

Monument Rock

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 6



Chapter 1

Lona was afraid of him. She was afraid of Frank Mailer, the man whom she was to marry. She realized that it was not size alone that made her afraid of him, but something else, something she saw in his blue, slightly glassy eyes, and the harshness of his thin-lipped mouth.

He was big, the biggest man she had ever seen, and she knew his contempt for smaller men, men of lesser strength and lesser will. He was five inches over six feet and weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. Whenever he stood near her, the sheer mass of him frightened her and the way he looked at her made her uneasy.

Her father looked up at him as he came in. "Did you get that north herd moved before the rain set in?"

"Yeah." Mailer did not look up, helping himself to two huge slabs of beef, a mound of mashed potatoes, and liberal helpings of everything else. He commenced his supper by slapping butter on a thick slice of homemade bread and taking an enormous bite, then holding the rest of it in his left hand, he began to shovel food into his mouth with his right.

Between bites he looked up at Poke Markham. "I saw the Black Rider."

"On our range?"

"Uh-huh; just like they were sayin' in town, he was ridin' the high country, alone. Over toward Chimney Rock."

"Did you get close to him? See what he looks like?"

"Not a chance. Just caught a glimpse of him over against the rocks, and then he was gone, like a shadow. That horse of his is fast." Mailer looked up and Lona was puzzled by the slyness in his eyes as he looked at her father. "You know what the Mexican boys say? That he's the ghost of a murdered man."

The comment angered Markham. "That's foolishness! He's real enough, all right! What I want to know is who he is and what he thinks he's doin'."

"Maybe the Mex boys are right. You ever see any tracks? I never did, an' nobody else that I ever heard of. Nobody ever sees him unless it is almost dark or rainin', an' then never more than a glimpse."

"He's real enough!" Markham glared from under his shaggy brows, his craggy face set in angry lines. "Some outlaw on the dodge, that's who he is, hangin' out in the high peaks so he won't be seen. Who's he ever bothered?"

Mailer shrugged. "That's the point. He ain't bothered anybody yet, but maybe he wants one certain man." Mailer looked up at Poke, in his malicious way. "Maybe he's the ghost of a murdered man, like they say, an' maybe he's tryin' to lure his murderer back into the hills."

"That's nonsense!" Markham repeated irritably. "You'll have Lona scared out of her wits, ridin' all over like she does."

Frank Mailer looked at her, his eyes meeting hers, then running down over her breasts. He always made her uncomfortable. How had she ever agreed to marry him? She knew that when he drank he became fiercely belligerent. Nobody wanted to cross him when he was drinking. Only one man ever had tried to stop him when he was like that. Bert Hayek had tried it, and Bert had died for his pains.

His fighting had wrecked several of the saloons in town. All, in fact, except for the Fandango. Was it true, what they said? That Frank was interested in that Spanish woman who ran the place? Nita Howard was her name. Lona Markham had seen her once, a tall young woman with a voluptuous figure and beautiful eyes. She had thought her one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen. Lona's intended was often seen visiting with a beautiful woman who ran a saloon and gambling hall and Lona found she didn't care... not at all.

When supper was over Lona left hurriedly. More and more she was avoiding Frank. She did not like to have him near her, did not want to talk to him. He frightened her, but he puzzled her, too. For more and more he seemed to be exerting authority here on the Blue Hill ranch, and more and more her father was fading into the background. People said that Poke Markham was afraid of no man, but of late she'd begun to wonder, for several times he had allowed Mailer to overrule him.

She crossed the patio through a light spatter of rain to her own quarters in the far wing of the rambling old house. Once there, she hung up her coat and crossed to the window, looking off over the magnificent sweep of land that carried her eyes away to the distant wall of the mountains in the southwest. It was over there the strange rider had been seen.

Suddenly, as if in response to her thoughts, a horseman materialized from the rain. He was out there, no more than a hundred yards from the back of the house, and scarcely visible through the now driving rain. As she looked she saw him draw up, and sitting tall in the saddle, he surveyed the ranch. Under his black flat-brimmed hat nothing of his face was visible and at that distance she could not make out his features. He was only a tall horseman, sitting in the rain, staring at the ranch house.

Why she did it, she never knew, but suddenly she caught up her coat, and running out into the rain, she lifted her hand.

For a moment they stared at each other and then suddenly the horse started to walk, but as he moved, the Black Rider raised a hand and waved!

Then he was gone. One instant he was there, and then he had vanished like a puff of smoke ... but he had waved to her! Recalling the stories, she knew it was something that had never happened before. She returned to her room, her heart pounding with excitement. She must tell Gordon about that. He would be as surprised as she was. In fact, she paused, staring out at the knoll where the Rider had stopped, Gordon Flynn was the only one who seemed to care much what she thought or how she felt. Gordon, and of course, Dave Betts, the broken-down cowhand who was their cook.

Mailer dropped into a big chair made of cowhide. He rolled a smoke and looked across at Markham. The old man was nodding a little, and it made Frank smile. Markham, if that's what he wanted to be called, had changed. He had aged.

To think how they all had feared him! All but he himself. All but Frank Mailer. Markham had been boss here for a long time, and to be the boss of men like Kane Geslin and Sam Starr was something, you had to admit. Moreover, he had kept them safe, kept them away from the law, and if he had taken his share for all that, at least he'd held up his end of the bargain. He was getting older now, and he had

relinquished more and more of the hard work to Mailer. Frank was tired of the work without the big rewards; he was ambitious. Sure, they had a good thing going, but if one knew the trails, there were easy ways out to the towns and ranches, and a man could do a good job on a few banks, along about roundup time. It beat working for money, and this ranch was as good as his, anyway, when he married Lona.

Looking over at the old man, he began to think of that. Why wait for it? He could shoot the old man right now and take over. Still, it would be better to marry the girl first, but he was not ready for that. Not yet. He wanted to move in on that Spanish woman at the Fandango, first.

There was that bodyguard of hers to be taken care of. He did not like the big, dark man who wore two guns and always sat near her door, faithful as a watchdog. Yet it would pay to be careful. Webb Case had been a fairly handy man with a gun, and he had tried to push this Brigo into a gunfight, planning to kill him. From all accounts, it had taken mightily little of a push, but Webb's plans backfired and he took a couple of slugs and got planted out on Boot Hill.

He began to think of that bank at the Crossing. Four... no, five men. Geslin and Starr, of course, among them. Geslin was a lean, wiry man with a pale, hatchet face and white eyes. There was no doubt that he ranked among the fastest gunmen of them all, with Wes Hardin, Clay Allison, Bill Hickok, or Kilkenny.

The bank would keep the boys happy, for however much Poke Markham was satisfied with the ranch, his boys were not. Poke made money, but most of the men at Blue Hill ranch were not punchers. They were wanted, one place or another, and when they'd tired of cooling their heels, they'd leave. Frank Mailer wanted to take advantage of the situation before that happened. The bank should go for eight or nine thousand, and they could make a nice split of that. Four men and himself. That would be enough. Nobody would tackle a gang made up of Geslin, Starr, and himself, let alone the other two he would pick.

Thoughtfully, Frank Mailer considered Geslin. How would he stack up with Geslin? Or Starr? He considered it a moment, then shrugged. It would never happen. They were his men, and they had accepted him as boss. He knew how to handle them, and he knew there was a rivalry between Starr and Geslin. If necessary, he could play them off against one another. As for Poke, he intended to kill Markham himself when the time came.

He heaved himself out of his chair and stretched, enjoying the feeling of his powerful muscles. He would ride into town and have a talk with that Howard woman at the Fandango. He thought again of Jaime Brigo, and the thought bothered him. There was something about the big, silent man that disturbed him. He did not think of Lona. The girl was here when he wanted her, and he did want her, but only casually. His desire for Nita Howard was a sharp, burning thing.

The Fandango was easily the most impressive place in Salt Creek, and finer than anything in Bloomington. In fact, finer than anything this side of Santa Fe. Nita Howard watched the crowd, well pleased. Her hazel eyes with tiny flecks of darker color were large and her lashes were long. Her skin was the color of old ivory, her hair a deep, beautiful black, gathered in a loose knot at the nape of her neck. Although her lips were full, slightly sensual, there was a certain wistful,

elusive charm about them, and a quick, fleeting humor that made her doubly beautiful. She was a tall woman, somewhere just beyond thirty, but her body was strong, and graceful.

Standing in the door, she said, without looking down at the man in the tipped-back chair, "Any message, Jaime?"

The Yaqui gunman glanced up. "No, señorita, there is none. He has been seen this day near Monument Rock. You have seen the map."

Nita Howard relaxed. "Yes, I know. As long as he is well, we had best leave him alone."

"He is loyal. A long time ago Markham, he befriended the señor when he was wounded and in danger. The señor does not forget. So he comes here. And you come here; so this means I do, too." Brigo shrugged. "We are all loyal to one another, but for now you must trust that our friend knows what he is doing."

The door opened suddenly and Frank Mailer stepped into the room; behind him were Kane Geslin and Sam Starr with another man known as Socorro. Mailer's eyes brightened with satisfaction when he saw Nita and he turned abruptly and walked toward her.

How huge he was! Could anything ever stop this man if he became angered? Nita watched him come, her mind coolly accepting the danger but not disturbed by it. Her father had died long ago and left her the doubtful legacy of a tough saloon on the Rio Grande border. She had directed its fortunes herself, with Brigo at her side, he who loved her like his own sister, and all because of her father's friendship to him.

Mailer stopped before her, his hard eyes surveying Nita with appreciation. "You're all woman, Nita!" he said. "All woman! Just the kind I've been lookin' for!"

She did not smile. "It is said around town that you are to marry Lona Markham."

Mailer was irritated; there was no reason to think of Lona now and he disliked the subject being brought up. "Come on!" he said impatiently. "I'll buy a drink!"

"Good!" she said smoothly. Lifting her eyes, she glanced over at the bartender. "Cain"—the big bartender glanced up sharply—"the gentleman is buying a drink." Her eyes turned to Mailer. "You meant you were buying for the house, did you not?"

