight with pain. The hole in his side had started to bleed again. Patman knew it was only a matter of time, but he tried not to show the pain when the contract scout lowered close to him. He heard the scout say, „Your partner's kind of nervous,“ and for a moment it sounded far away.

Patman answered, „He's young,“ but knew that didn't explain anything to the other man.

„He's anxious to get on after the man,“ Quaine went on. „How you feel having an avenging angel?“ Then added quickly, „Hell, in another day or two you'll be avenging yourself.“

„It's not for me,“ Patman whispered, and hesitated. „It's for himself, and the girl.“

Quaine was surprised, but kept his voice down. „The girl? He hasn't even looked at her since we got here.“

„And he won't,“ Patman said. „Until he gets him.“ He saw the other man's frown and added, „It's a long story, all about pride and getting your toes stepped on.“ He grinned to himself at the faint sign of bewilderment on the scout's face. Nobody's going to ask a dying man to talk sense. Besides, it would take too long.

After a silence, Patman whispered, „Let him go, Cima.“

„His yen to make war might be good as gold, but my boys ain't worth a damn after dark. We can pick up the man's sign in the morning and have him before sundown.“

„You do what you want tomorrow. Just let him go tonight.“

„He wouldn't gain anything,“ the scout whispered impatiently. „He's got the girl here now to live with long as he wants.“

„He's got to live with himself, too.“ Patman's voice sounded weaker.

„And he doesn't take free gifts. He's got a funny kind of pride. If he doesn't go after that man, he'll never look at that girl again.“

Cima Quaine finished, „And if he does go after him, he may not get the chance. No, Virg. I better keep him here. He can come along tomorrow if he wants.“ He turned his head as if that was the end of the argument and looked past the Coyoteros to see the girl standing in the doorway.

She came in hesitantly, dazed about the eyes, as if a strain was sapping at her vitality to make her appear utterly spent. She said, „He's gone,“ in a voice that was not her own.

Cima Quaine's head swung back to Patman when he heard him say, „Looks like you don't have anything to say about it.“

AT THE FIRST light of dawn, Dave Fallis looked out over the meadow from the edge of timber and was unsure. There was moisture in the air lending a thickness to the gray dawn, but making the boundless stillness seem more empty. Mist will do that, for it isn't something in itself.

It goes with lonesomeness and sometimes has a feeling of death. He reined his horse down the slight grade and crossed the gray wave of meadow, angling toward the dim outline of a draw that trailed up the ridge there. It cut deep into the tumbled rock, climbing slowly. After a while he found himself on a bench and stopped briefly to let his horse rest for a moment. The mist was below him now, clinging thickly to the meadow and following it as it narrowed through the valley ahead. He continued on along the bench that finally ended, forcing him to climb on into switchbacks that shelved the steepness of the ridge. And after two hours of following the ridge crown, he looked down to estimate himself a good eight miles ahead of the main trail that stayed with the meadow. He went down the opposite slope, not so steep here, but still following switchbacks, until he was in level country again and heading for the Escudillas in the distance.

The sun made him hurry. For every hour it climbed in the sky lessened his chance of catching the man before the Coyoters did. He was going on luck. The Coyoters would use method. But now he wondered if it was so much luck. Vea Oiga had told him what to do.

He had been leading the horse out of the corral and down through the timber when Vea Oiga grew out of the shadows next to him, also leading a horse. The Indian handed the reins to the boy and held back the mare he had been leading. „It is best you take gelding,“ he whispered. „The man took stallion. Leave the mare here so there is no chance she will call to her lover.“

The Apache stood close to him confidently. „You have one chance, man,“ he said. „Go to Bebida Wells, straight, without following the trail. The man will go fast for a time, until he learns he is not being followed.

„But at dawn he will go quick again on the main trail for that way he thinks he will save time. But soon he will tire and will need water. Then he will go to Bebida Wells, for that is the only water within one day of here. When he reaches the well, he will find his horse spent and his legs weary from hanging without stirrups. And there he will rest until he can go on.“

He had listened, fascinated, while the Indian read into the future and then heard how he should angle, following the draws and washes to save miles. For a moment he wondered about this Indian who knew him so well in barely more than an hour, how he had anticipated his intent, why he was helping. It had made no sense, but it was a course to follow, something he had not had before. The Apache had told him, „Shoot straight, man. Shoot before he sees you.“

And with the boy passing from view into the darkness, Vea Oiga led the mare back to the corral, thinking of the boy and the dying man in the hut. Revenge was something he knew, but it never occurred to him that a woman could be involved. And if the boy failed, then he would get another chance to shoot straight. There was always plenty of time.