Crimson started to go up Mailer's neck. He had meant nothing of the kind, yet he'd been neatly trapped and he had the feeling that he would appear cheap if he backed out. "Sure," he said grudgingly, "for the house! Now come on." He reached for her arm. "You drink with me."

"Sorry, I do not drink. Cain will serve you." She turned and stepped through the door, closing it behind her.

Frank Mailer's eyes grew ugly. He lunged toward the door at the end of the bar.

"Señor." Brigo was on his feet. "The señorita is ver'tired tonight. You understand?"

Mailer glared at Brigo, but the Yaqui's flat dark face was expressionless. Mailer turned on his heel and walked to the bar in baffled fury.

The big bartender finished pouring the drinks, then looked over at Mailer. "That'll be thirty bucks," he said flatly.

His jaws set, Mailer paid for the drinks. Geslin was in a game with several others. One of them was a red-haired puncher, stocky and tough-looking. Mailer dropped into an empty chair and bought chips.

At the end of the third hand the redheaded puncher looked up at him. "Mailer, don't you ramrod that Blue Hill spread? I'm huntin' for work."

Frank Mailer's eyes slanted to the redhead. He was a tough, capable-looking man with hard, steady eyes. He packed his gun low. "You been anywhere I might've heard about?"

"I rode for Pierce an' for Goodnight."

"Then I can use you, all right." With the riding he planned to do with Geslin and the others, he would need a few good hands. Also, unless his guess was altogether wrong, this man had ridden the owl hoot himself. "Texas man, hey?"

"Big Bend."

"Know Wes Hardin?" Mailer asked. "I hear he's fast."

"Plenty, an' with both hands. Maybe as fast as Kilkenny."

"Kilkenny?" Geslin turned his white eyes toward the redhead. "You say he's faster than Hardin? Did you ever see Hardin?"

"Uh-huh." Rusty Gates picked up his cards. "I seen Kilkenny, too."

All eyes were on him now. Men who had seen Kilkenny to know him were few and far between. The strange drifting gunfighter had a habit of appearing under various names and nobody ever really knew who he was until suddenly there was a blaze of guns and then he was riding out of town. "What's he like?" Mailer asked.

"Fast."

"I mean, what's he look like?"

"Tall, black hair, green eyes that look right through you when he's riled up. Quiet feller, friendly enough mostly."

"Is it true what they say? That he's killed forty or fifty men?"

Gates shrugged. "Doubt it. A friend of his told me it was no more than eighteen. An' he might have been exaggeratin'."

Hours later, when the game had broken up, Rusty Gates crossed to the bar for one last drink. The others had started back to the ranch and he was to come out the following day. He accepted his drink, and Cain grinned at him and shoved his money back. "I got the job," Gates said.

"Good!" Cain nodded emphatically. "I'll tell the boss."

Bright sunlight lay across the Blue Hill when Lona left the house the following morning. Frank Mailer had gone out early, and her father was fussing over some accounts in his office. Yet the night had neither lessened her curiosity nor changed her mood, and she started for the corral to catch up a horse, believing the hands were all gone.

The ranch lay between two peaks with its back to the low bench where Lona had seen the Black Rider on the previous night. These peaks lifted five hundred feet or so above the ranch house, and it was from one of them that the ranch had taken its name. The ranch house faced northwest, and off to the right, also running toward the northwest, lay the Old Mormon Trail to Utah. Beyond the trail the cliffs lifted high, and at one point a crown of rock reached out to need no more than a half mile to join the twin peaks at Blue Hill.

She had reached the corral when she heard a boot scuff stones and turned to face a strange, redheaded puncher who grinned at her in a friendly fashion. "Can I help, ma'am? I'm Rusty Gates, a new hand."

"Oh, would you? I was going to saddle my horse. The black mare."

Gates nodded. "I been studyin' that mare, ma'am. She's sure all horse."

He shook out a loop and caught the black. As the rope settled, the mare stood still, and when she saw Lona she even walked toward the gate. Rusty led the horse outside and glanced at Lona. She was very young, very pretty, and had a trim, neat figure, auburn hair, and gray eyes. She caught his glance and he grinned. "Your hair's 'most as red as mine, ma'am," he said. "I reckon that makes us partners."

There was something so friendly in his manner that she warmed to him instantly. On impulse, she confided in him. "Rusty," she said, "don't you tell a soul what I'm going to tell you, but I'm going to see the Black Rider!"

Rusty gave her a sidelong, cautious glance. "To see him? How do you figure to do that?"

"I'm going to ride out and look along the ridges for him, then if I see him, I'll leave it up to Zusa to do the rest. She'll run him down if anything can."

Gates was silent. After a while he asked, "You ever see the Rider?"

"I saw him last night, right back on the bench in the rain. I waved to him, and he waved back! Isn't it exciting?"

She expected him to disapprove or to caution her, but strangely, he did not. He merely nodded, then said, "Ma'am, if I wanted to see that Black Rider, you know what I'd do? I'd head across the valley for Monument Rock, an' then if I saw him, I wouldn't take after him none at all. I'd just sit still an' wait."

"Wait?" Lona's eyes widened doubtfully. "You mean he might come up to me?"

Rusty chuckled. "Ma'am, they do say that the Rider's a ghost, but flesh and blood or ghost, if anything that *is* male or *was* male saw you settin' a horse waitin' for him, he'd sure come a-runnin'!"

She laughed. "Rusty, you're just like all the cowhands! Full of the old blarney!"

"Sure I am. But, ma'am"—his voice dropped a note lower and the look in his eyes was not a teasing look—"you do what I say an' see if it don't work. But," he added, "don't you ever tell anybody on this ranch I suggested it. Don't you tell."

"Thanks, Rusty. I won't." She turned to go and he caught her bridle rein.

"Ma'am," he said, "before you go... who's your best friend on this ranch? I mean, ma'am, somebody who really loves you."

Surprised, she looked down at him, but he was in dead earnest. The question brought her up short, too, for it made her wonder. Who were her friends? Did she have any?

Frank? She shuddered slightly. Her father? For a long time she hesitated. He had never been close to her, never since she returned from school. He had been strict and stern, had given her what she wanted, but allowed her little freedom. She realized suddenly that her father was almost a stranger to her.

"I... I guess I haven't many friends, Rusty," she said, in a small voice. "I guess... Dave, the cook, and Gordon."

Gates relaxed his grip. "Well, ma'am," he said, his voice thick, "I reckon you can count on another friend now. You can count on me. If ever you need a friend, I'd

admire to have you call on me.” He turned away, then stopped and turned, glancing up out of his bright blue eyes. “Maybe you’ve got more friends than you realize, ma’am.”

Lona turned the mare up the trail to the bench, and drawing up, she looked carefully around. There were no tracks!

A curious little thrill of fear went through her. Was it possible the stories were true? Had it been a ghost who waved at her? The rain could have wiped them out, of course, and there was much rock. She rode on, cutting diagonally across toward the Old Mormon Trail, which would make for easier riding until she had to leave the trail and ride across the rough grass country toward the high cliffs at Monument Rock.

North and east of her, the cliffs made a solid barrier that seemed to cut off the world from this valley, cliffs from four hundred to nine hundred feet high, a dark barrier of dull red now, with the sun just showing above them. Yet that barrier was not as solid as it appeared, for there were a score of places where a horseman might find a way through, and there were, almost due east of the ranch, three canyons that branched like three spread fingers from a given point. The only one she knew was Salt Creek Wash, and only the first half mile of that. Her father had never liked her to ride up into those rugged mountains alone.

It was early spring, yet the air was warm and vibrant, clear as only desert air can be. The black mare felt good, and wanted to go, but Lona held her in, scanning the country ahead and around her, hoping to see the Black Rider.

She had been wrong to come in the morning, especially when it was clear, for he was never seen but at dusk or in the rain. Was there method in that? So that he would be impossible to follow for long? Dust arose from her horse’s hoofs and she rode on until the cliffs began to rise above her and the sun was not yet high enough to show above their serrated rim. She reined in and looked up at their high battlement crest, then let her eye travel along it, but she saw no horseman, nothing but the rock itself.

What she had expected, she did not know. If she had expected her presence to bring the Black Rider suddenly springing from the solid rock, she was mistaken. It was still here, and lonely. She had stopped with Zusa headed north, so she started on, walking her along the low slope that ended in the cliffs.

Ahead of her she knew the cliffs took a bend eastward and through the gap flowed the occasional waters of Salt Creek, but there was, she knew, another wash beside Monument Rock, so she followed along and entered a narrow opening that had rock walls lifting six hundred feet and more on either side of her. It was shadowy and cool and so still as to be almost unbelievable. She rode on, the canyon echoing to her horse’s hoofs.

She drew up in a sort of amphitheater, the dark piñons clustering against the wall, and climbing it wherever a faint ledge gave precarious root hold. It was still here, and she drew up, her eyes wide and every sense alert. Even Zusa was on edge, for the mare’s sensitive nostrils expanded and her eyes were wide and curious.

No sound disturbed the still afternoon. From the stillness she might have been sitting in a mighty cathedral, yet there was no cathedral so splendid or so tall as this, no man-made temple as grand or magnificent. And then Zusa’s muscles

twitched, and turning her head, Lona Markham looked straight into the eyes of the Black Rider!

He was about fifty yards away, his horse standing on a tiny knoll, outlined sharply against the green of the piñons behind him. The horse was a buckskin, a long-legged, magnificent animal, and the rider was tall, broad in the shoulder, and clothed in black trousers, a dark gray shirt, and a black Mexican-style jacket.

For an instant she might have turned and fled, so frightened was she, so startled by the horseman's unexpected appearance, but she sat her mare, her eyes wide and expectant, and then the buckskin started to walk down the knoll toward her.

Under the low flat brim of his black hat, the Rider's face was scarcely visible, and as he drew near she noticed that he wore two guns, tied down. He drew up suddenly and, to her relief, lifted a gloved hand and brushed his hat back.

She saw first that he was handsome, with a strong, rugged face, brown from wind and sun, and green eyes that had the look of the desert at their corners. "You are Lona?" he asked.

His voice was strong, clear, friendly. "Yes," she said, "how did you know my name?"

"I have known it for a long time," he said. "Why did you come here today?"

"Why, I..." She hesitated. "I was curious!" she said. "Just plain curious."

He chuckled, and she liked the sound. There was droll humor in his eyes. "Don't blame you! From what I hear, a lot of folks are curious. How about Frank Mailer an' Poke Markham? Are they curious?"

"A little. I think Father is more curious than Frank."

At her use of the word *father*, he looked at her again. "You call him Father?" he asked.

"Why, of course! He is my father. What else would I call him?"

"I could think of a number of things," he said grimly. "Want to talk awhile?" he suggested suddenly. "No use you coming clear out here to see the strange rider and not getting to talk with him."

She hesitated, but he swung down, and so she dismounted. He took the bridle of her horse and ground-hitched them both on a patch of grass in the lee of a cliff where subirrigation kept the grass green. Then he took off his hat and walked toward her. He had dark curly hair and a quizzical humor in his eyes.

"Don't worry about this," he said, smiling at her. "I know this is a mighty lonely place for a girl to be talkin' to a stranger, but later you'll understand."

"What will I understand?" she said evenly. She was frankly puzzled by him and by his attitude. He had known her name, and he seemed to know something about her, but certainly there was nothing in his manner that would in any way offer a cause for resentment.

"Lots of things." He dug out the makings and dropped to a rock facing her. He was, she noticed, also facing the opening up which she had ridden. "How'd you happen to come here?"

"I heard you had been seen on the rims, and that I should come here and wait. Rusty, he's our new hand, told me that. Very mysterious, if you ask me!"

He grinned. "He's quite a guy, Rusty is. You can trust him."

"Oh, you know him?" She was startled.

“Rusty? If you ever need a friend, he’s your man.”

He drew deep on the cigarette. “You were away to school quite a while, weren’t you? How old were you when you left?”

She looked at him seriously. “Oh, I was only five then. Father sent me away to the sisters’ school, said a ranch was no place to raise a girl who had so far to go. I mean, so many years in which to grow up. I used to return for vacations after I was fifteen. Once in a while, that is.”

“I don’t remember a lot of things from when I was five,” he said casually. “Do you? I mean, do you remember your father very well?”

“Some things about him, but it’s all sort of funny and mixed up. He was awfully good to me, I remember that. He was sort of sweet, too. I remember riding in a wagon for ever so long, and how he used to tell me stories about my mother—she died a year before we started west—and about the ranch that was waiting for us out here. The place where he had hoped to take my mother. He said he had taken it in my name, and it would always be mine.”

“Has your dad changed much?”

She nodded. “Quite a lot. But he’s had trouble, I guess. He never says much anymore, not to me, at least, and sometimes he acts sort of strange. But he’s all right,” she added hurriedly. “I love him.”

He turned his green eyes full upon her and there was something so searching in those eyes that she was disturbed. “Is that wrong?” she asked indignantly. “To love your father?”

“No, it isn’t.” He threw down his cigarette and rubbed it out with his toe. “In fact, that’s the way it should be. On the other hand, maybe this particular gent doesn’t deserve loving.” He looked over at her. “Lona, we’ve got to have more than one talk, I can see that. Some things I might want to tell you, you wouldn’t want to believe now. Later you might.”

“But first off, I want to ask you to mention meeting me to no one. Rusty would be all right, if you could do it where nobody could hear. Remember this: I’m your friend and you’ve got to trust me. You’re in a position right now where you’ll need friends, and badly!”

“Why do you say that?” she demanded.

“Haven’t they talked to you about marryin’ Frank Mailer?”

She nodded. “Yes, of course. Father wants me to marry him.”

“You want to marry him?”

Lona hesitated. Why was this stranger asking all these questions? Who was he?

“No,” she said honestly. “I don’t.”

“Then,” he said, “you mustn’t. No matter what they say or what they do,” he insisted, “don’t marry him! Don’t refuse right out, just evade the issue. Find excuses... clothes you have to have, plans for the wedding, just anything. You won’t have to delay it long, because I think there will be a lot happening and soon. If the worse comes to the worst, see Rusty. You can trust him, like I said.”

He walked to the horses. “And can you meet me here again? The day after tomorrow?”

Lona hesitated. “Why should I? I don’t know what you are talking about! These are all riddles and I have no idea why you say I may need friends, or why I should trust this new puncher! Or why I should either trust or listen to you!”

The Rider took a breath. "I don't blame you for that, but you must listen. You don't know it yet, but you're in trouble. Your marriage to Frank Mailer was planned a long time ago, Lona, before you ever heard of him, and it's bad! Plumb bad!

"Something else I want you to do," he added. "I want you to think about the times when you were a youngster, before you ever went away to school. Every minute from now on I want you to think about that wagon trip. The way it started, everything that happened. The more you try to remember, the more it will come back. It's very important to you." He hesitated. "You see, I knew your mother."

"What?" She turned on him, wide-eyed. "You knew...? But why didn't you tell me?" Then suddenly she hesitated. Her eyes were suddenly frightened. "You... what did you know about her?"

"That she was a mighty fine woman, Lona. You look a lot like her, too. Yes, she was mighty fine. One of the sweetest, finest women I ever knew. I knew your father in those days, and he was a fine man."

"Why don't you come to see him, then?" she said, frowning at him.

He hesitated. "Lona, that man is not your father. He is no relation to you at all. There never was a *Poke* Markham! Isiah Markham was your father. That man down there is *Poke* Dunning, a onetime gunfighter and outlaw from the Big Bend country. I don't know what it is he's doing here, but I aim to find out! Your father was once a friend to me when I needed him. That's why I, now, am a friend to you."

Chapter 2

At the corral bars she slid from the saddle as if stunned, then stood for a long time, staring at the far blue line of the cliffs from which she had just come.

Poke Markham was not her father!

The thought stood stark and clear in her mind, written across her consciousness in black, staring letters.

After the first minutes of stunned disbelief had come the uneasy memories which she had put aside and tried to forget. They came flooding into her mind. Little things and haunting details that had made her unhappy and puzzled.

The vague memories of her father before she went away to school had always been confused. Somehow she'd never been able to sort them out, to shape them into any plain picture. She knew now the reason for that confusion; it was that the memories of two individuals, two separate men, had mingled in her mind. This was why whenever she looked back to those years, the face of her father was always blurred, never sharp and clear.

The strange rider had said he was her real father's friend, that her mother had been a fine, sweet woman.

It was that last that flooded her mind with relief, for always when she had asked *Poke* Dunning about her mother, he had put her aside, evaded the issue, and so finally she had come to believe there was something shameful in her past, something in her story of which her father did not wish to be reminded. Lona had

come to believe that her mother must have done something that had hurt and disgraced them both. Now she knew that was not true.

She knew?

Lona stopped at the thought, testing it, turning it over. Yes, she did know. The Rider was a stranger to her, and yet his voice had in it the ring of truth, and it was not only because she wanted so much to believe that her mother had been a fine, splendid woman, but simply because she knew it was the truth.

Now that the thought was there, a thousand minute details of the past came flooding back. Now she no longer had to fight the idea that she detested the man she had believed was her father. Always she had made excuses for him, avoided the question of his character and his little cruelties. Now she could face it, and she could wonder that she had ever believed him to be her father.

She remembered how few his letters had been, how she had never had from him any of the love or affection she wanted or that other girls had, how she had returned home on her first vacations with eagerness and then with increasing reluctance.

Stripping the saddle from the mare, Lona turned her into the corral. It was already past mealtime, and the hands were gone again. Rusty Gates was nowhere around, nor did she see Poke or Frank. She walked to the house and looked into the kitchen. Old Dave Betts looked up and his red face wrinkled in a smile. "You're late, ma'am, but come on in. I saved you something and kept it hot for you."

"Thanks, Dave."

He put out the food on the kitchen table. He was already preparing the evening meal, getting a few things ready in order to save time later. He glanced at Lona. "You aren't sick, are you?" he asked anxiously.

"No, Dave. Just thinking." She started to eat, but despite the long ride in the fresh, clear air, she was not hungry. "Dave," she asked suddenly, "how long have you worked for... Father?"

If he noticed her hesitation, he gave no sign or it made no impression. "Most of six years, ma'am. I come up to this country from Silver City. Went to Cimarron first, worked in a eatin' place there, then went back to punchin' cows for the XIT, then drifted back west an' come here. Poke Markham needed a cook, so I hired on. I was gettin' too stove up for ridin' much."

"Was Frank with him then?"

"Mailer?" Betts's face became cautious. "Well, no. No, ma'am, he wasn't. Frank didn't show up until shortly before you come home from school. He rode in here one day with Socorro an' they both hired on. Mailer, though, he'd knowed your dad somewhere else. That's why he hired him on as foreman."

"Is he really a gunman?" Lona looked up at Dave.

Betts swallowed uneasily and, stepping to the door, peered into the dining room, then outside. "I reckon there's no mystery about that. He sure is. Mighty bad... I mean, mighty good with a gun. So's Geslin." He looked at her quickly. "You better not ask many questions about him, ma'am. Mailer's right touchy about that. He don't like folks talkin' about him."

There was a sound of approaching horses and Lona glanced out the open door. Gordon Flynn and Rusty Gates had ridden into the yard and were swinging down.

Flynn glanced toward the door, and when he saw her, he waved, then said something to Rusty and walked toward the house.

"Howdy, ma'am!" he said, his boyish face flushing a little. He had removed his hat and stood there, his wavy hair damp along his forehead where the hat had left a mark. The admiration in his eyes was obvious. "See you had been ridin' some. Why didn't you come over to the north range to see us?"

"Just riding," she said. "It was a pretty day for it and I wanted to think."