THE SUN WAS almost straight up, crowding the whole sky with its brassy white light, when he began climbing again. The Escudillas seemed no closer, but now the country had turned wild, and from a rise he could see the wildness tangling and growing into gigantic rock formations as it reached and climbed toward the sawtooth heights of the Escudillas.

He had been angling to come around above the wells, and now, in the heights again, he studied the ravines and draws below him and judged he had overshot by only a mile. On extended patrols out of Thomas they had often hit for Bebida before making the swing-back to the south. It was open country approaching the wells, so he had skirted wide to come in under cover of the wildness and slightly from behind.

A quarter of a mile on he found a narrow draw dense with pines strung out along the walls, the pines growing into each other and bending across to form a tangled arch over the draw. He angled down into its shade and picketed the gelding about halfway in. Then, lifting the Winchester, he passed out of the other end and began threading his way across the rocks.

A yard-wide defile opened up on a ledge that skirted close to the smoothness of boulders, making him edge sideways along the shadows of the towering rocks, until finally the ledge broadened and fell into a ravine that was dense with growth, dotted with pale yucca stalks against the dark green. He ran through the low vegetation in a crouch and stopped to rest at the end of the ravine where once more the ground turned to grotesque rock formations. Not a hundred yards off to the left, down through an opening in the rocks, he made out the still, sandcolored water of a well.

More cautiously now, he edged through the rocks, moving his boots carefully on the flinty ground. And after a dozen yards of this he crept into the narrowness of two boulders that hung close together, pointing the barrel of the Winchester through the aperture toward the pool of muddy water below.

He watched the vicinity of the pool with a grimness now added to his determination; he watched without reflecting on why he was there.

He had thought of that all morning: seeing Virg die on the dirt floor... But the outlaw's words had always come up to blot that scene.

„I think you better teach him the facts of life.“ Stepping on his toes while he was supposed to smile back. It embarrassed him because he wanted to be here because of Virg. First Virg and then the girl. He told himself he was doing this because Virg was his friend, and because the girl was helpless and couldn't defend herself and deserved a chance.

That's what he told himself.

But that was all in the past, hazy pictures in his mind overshadowed by the business at hand. He knew what he was doing there, if he wasn't sure why. So that when the outlaw's thin shape came into view below him, he was not excited.

He did not see where De Sana had come from, but realized now that he must have been hiding somewhere off to the left. De Sana crouched low behind a scramble of rock and poked his carbine below toward the pool, looking around as if trying to determine if this was the best position overlooking the well. His head turned, and he looked directly at the aperture behind him, where the two boulders met, studying it for a long moment before turning back to look down his carbine barrel at the pool. Dave Fallis levered the barrel of the Winchester down a fraction and the front sight was dead center on De Sana's back.

He wondered why De Sana had taken a carbine from the corral lean-to and not a saddle. Then he thought of Ve'a Oiga who had fired at him as he fled. And this brought Ve'a Oiga's words to memory. „Shoot before he sees you.“

Past the length of the oiled gun barrel, he saw the Y formed by the suspenders and the faded underwear top, darkened with perspiration.

The short-haired skull, thin and hatless. And at the other end, booted long legs, and toes that kicked idly at the gravel.

For a moment he felt sorry for De Sana. Not because the barrel in front of him was trained on his back. He watched the man gaze out over a vastness that would never grow smaller. Straining his eyes for a relentless something that would sooner or later hound him to the ground. And he was all alone. He watched him kick his toes for something to do and wipe the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. De Sana perspired like everyone else. That's why he felt sorry for him. He saw a man, like a thousand others he had seen, and he wondered how you killed a man. The Indian had told him, „Shoot before he sees you.“ Well, that was just like an Indian.

He moved around from behind the rocks and stood there in plain view with the rifle still pointed below. He felt naked all of a sudden, but brought the rifle up a little and called, „Throw your gun down and turn around!“

And the next second he was firing. He threw the lever and fired again—then a third time. He sat down and ran his hand over the wetness on his forehead, looking at the man who was now sprawled on his back with his carbine across his chest.

He buried the gunman well away from the pool and scattered rocks around so that when he was finished you'd wouldn't know that a grave was there. He took the outlaw's horse and his guns. That would be enough proof. On the way back he kept thinking of Virg and the girl.

He hoped that Virg would still be alive, but knew that was too much to ask. Virg and he had had their good times and that was that. That's how you had to look at things.

He thought of the girl and wondered if she'd think he was rushing things if he asked her to go with him to the Panhandle, after a legal ceremony...

And all the way back, not once did he think of Lew De Sana.