"I reckon there's no better way," he agreed. "It sort of just *makes* a body think, ridin' slow across the hills with lots of distance around you." He stepped into the room. "Dave, you got more of that coffee? Rusty an' me...?"

"It ain't grub time," Dave said testily, "but you pull up a chair. I reckon I can do that for you, but I doubt if the boss would like either of you bein' here right now."

Rusty came into the room and took a quick, sharp look at Lona. He seemed satisfied with what he saw, and turned to Dave. "We have to go down to Yellow Butte after some cows and this was on our way. Drink up, Gord, and don't sit there looking calf-eyed at Miss Lona."

Flynn blushed magnificently. "Who's lookin' calf-eyed?" he demanded, blustering. "Can't a man speak to a girl without folks sayin' things like that?"

Gates turned a chair back to the table and straddled it, grinning from one to the other. "Don't know's I blame you," he said. "She's a right pretty girl, and believe you me, if I was as good-looking as you are and not so durned bowlegged, I'd sure say my piece, too!"

Flynn's face was grim. "You're new around here," he said. "Miss Lona is engaged to the foreman."

Gates shrugged and looked pointedly at Lona. "When did a man ever let a thing like that stand between him and the girl he wanted? It sure wouldn't stop me!"

"Don't you be advisin' that sort of thing!" Betts turned irritably to Gates. "You don't know Frank Mailer! Anybody who steps on his toes or tries to move in on his girl had better be fast with a gun! He durned near killed one of the hands with his fists and boots just for talkin' to her!"

"Then I'll be careful," Gates said. Gulping his coffee, he shoved back from his chair and got up. "I just wouldn't let him catch me. But if I wanted a girl, I wouldn't stand by and see her go to another man, unless I was right sure she wanted that other man." He turned on his heel and walked out, letting the door slam behind him.

The kitchen was silent. Flynn was staring into his cup, and Lona's heart was pounding, why she could not have said. Glancing up, she could see the stubborn, angry look on Flynn's face and the sharp disapproval on the face of Dave Betts. After a minute Flynn swallowed his coffee and ducked out without saying another word.

Lona gathered the dishes and placed them on the drain board, stealing a glance at Betts's face from the corner of her eye. "You be careful," Dave said suddenly, without turning. "You don't know Frank Mailer like I do. Don't you let no fool puncher talk you into trouble."

Lona hesitated. "What's the matter, don't you think Gordon is a nice fellow?"

Dave Betts turned sharply. "I sure do, ma'am. Flynn's one of the finest boys I know, an' he's a top hand, too. He's worth any four like Geslin or Starr, but he's

too nice a boy to see shot to doll rags, ma'am, or to see stomped to bloody ruin like I've seen men stomped right here on this ranch!"

The canyon where Lona had come upon the Black Rider had several branches, all box canyons. There was, however, a trail to the rim if one knew the way and rode a good mountain horse. Not far up this steep trail there was a ledge that made a sharp turn around a jutting corner of rock. Here, in an almost hidden corner of rock, was a wide shelf, all of fifty yards across and something more in length. It was concealed from the canyon below by piñons, so that from below one would believe the cliff was unbroken. From above, due to a steep slide that broke off in the sheer drop, there was no way of approaching the ledge or looking down into the rocky niche.

Here, in this secret place, was good green grass and a thin trickle of water from a spring. At the back end of the niche was a deep undercut in which cliff dwellers had built several houses, walling part of the undercut with stone. In this hidden place the Rider had his retreat.

Dismounting, he stripped the saddle and bridle from the horse and let it go on a long picket rope. There was grass enough here, and water. From the look of the place, it had never been visited since the Indians had gone, yet one never knew. No better hiding place could be found, and here, he hoped, he was secure.

His rides over the country had given him a fair knowledge of the lay of the land, and he had been watching the Blue Hill ranch through his glasses and knew the daily procedure, yet despite the progress he had made that day in his talk with Lona Markham, he was restless, and he knew why. He wanted to see Nita.

She should never have come here, he knew. He had tried to convince her that the job was his alone, but she would have none of it, and in the end he had given in. He was pleased now that he had, for his restlessness was in a sense appeased by knowing her nearness. Once it had been decided that she was to come, Brigo, of course, had come, too. Jaime Brigo had been asked by Nita's father to watch over her, and that was an oath he had never broken.

Cain Brockman, the bartender, doubled Nita's protection, and it had been simple enough for Rusty Gates to hire out to the ranch, which put one of their own men in the enemy's camp. Yet there was much to be done, even now.

That somehow Poke Dunning had taken Markham's place, taken his ranch and usurped his position as father was obvious. Yet what had become of Markham? And what had become of his wife, Lona's mother? Where did Poke fit in? Also, was there any evidence that the ranch actually belonged to Lona other than Markham's statement to her? It seemed that the mere fact that Dunning was carefully deceiving this young girl showed that he was convinced that the ranch he had been running all these years actually belonged to her. It also seemed that Poke Dunning had somehow gotten control of the ranch by posing as her father, an act made all the easier by the fact that no one in these parts had known the original Markham. For all anyone knew, Dunning was the man who had given her the property, but now he was planning on transferring legal control to Mailer by having the girl marry him. Once the wedding took place, Dunning would not have to worry about his charade, and if something happened to Lona, Mailer would inherit the ranch simply by being her husband.

Dunning would say nothing to Lona about her mother. Was that because he did not know? And Lona had said her father had told her that her mother had died before they came on west, but was that statement made by her real father, or by Dunning?

Before facing Dunning, it was necessary to learn how title to the ranch was placed, and to have something substantial to go on. In so many years Dunning had had time to shape stories and the papers that would give him title, yet why, if that was true, had he kept the girl?

Collecting dry sticks that would make no smoke, he built a fire, and squatting above it, the Rider prepared his evening meal. He was a tall man, and his eyes were green; a sharp, straight look came into them at times that disturbed those he looked at, and at times changed quickly to easy humor and a ready smile.

Shadows were long and his meal was finished when he heard a distant sound. He straightened swiftly and, hitching his guns into place, moved swiftly from the side of the cliff dwelling across the green sward of the ledge. His horse was standing with his head up and his nostrils wide. "Easy, Buck!" he said gently.

Through the junipers he could look down into the canyon, and as he looked he heard a tapping of metal on metal. He listened a moment, then grinned and spoke aloud, knowing his voice would carry in the still air. "Straight ahead and left around the boulder."

In a few minutes he heard the horse, and then Rusty Gates appeared. It was dusk, yet light enough to see, and the cowhand stared around him in astonishment. "Now, how in the ever-so-ever did you find this place?" he demanded. "A man would sure never guess it was here!"

"It's well hidden. Come on back, I've put more coffee on."

When they were squatted over the small fire, Gates grinned across the coals at him. "Kilkenny," he said, "you have the damnedest nose for hideouts of any hombre I ever knew!"

The tall rider shrugged. "Why not? Lots of times I need 'em. It gets to be an instinct."

"You talked to Lona?"

"Uh-huh. I didn't tell her much, only that Poke was not her father."

"I thought so. She was walkin' in a trance when she got back to the spread. By the way," he added, "there's a hand on that ranch that's so much in love with her he's turnin' in circles. Name of Gordon Flynn. Nice lad."

"Well, they can work that out by themselves. I'm goin' to see she gets justice, but I'll be durned if I'll play Cupid."

Rusty chuckled. "Leave that to me! I already put a bug in their ears." He pushed a couple of sticks on the fire. "Lance, something is building down there, but I don't know what. Mailer has been doin' a lot of talking, strictly on the private, with Geslin, Starr, and Socorro. I think they've got somethin' up their sleeves."

"Not Dunning?"

"No, the old man isn't in on it. They are very careful not to get bunched up when he's around."

"What do you think of Mailer, Rusty?"

"Damned if I know!" Gates looked up, scowling. "Good as Geslin is, he listens to him. So does Starr. I guess they knowed each other before comin' to Blue Hill, too. That Socorro came in with Mailer."

"How's Nita?" Kilkenny asked, looking up.

"I was wonderin' when you'd get around to that. She's fine. Man"—he chuckled—"that girl is good! She's got brains aplenty, but, Kilkenny, she's got troubles, too! Frank Mailer is makin' a strong play for her."

Lance Kilkenny got to his feet. "Mailer?" He was incredulous. "I thought he was due to marry Lona?"

Gates looked cynical. "How much difference would that make to a man like Mailer? He's mostly interested in that ranch, I'm thinking, as far as she's concerned, anyway. But he's red-eyed over Nita."

"Has there been trouble?"

"Not yet." Gates told what had happened at the Fandango and how Nita had handled it. "So he wound up spending thirty bucks he hadn't figured on. But that won't be the end of it."

"How do Dunning and Mailer stand?" Kilkenny asked thoughtfully.

"I've been thinkin' about that. From what I hear, they trusted each other at one time, but I think a break is due. One thing: when it comes down to it, the old man will be standing all alone. The boys are all with Mailer; that is, all but Flynn, the cook, an' me. We're on the outside of that fuss."

Gates got to his feet. "I'd better get out of here before the moon comes up." He turned to go, then hesitated. "Lance, you make no mistake, Frank Mailer is dangerous."

"Thanks. I'll remember that." He grinned over the fire at Rusty.

"Hope we beat this deal without a shootin'," Rusty said.

"Me, too," Kilkenny said, almost wistfully. "Especially with that girl around, that's a tough crowd down there."

Long after Rusty Gates was gone, Lance Kilkenny sat over his lonely fire. There had been too much of this, too much of hiding out in the wilderness, yet it was this or be recognized, and when he was recognized, there was always some wild-eyed puncher who wanted the reputation of killing Kilkenny.

He had never intended to gain a reputation, but his own choice of keeping himself anonymous had helped to begin the stories. He had become a strange, shadowy figure, a drifting gunfighter whom no man knew, until suddenly, in a blasting of gunfire, he wrote his name large across yet another page of western history.

Long ago he had taken to haunting the lonely places or to roaming the country alone under an assumed name. He would drift into a new country and for a time he would punch cows or wrangle horses or hire out as a varmint hunter, and then trouble would come, and Kilkenny, who had rarely drawn a gun in his own battle, would fight for a friend, as he was fighting now.

This time, for the first time, he was not fighting alone. He had friends with him, good friends, and he had Nita Riordan, now using the name Howard, for there were those who knew that Nita Riordan was connected with Kilkenny.

Alone over his fire, he studied the situation. What was in the mind of Frank Mailer? What did he plan? How much opposition could Poke Dunning offer, if it

came to that? If it came to a fight over the ranch? Kilkenny was enough of a strategist to appreciate the fact that in a gunfight, Dunning and Mailer might eliminate each other and so save him the trouble. Once they were out of it, he could face the others or they would leave.

What he needed to know now was how Dunning had come into possession of the ranch. When Markham had started west so long ago, he was going to this ranch, which he had acquired sometime before. Hence, Dunning had to have come into the picture after Markham left Santa Fe. Also, he must learn whether Markham's statement to Lona that the ranch was now hers was merely an idle comment or whether he had actually given the girl the title.

Yet there was on him something else, a driving urge to see Nita. He got to his feet and walked the length of the ledge, speaking softly to the buckskin, and then he walked back. The fire was dying, the embers fading. Maybe now was the time, if he could slip into Salt Creek quietly and get to the Fandango without noise. He turned the idea over in his mind, contemplating every angle of it. At last he shook his head, and replenishing the fire, then banking the coals, he crawled into his blankets and was soon asleep.

Old Poke Dunning got restlessly to his feet. He was alone much of the time now. Lona had been keeping to her quarters and he missed her. Scowling, he thought of that, and his eyes narrowed as he remembered the time of her marriage was coming nearer. That marriage was a deal that he had cooked up with Frank Mailer. But since that time he had come to distrust the man. Soon after he made his offer to guarantee them clear title to Blue Hill, Frank had started acting like he owned the place. Suppose Mailer made up his mind to go it alone? He, Dunning, would have no status, nothing that would stand up legally. Of late, Mailer had been making decisions without consulting him.

If he had it out with Mailer, he decided, he would need an edge. Only a fool would take chances with Mailer. The man was too big, too tough. He looked as hard to stop as a bull elephant.

That Rider. The presence of the Rider might not bother Mailer, but it did bother him. He was suspicious and could find no reason for the man's continual evasion of contact with anyone.

The Black Rider must have provisions. How did he obtain them? The logical place was Salt Creek. Poke nodded; that was it. He would have a spy watching in Salt Creek, and then when someone resembling the Rider appeared, he would trail him. After that he would have a line on the man.

It was late, but he would ride into Salt Creek now and he knew just the man. The road was white in the moonlight, but Dunning rode swiftly on a powerful gray. He had not seen Mailer, and no doubt the man was again in town, and the boys with him.

Although well past fifty, Dunning was a strong and rugged man in the peak of condition. Age was no problem to him as yet, for his outdoor life and the rough, hearty food of the frontier had kept him in fine shape. He had made vast improvements on the ranch and it had provided a welcome cooling-off place for men on the dodge, as he once had been.

He had always insisted that the boys not pull any jobs while they “worked” for him, and while he paid all his men monthly, those on the run had handed back far more than their salaries in private. He also insisted that his hands not spend any of their ill-gotten gain in town or do anything that would indicate who and what they actually were. The kick-backs and free labor he had availed himself of over the years had helped make Blue Hill a profitable enterprise. Poke Dunning took great pride in the ranch. There was just Mailer and that matter of the girl and the confounded deed!

Salt Creek was a rough-looking town of some three-score buildings of which most were homes and barns. Along the one street of the town, a dozen or more buildings stared at each other, and the express office and Fandango were the biggest buildings in town. The Express, as it was known, was much more than its name implied. It was a general store as well as the post office and office of the justice of the peace, and had a small bar where drinks were sold, mostly to the older men in the community.

Up the street only two doors was another saloon, this one run by Al Starr, a brother of Sam, and beyond it another store and the livery stable, and beyond that the Fandango. It was ablaze with light when Poke Dunning rode the gray into town, but he stopped at the Express and shoved through the door.

Aside from Mr. Lisa, the Portuguese proprietor, only three men were in the Express. A couple of oldsters who were dry-farming near town, and the man Dunning sought, a hanger-on known about town as Kansas.

Kansas was more than a loafer, he was a man of unknown background and capacity. What his life had been in the years before he arrived in Salt Creek, nobody knew. He had a wife, and the two lived in a small cabin on the edge of town. It was nicer inside than most houses, for Kansas seemed to have a knack with tools, and he had even varnished the furniture and there were curtains in the windows and neatness everywhere. Moreover, Kansas had a dozen books, more than the rest of the town combined.

Yet he was a loafer, a short, heavy man with a round face and somewhat staring eyes who did odd jobs for his money. He smoked a corncob pipe, blinked like an owl, and had a faculty for knowing things or knowing how to find out. He had been in the War Between the States, and someone said he had once worked on a newspaper in the East. His conversation was more varied than customary in Salt Creek, for he knew something more than cows and the range. In fact, he knew a little of everything, and was nearly as old as Dunning himself.

“Howdy, Kansas!” Dunning said affably. “Have a drink?”

“Right neighborly of you, Poke! B’lieve I will!” He let the dark-faced Lisa pour his drink, then looked over at Dunning. “We don’t see you much anymore. I guess you leave the business mostly to Mailer.”

“Some things,” Dunning agreed. It was the truth, of course, that Mailer had been doing the business, yet it nettled him to hear it said. “Any strangers around town?” he asked casually.

To Kansas, the question was not casual. He could not recall that Poke Markham had ever asked such a question before, and he was aware that the conversation of people will usually follow certain definite patterns. Hence it followed that the

remark was anything but casual and that Markham was interested in strangers, or some particular stranger.

"Not that I know of," Kansas replied honestly enough. "Not many strangers ever come to Salt Creek. Being off the stage route and miles from the railroad, it doesn't attract folks. Were you expecting somebody?"

"No," Dunning replied, "not exactly." He steered the conversation down another trail and let it ride along for a while before he opened up with another question. "I expect like ever' body else you've seen that Black Rider they talk about," he suggested.

"Can't say I have," Kansas replied. So old Markham was forking that bronc, was he? What was on his mind, anyway? There was a point behind these questions, but Kansas could not place it.

"I've got my own ideas about him," he added, "an' I'd bet a little money they are true."

"What sort of ideas? You know who he is? Why he's here?" Poke was a little too anxious and it showed in his voice. Kansas needed some extra money and this might be the way to get it.

"Oh, I've been studyin' on it."

The two oldsters had started for the door and Lisa was opening a barrel of flour. Poke Dunning leaned closer to Kansas. "You find out who he is and I'll make it worth your while."

"How much is my while worth?" Kansas asked.

Poke hesitated, then dug into his jeans. "Twenty dollars?"

It was a talking point, but Kansas decided he might get more. He never accepted a man's first offer. "Make it fifty," he said.

"Too much." Poke hesitated. "I'll give you thirty."

Kansas sighted through his glass. "All right," he said, "I'll find out for you."

"What was your hunch?" Dunning wanted to know.

Kansas hesitated. "You seen this Nita Howard over to the Fandango?"

"Not yet."

"You take a good look. I think she's Nita Riordan."

The name meant nothing to Dunning and he said as much. Kansas turned his head toward Dunning. "Well, Nita Riordan is associated with Kilkenny. He met her down on the border during that wire war in the Live Oak country. Then she was with him over to the Cedars in that ruckus."

"Kilkenny..." Dunning's eyes narrowed as he half spoke, half gasped the word. Now, there was a thought! Why, if he could hire Kilkenny...! When the split came with Mailer, it would pay to have the mysterious gunman on his side.

He scowled suddenly. "Why would he be here? What would he be doin' here?"

Kansas shook his head. "What he's doing here, I don't know. But Kilkenny keeps to himself like this Rider does. Moreover, the Howard woman at the Fandango calls her bartender Cain, an' Cain Brockman was with Kilkenny in that last fuss."

Dunning peeled a couple of twenties from a buckskin-wrapped roll of them and slapped them in the man's hand. "If you can get word to him, I'll give you another thirty. I want to see him on the quiet, an' don't let it get around, you hear?"

Kansas nodded, and Poke Dunning walked out and stopped on the step.

Kilkenny! If it were only he! But maybe he wouldn't take the job; there were stories that Kilkenny's gun was not for hire. That was sure nonsense, of course; any man's gun could be hired for enough money, and he had the money. To be rid of Mailer it would be worth plenty.

Lona was up at daybreak, having scarcely slept a wink. She had followed the Rider's instructions and tried to recall all she could of the ride on the wagon, but it was little enough. She recalled the town where the fat lady had been so nice to her and where she had given her maple sugar brought out from Michigan in a can. There had been Indians there, and a lot of people. She was sure that town was Santa Fe.

She waited until the hands were gone and then got a hurried breakfast from Dave Betts. "Rusty?" Betts asked. "Sure, I know where he went. He went south, down to Malpais Arroyo. Mailer sent him down there to roust some stock out of that rough country an' start it back thisaway."

Zusa was ready and eager to go, and Lona let the mare run. She was curious to talk to Gates again, for she was sure now that he knew who the Rider was. Though he seemed young, the Rider had known her father. Maybe Rusty would know.

She found him by as fine a flow of profanity as she had ever heard. He was down in the brush fighting an old ladino who had Rusty's rope on his horns but who had plunged into the brush even as the rope snagged him, and at the moment it was a stalemate, with Gates venting his irritation in no uncertain terms.

"Hi!" she called. "Having trouble?"

He shoved his hat back on his sweaty forehead and grinned at her. "That goll-durned, ornery critter!" he said. "I got to get him out of here, and the durned fool wants to stay! You just wait, I'll show him!" Rusty eased his horse sideways and then loosened his rope from the saddle horn. Before the steer could back up any farther into the brush, he whipped the rope around the stub of an ancient tree and tied it off. "There!" he said. "We'll just let him sit for a while."

Rusty walked over to her, his eyes curious, but if he had a question, Lona beat him to the draw. "Rusty, who is the Black Rider?"

Gates wrinkled his nose at the fancy name. "He'll tell you, ma'am, when he's ready, and he's the one to do it."

"But how could he have known my father?"

Rusty looked up quickly. "Ma'am, how he knew your father, I don't exactly know, only it seems to be your pa helped him when he was a kid and havin' it tough. I guess your pa talked a good bit about his plans. He only found out a short time ago that your pa was dead an' that there might be trouble here. Naturally, bein' the man he is, he had to do somethin' about it."

The sound of a horse made them both look up, and Lona felt herself grow pale as she saw Frank Mailer!

"Lona!" His voice was hoarse with anger. "What's goin' on here? What are you doin', meetin' this puncher down here?"

"I'm talking to him!" she flared. "Why shouldn't I? He works for me! And it might be a good idea," she added with spirit, "for you to remember that you work for us, too!"

Frank Mailer's face stiffened and his eyes narrowed. "You seem to forget that you are the girl I'm to marry," he said, in a tone less harsh. "Naturally, I don't want you around like this."

"Well, until we are married," she said coldly, "it happens to be none of your business! If you'd like to change your mind, you may. In fact, I don't like your bullying tone and I think I've changed *my* mind!"

Frank Mailer was furious. He glared, struggling for speech. When he did speak it was to roar at Gates. "Get that steer out of that brush, you blamed farmer! Get it out an' you get them cows back to the ranch, pronto!"

Rusty Gates calmly went to work freeing the steer. Lona and Zusa started out of the arroyo. "Wait!" Mailer shouted. "I want to talk to you!"

She turned in her saddle. "Until you learn how to act like a gentleman, I haven't got a thing to say!"

Touching a spur to the mare, she was gone like a streak. Frank stared after her, then swearing bitterly, he reined his horse around and rode away, ignoring Gates.

Chapter 3

Frank Mailer was in a murderous mood when he returned to Blue Hill. He left his saddled horse to Flynn and went up the steps to the house. Poke Dunning was standing in front of the fireplace when Mailer stormed into the room.

"Poke!" Frank said. "I've had about enough out of that girl! She threw her weight around too much today! Let's fix that marriage for next week!"

Dunning was lighting his pipe and he puffed thoughtfully, his eyes on the flame. Here it was, sooner than he wanted it. Well, there was more than one way to stall.

"What's the matter? What did she say?"

"I found her down at Malpais with that new puncher. I told her I didn't like it and she told me it didn't matter whether I did or not, that I worked for her! For her!"

Dunning chuckled. "Well, in a way she's right!" he said slyly. "This here is her ranch. And you're the foreman."

Mailer's eyes narrowed vindictively and he felt hot rage burning inside him. There were times when he hated Dunning. He glared at him. "I'm a damn sight more than any foreman!" he flared.

"Are you?" Dunning looked up under shaggy brows. His hands were on his hips, whether by accident or design, but his eyes were cool and steady.

Frank Mailer felt everything in him suddenly grow still. He turned on Dunning, and with a shock, he realized something he had been forgetting, that Poke Dunning was a gunman himself, and that he was not, by any means, too old. Right now he looked like a fairly dangerous proposition, and Mailer found that he did not like it, he did not like it one bit. He felt sure he could beat Poke, but he might get a slug in the process, and tomorrow they would be leaving on that job.

No fight... not now.

"What's the matter, Poke? You on the prod?"

Dunning recognized the change in Mailer's tone and it puzzled him. He knew the big man too well, yet here, with an even break between them, or almost an even break, for Dunning all but had the butts of his guns in his hands, Mailer was avoiding the issue. It puzzled Dunning, and worried him. He had known Mailer too long not to know the man was a schemer.

"No, Frank, I'm not," he said quietly. "Only here lately you've been taking in a little too much territory. We have our plans, but we can't ride into this roughshod. That girl has a mind of her own, and suppose she lights out of here to Salt Creek and raises hell about bein' forced to marry you? It might stir up some talk, an' we can't afford that.

"You've got to play it smart, Frank. You can't push Lona around; she's got too much fight in her. Take it easy, win her over. You can't handle a woman by shouting at her; they need soft talk."

There was truth in what Dunning said, and Mailer knew it. He was, he admitted, bullheaded. And he had been taking on a lot of weight around here. Anyway, first things come first, and there was that bank job to be handled. There would be time enough to take care of Dunning when that was off his hands. Geslin and Starr both wanted the money they would get from that job, and if he expected to keep them around, he must keep them busy, give them a chance to make a few dollars.

"Maybe you're right," he agreed. "It's a shame that Markham had to fix things that way."

"He did, though," Dunning said. "We don't dare take over until you marry her, then her property is legally yours an' we can do what we want."

"Sure, you've explained that," Mailer agreed grudgingly. He turned toward the door. "By the way, Poke," he said, in more affable tones, "I'm takin' some of the boys on a little trip tomorrow. I heard about some cattle and want to look them over. We'll be gone two days. Flynn and Gates will handle things on this end."

Dunning nodded absently. "All right. Good luck on the trip."

Outside on the porch, Frank Mailer stared angrily into the darkness. "We'll need it," he muttered. "And once I've married that girl, you'll need it!"

One thing he knew. The time was coming for a showdown. He would wait no longer. That Spanish woman, now... if he were owner of the Blue Hill, she would pay attention to him. She liked him, anyway, but was just stalling. That was always the woman's way, any woman. The fact that he would be married to Lona would matter but little. He would have things in his hands then, and he would know how to handle matters. Poke Dunning had to die.

Lance Kilkenny was riding to Salt Creek. Despite his desire to remain unknown, he had missed Nita so much that he could no longer stay away. Also, with his instinct for trouble and his knowledge of the situation in Salt Creek and on the ranch, he knew the lid was about to blow off. It was high time that he appeared on the scene.

Yet reaching town, he did not ride immediately into the street, but studied it carefully. He could see the lights of the Fandango, and nearer, the lights of Starr's Saloon and the Express. He rode the buckskin into the street and swung down in front of the Express.

He stepped up onto the boardwalk, feeling all that tightness he always knew when appearing for the first time in a strange town. His eyes slanted down the street, studying each building with strict attention. Every sense was alert for trouble, for a man who had used a gun as he had would have enemies, and in a strange town one never knew whom one would see.

The street was empty and still, its darkness alleviated only by the windows of the four or five lighted places in Salt Creek. He turned and opened the door to the Express and walked in.

Down the left-hand side was a row of boxes and sacks backed by a wall of shelves filled with various articles of cutlery and other tools. On his right were shelves of clothing, a few wide hats, and nearer the counter at the end was the ammunition, and beside it the bar. There were groceries and several opened barrels. Near a stove, now cold, sat two old men. At the bar Kansas was talking to Lisa.

Kilkenny walked down the right side of the long room whose middle was also stacked with boxes and barrels. As he approached the near end of the bar, Kansas looked up. In that instant the gunfighter knew he was recognized.

"Rye, if you would," Kilkenny said quietly. His eyes turned to Kansas, alert, probing. "What are you drinking, friend?"

Kansas's mouth was dry. He started to speak, swallowed, and then said, "Rye. Mine's rye, too, Lisa."

The Portuguese noticed nothing out of the ordinary, and put the glasses on the bar. His quick glance, however, noticed that the gray shirt was new and clean, the flat-brimmed hat was in good condition, and Kilkenny was clean-shaven. He left the bottle on the bar. He knew when a man could pay for his drinks.

Kansas recovered himself slightly. Here was his chance to do that job for Poke, dropped right in his lap. Luck seemed to be with him, but he reflected uneasily that Kilkenny did not have a reputation as the sort of man who would hire his gun. "Driftin' through?" he said.

"Maybe."

"Nice country around here."

"Seems so."

"There's jobs. Mailer, he's foreman out to the Blue Hill, he took on a hand the other day." He dropped his voice. "Poke Markham was talkin' to me. Seems he's huntin'a particular man for a very particular job. From the way you wear those guns, you might be just the man."

Kilkenny looked into his glass. Now, what was this? A trap? Or was Dunning looking for gunmen? "We might talk about it," he said. "I just might be interested."

Kansas was pleased and disappointed at the same time. He had heard much of Kilkenny, and while if he did this job for Poke, it might mean more money, which he could always use, he was sorry that Kilkenny would consider such a thing.

"Many folks in town?" Kilkenny asked quietly.

"A few. Mailer's here, if you're interested, but better not talk to him about this Markham job. I had the idea Markham was hiring someone confidential."

Kilkenny nodded... So? Was there a break there? If so, it might workout very well for him. And Rusty had said Mailer was planning some move in which Dunning was not concerned. Maybe Poke knew more than Mailer realized.

"This Mailer," he said carelessly, "what sort of hombre is he?"

"Mighty big an' mighty bad," Kansas replied honestly. "He's hell on wheels with a gun an' ready to use one on the slightest provocation, but he would rather use his fists and boots. Sometimes I think he likes to beat a man." There was animosity in Kansas's voice, and Kilkenny noticed it at once.

"Where's he from?"

"You've got me," Kansas admitted. "Folks around here have done a lot of wondering about that. Where he came from or what he was, I don't know. Somebody did say they saw him talking to Port Stockton over to Bloomfield once."

Port Stockton was a name Kilkenny knew. Boss of the Stockton gang, marshal of Bloomfield, and formerly in the Lincoln County War in the faction opposed to the Tunstall-McQueen outfit that had Billy the Kid. Stockton was no honest man, by all accounts, and a dangerous one. It was worth looking into, that angle.

He straightened. "You tell Markham I'll talk to him. I'll get in touch with him myself within the next couple of days." Turning, he walked to the door, scanned the street briefly, and then stepped out.

The Fandango was ablaze with lights, and Kilkenny did not hesitate; he walked at once to the doors and pushed them open. The place was crowded. Nita had a faculty for knowing the sort of place the range people liked, and she gave them lots of light and music. A half dozen card tables were going now, and the long bar was lined with booted and spurred men.

A few men in business suits mingled with the roughly dressed cowhands, but one and all they were wearing guns. The first person who saw him was Jaime Brigo, and the big Yaqui did not smile, merely reaching back with his knuckles and tapping a signal on the door.

Nita Riordan heard that signal. She was at her mirror, and for a minute she stared at her reflection. She had known Kilkenny now for more than three years, and had loved him every minute of them, but after one of these absences it never failed to leave her breathless when she heard his voice, his step, or heard the signal that signified his presence.

Kilkenny had walked to the end of the bar, and Cain Brockman moved at once to him and placed a glass and a bottle there. His head moved ever so slightly, and Kilkenny's eyes followed the movement. He saw Frank Mailer towering above the crowd, his face red and flushed from drinking, his glassy-blue and slightly protuberant eyes bold and domineering as they surveyed the crowd around him.

The slender hatchet-faced man would be Geslin, of course. Starr was there, and the sallow, dark-haired Socorro.

Mailer, Kilkenny observed, kept turning his head to glance toward the door where Brigo sat. Kilkenny studied him without seeming to, watching the man with the side of his glance. The fellow was a bull, but big as he was, there was no evidence of fat. Even his thick neck looked like a column of muscle; there was cruelty in the man's eyes and in his thin lips, and there was brutality showing all through him. Even without knowing who he was and why he was here, Kilkenny would have felt the same animal antagonism for the man.

Suddenly Nita was in the room. He knew it without turning his head. He would always know it, for there was that between them, that sharp, strong attachment, something physical and yet more than physical. He turned and their eyes met

across the room and he felt something well up within him. She smiled, ever so slightly, and turned to the nearest card table, speaking to one of the players.

Frank Mailer had seen her, too, and he turned abruptly away from the bar. "So there you are!" he boomed. "Come and have a drink!"

"I don't drink. I believe I have told you that."

"Oh, come on!" he insisted, reaching for her arm. "Don't be foolish! Come on and have a drink with me."

Suddenly Nita Riordan was frightened. Kilkenny had moved away from the bar; he was coming toward them.

"I'm sorry," she said coldly. "I'll not drink with you. Why don't you join your friends?"

Kilkenny was beside her now, but Mailer had eyes for nobody else. He had been waiting for this woman to come out, and he had been drinking, thinking of her, wanting her. He told himself she wanted him, and there had been enough of foolishness. "Come on!" he said roughly. "I want to talk to you!"

"But the lady does not want to talk to you!" Kilkenny said. Frank Mailer turned his big head sharp around. For the first time he saw Kilkenny. "Get lost!" he snarled. "Get...!"

What he was going to say never came out. He was seeing Kilkenny, really seeing him for the first time, looking into those hard green eyes, level and dangerous now, into the bronzed face of a man that he instinctively recognized as being something different, somebody new and perhaps dangerous. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"The man who tells you the lady does not wish to talk to you," Kilkenny said. He turned. "Miss Howard, do you wish to go to the bar?"

She turned instantly and started to go off with him. Mailer found himself left in the middle of the floor alone, and he had made his brags about this woman and himself. They had an understanding, he had hinted. In fact, he had convinced himself it was true. Somebody snickered, and Frank Mailer blew up.

Lunging, he grabbed at Nita's shoulder, but knowing his man, Kilkenny had been watching. He moved swiftly and thrust the hand aside. Instantly, Frank Mailer struck. He struck with his ponderous right fist that had already lifted with the violence of his grab at the girl, but Kilkenny rolled his head and smashed a left and right to the body.

Lance Kilkenny knew the manner of man he was facing and knew that if ever he had been in for a battle, he was in for one now. He struck fast and he struck hard, and the blows smashed Mailer back on his heels. Before he could catch his balance, Kilkenny hooked high and hard with a left and the blow knocked Mailer crashing to the floor.

He hit hard, in a sitting position, knocked back all of four feet, and as he hit he knew he had been struck with such force that all the other blows he had taken seemed mere child's play. He hit the floor drunk and raging, but he came up with a lunge, and cold sober.

Skilled in the rough-and-tumble style of barroom brawling, Lance Kilkenny knew what he was facing, yet he had more than that sort of skill on which to draw, for long ago in New Orleans he had studied the art of boxing and become quite proficient at it.

Mailer came up with a lunge and charged, swinging. Kilkenny nailed him on the mouth with a straight, hard left and then smashed another right to the ribs before the sheer weight of the rush smashed Kilkenny back against the bar. Mailer blazed with fury and confidence. Now he had him! Against the bar!

One hand grasped Kilkenny's throat, pushing his head back. Then he jerked up his knee for Kilkenny's groin. Yet Kilkenny's own knee had lifted an instant quicker and blocked the rise of Mailer's drive. At the same time Kilkenny struck Mailer's left hand away from his throat by knocking it to the right, and he lunged forward, smashing the top of his skull into Mailer's nose and mouth.

Blood streaming from his smashed lips, Mailer staggered, pawing at the air, and Kilkenny let him go, standing there, breathing easily, and waiting. The crowd had been shoved back, he saw, and Jaime Brigo was standing beside Nita with drawn gun. Over the bar behind him he heard Brockman speak, Brockman whom he had once fought in just such a battle, before they were friends. "Don't worry, boss. Nobody butts in!"

Mailer recovered his balance and stared at Kilkenny with malignant eyes. With the back of his hand he mopped the blood from his lips, staring at Kilkenny. "Now," he said, his voice low and dangerous, "I'm goin' to kill you!"

He moved in, his big fists ready, taking his time now. This man was not going to be smashed down in a couple of driving rushes. Mailer was not worried. He had always won, no man could stand against him.

Mailer moved in, feinted, then lunged. Kilkenny did not step away or retreat; he stepped inside and his legs were spread and he smashed wicked, hooking drives to the ribs that jolted and jarred Mailer. Frank shortened his own punches and caught Kilkenny with a mighty right that knocked him to the floor. With a roaring yell, Mailer sprang into the air and leaped to come down on Kilkenny's body, but Lance rolled over and sprang to his feet like a cat, and Mailer, missing, lunged past him against the bar. Kilkenny smashed a wicked right to the kidney, and as Mailer turned and grabbed for him he swung the man over his back with a flying mare.

Mailer came up fast and rushed and they stood toe to toe, swapping punches. Shifting his feet, Kilkenny was caught with a foot off the floor and he went back into the bar. The big man lunged and grabbed Kilkenny around the waist with both mighty arms.

Growling with fury, he tightened that grasp, but Kilkenny, caught with his hands down and inside that mighty hug, jerked both thumbs into the lower abdomen, low and hard. Mailer jerked back from the thumbs, and instantly Kilkenny turned his hips inside the hollow left between their bodies, and grasping Mailer's right sleeve with his left hand, he slid his right arm around his waist, and jerking down with the left, he swung Mailer across his hip and crashing to the floor with a thud that shook the building. He sprang back then, getting distance between them, and mopping the blood and sweat from his eyes. Frank Mailer got to his feet, throttling rage in his throat mingled with something else, something he had never felt before, the awful, dreadful fear that he might be beaten!

He lunged, and Kilkenny stepped into him. The gunfighter was utterly savage now. Watching, Cain Brockman cringed with the memory, for Kilkenny's fists cracked like ball bats on Mailer's face. It was a driving, utterly furious attack that

smashed Mailer back with solid blow after solid blow. Mailer lunged, grabbed him again, and jerked him clear off the floor, hurling him down. Kilkenny hit hard, and one of his guns went scooting, but Nita stooped quickly and caught it up.

Kilkenny was on his back and Mailer lunged for him. Kilkenny swung a boot up and caught the oncoming man in the solar plexus, and the drive of the rush and the moving boot carried the big man over like a catapult and he hit the floor beyond, his fall broken by the crowd that could not move fast enough.

Kilkenny rolled over and was on his feet. Punch-drunk, Mailer came up, and Kilkenny let go with both hands. Mailer sagged and his knees buckled and Kilkenny threw an uppercut with all the power that was in him. It lifted the big man from his feet and turned him over, and Frank Mailer hit the floor on his shoulder blades, out cold!

Kilkenny drew back, feeling for his gun. The right gun was still with him and he faced the crowd, his eyes desperate, blazing with cold fire. He swept the crowd until he found Geslin and Starr. Their eyes met and he stood there, his chest heaving with the struggle for air, sweat streaming down his face, his shirt in rags about him. He stood there, and suddenly Nita spoke. "In your holster!" and he felt his left-hand gun slide home. For a minute he held their eyes, steady, waiting.

Nobody moved, nobody spoke. He straightened then and glanced down at the beaten and bloody man who sprawled on the floor. "Tell him all the roads are open, but they run one way... out of town!"

It was a silent, grim bunch of men who took the trail that night back to Blue Hill, but while they rode slowly, and Frank Mailer slumped heavily in his saddle, his great head thudding with a dull ache, there was a man ahead of them who rode very swiftly, indeed. It was Kansas, and he was riding to be the first to report to Dunning. This was something Poke would want to know, something he needed to know.

After Kansas was gone, Poke Dunning paced the floor alone. Frank Mailer whipped! It was unbelievable! Had the earth opened and gulped down the Blue Hill, the ranch and its neighboring peak, he could have been no more shocked. That Mailer might be beaten with a gun, he knew. But with fists? In a rough-and-tumble fight? It was impossible!

But it had happened. Mailer was beaten. Despite his satisfaction, Dunning was worried. He turned in late, but he did not sleep, lying there and staring up into the darkness. He had worked a long time for this ranch, and he meant to keep it. He would kill anybody who endangered his possession of the ranch. Even Lona. Even Lona, the girl he had reared.

Kilkenny awoke early the following morning. He had returned at once to his hideout, but now he was awake. His hands were swollen and battered, and in the mirror he carried, he could see one eye was swollen almost closed. There was a welt on the corner of his mouth and a blue swelling on his cheekbone. He heated water on the fire and soaked his hands; carefully he cleaned the cuts and scrapes on his head and arms.

He was still tending to his injuries at noon when Gates appeared. He swung down and crossed to Kilkenny with jingling spurs. "Man! Did you beat that big lug! He was still punch-drunk when they left this morning!"

Kilkenny looked up sharply. He didn't feel too good himself. "They left? How many of them?"

"Mailer himself and four hands. Geslin, Starr, Socorro, and a mean-faced hombre with a scar that I've not seen around much."

"Thin? Stoop-shouldered with yellowish eyeballs?"

"That's him, who is he?"

"That's Ethridge, one of the Stockton gang." Kilkenny got to his feet, drying his hands. "That gives me a hunch, now. I think I know who Mailer is. If I'm not wrong, he's one of a bunch that operated out of Durango. Used a flock of names. One of them was Lacey or something like that."

"Yeah, I've heard of him."

Kilkenny studied his swollen hands. "Look," he said presently, "we're going to wind this up. Lona should come to see me today, and I've got to go see Poke Dunning. He left word with Kansas down at Salt Creek. He's got a proposition for me."

"Watch yourself."

"I will. But I want to see him. The lid's set to blow off anyway, and we might as well start the ball rolling while Mailer is gone."

"He said he'd be gone two days."

"All right, that gives us some time. I'll talk to Lona, then I'll ride down and see Dunning. You be ready, and you talk to Flynn and that cook."

After Gates was gone, he thought it over again. Kilkenny had taken care to learn something about the extent of the Blue Hill holdings, and the ranch was vast in area and in stock. There were thousands of head of cattle, and in the breaks to the west there were sheep. It was a big stake, truly.

How had Mailer worked into the deal? He was sure that Poke had started it alone... in fact, in his own mind he was sure that Dunning had killed Markham. But somehow Mailer had come into it.

He was thinking about that when he heard Lona ride into the amphitheater below, so he got to his feet and swung into the saddle.

She smiled brightly when she saw him, then gasped as she saw his face. "Oh, what happened to you? You're hurt!"

Kilkenny chuckled. "No, not really. I had a fight last night. Didn't you hear about it?"

"No... how would I hear?"

He took off his hat and swung down to a seat near her on a boulder. "It was your man Mailer I was fighting."

She came to her feet. "You... fought Frank Mailer?"

He smiled, painfully. "If you think I look bad, you should see him!"

"You... whipped him?" Lona was amazed. The more she looked at the tall young man on the rock, the more impossible it became that this man could have beaten Mailer.

Kilkenny grinned. He didn't like to brag, and yet... well, what man doesn't like to have a pretty girl think well of him? "Well, to tell you the truth, I did, and if you'll

pardon my saying so, I did a bang-up job of it. Not that I didn't catch a few!" He felt with delicate fingers of the lump on his cheekbone.

"He'll kill you now." She was very positive. "He'll never let you get away alive."

"It's going to get to that point anyway," Kilkenny said. "I'm going to make sure that ranch is in your hands, all free and clear, with Poke Dunning and Mailer both out of the picture. Do you believe now that Dunning's not your father?"

She looked at him seriously. "I... I never really doubted that. He was always funny around me, and he would never tell me anything about my mother. I remember a lot of little things now."

"Anything about that wagon trip?" he asked quickly.

"Not much. I remember a town where there were Indians, and from all else I recall, it must have been Santa Fe. There was another man with us then. And we came west from there."

"You remember nothing after that?"

"Well... sort of. It's not very clear, not at all, but I have a memory of a place ... of coming up a long canyon with a small stream in the bottom. We came up it for a long, long way, it seems to me. Once we climbed out of it I remember Father pointing at a great peak or mesa that was far away. He... I remember that because he said something about an orphan at the time, and I pestered him to tell me what an orphan was. I guess it wasn't long after that I became one."

Kilkenny nodded. "That helps. We're getting places now. I would bet fifty dollars that the long canyon was Canyon Largo. The Orphan makes sense. You see, that's the name of a mesa over in the desert near Largo. They call it El Huérfano... the Orphan, because it stands alone."

"Isn't that funny?" she said. "I never connected the mountain and the orphan, at all! Now, let's see, there was something else, too. Last night I was thinking about it and I dreamed something about a night when there was a fire and I woke up and I could see the light dancing on a rock wall. I've thought about that real often. You know how it is, you forget so much and then two or three things sort of stick in your mind? It was that way with this... I remember waking up and being afraid because I could see that Father was not in his blankets, but when I called to him, he spoke to me from far off and told me to be quiet. I went back to sleep then."

Kilkenny squinted his eyes at her. "You remember anything else about that?"

She shook her head. "No, only I think it was the next day that we got here and the old Indian woman took care of me. I didn't see Father again for a long time."

"Probably you never saw him again, not actually." Kilkenny got to his feet. "You know, I've a hunch that night you woke up was the night your father was killed, and if you got to the ranch the next day, it could not have been far from here."

"Oh, but I can't be sure!" she objected. "It's been so long, and telling it this way makes it seem a lot more real than it actually was! It's pretty vague."

"Nevertheless, I think I'm right. Before I see Dunning today, I'm going to have a look."

"But how could you find it after all this time?" she asked.

"I'll have to be lucky," he admitted. "Mighty lucky. But there aren't many trails across this country from Santa Fe, and I don't believe he ever brought the wagons on much farther than that. He may have burned them, and if he did, they may still be there, or the rims may. I'll have a look, anyway."

“But why? What’s to be gained?”

“I don’t know,” he confessed. “Maybe nothing. I’d like to get something on Dunning, though. Something definite. And there might be a clue.”

She nodded, looking out past the screen of pines toward the distant hills.

Then suddenly, almost as she turned her head, he was gone from the rock! She stared, then started to her feet. Where in the world...?

“Lona!” She whirled. It was Gordon Flynn. “What in the world are you doin’ way back here?” he asked. He was sitting a dun pony that he often rode, and he looked around wonderingly. “An’ how did you ever find this place? I’d never have guessed it was here.”

“I found it.”

Kilkenny stepped from behind a clump of piñon, and Flynn gulped. “You... you’re Kilkenny?”

Lona’s eyes flew open and she gasped, “Kilkenny!”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, “that’s my name.”

Chapter 4

The hamlet of Aztec Crossing was born of a broken axle and weaned and reared on Indian whiskey. For three weeks the town was a covered wagon and three barrels of whiskey, but by that time “Hungry” Hayes, onetime buffalo hunter and freighter, had built a dugout roofed with poles and earth.

With those three barrels of Indian whiskey to prime the pump of prosperity, and a Winchester to back the priming, Hayes turned his broken axle and the river crossing into a comfortable fortune. Indian whiskey is a simple concoction of river water, not strained, straight alcohol (roughly two gallons to the barrel), three plugs of chewing tobacco, five or six bars of soap (very strong lye soap), one half pound of red pepper, and a liberal dose of sagebrush leaves. To this is added two ounces of strychnine, and the resulting brew is something to make a mummy rear on his hind legs and let out a regular Comanche yell. This recipe was not, of course, original with Hungry Hayes. He merely adopted the formula in use throughout the Indian country, the ingredients varying but little.

The first two settlers of Aztec Crossing halted because of proximity to the source of supply, yet neither proved as hardy as the durable Hayes. The first to pass on was helping Hayes mix the whiskey and decided that he preferred it straight, without the addition of the river water. The following morning Hayes planted him on the bank of the river with due ceremony. The second settler departed this world after a brief but emphatic altercation with four Apaches. His mistake was entirely due to a youthful disdain for mathematics, for having slain three Apaches, he straightened up from his protecting buffalo wallow to leave, and took an arrow through his chest. He was buried, after an interval of sunshine and buzzards, by Hayes, taking with him a surplus of arrows but considerably less hair.

Yet, as time passed, Aztec Crossing grew. Ranching began, and the town acquired a general store, four saloons, a livery stable, a bank, and various other odds and ends of business enterprise. Hungry Hayes, fat with money, departed for

the East and settled down in a comfortable Kentucky homestead, where people forever after regarded him as a liar for telling what was actually less than the truth.

The latest institution, and from Frank Mailer's viewpoint, the most interesting, was the Aztec City Bank.

With a dozen ranches nearer to Aztec than any other town, the bank was at times fairly bulging with coin. This fact had not gone unnoticed, and the five hard-bitten gentlemen who drifted into Aztec on the bright and sunny morning in question had decided to give some attention to this money.

Aztec was drowsing in the sun. The weather-beaten boards of the walk in front of the Aztec Saloon supported the posteriors of four old settlers, talking of great deeds against the warlike Comanche. In front of the livery stable, half asleep, old Pete chewed tobacco in drowsy content. In the store, his glasses as far down on his nose as possible, Storekeeper Worth studied a month-old newspaper. A dun pony flicked a casual tail at a fly who buzzed in deep bass, and the morning was warm, pleasant, and sleepy.

Frank Mailer, mounted on a blood bay, walked his horse down the main street with the saturnine Socorro beside him. Reining in at the bank hitching rail, he swung down, and Socorro did likewise, and stayed between the horses, fussing with some saddle gear, his carbine close at hand.

Geslin and Starr came down from the opposite direction, and Geslin drew up, taking time to light a smoke while his slate-gray eyes studied the street with a cold, practiced gaze. Starr chewed tobacco, and sat his horse, his thick thighs bulging the cloth of his jeans. Ethridge walked up from behind the bank and stopped at the corner of the building. He carried a Henry rifle, and with Socorro faced one way and he another, they could cover the street with ease.

Mailer, his face swollen and ugly, jerked his head at Geslin. Starr followed. Geslin was worried, for he had never seen Mailer as he was today. Always brutal, the man was now in a vicious mood, his whole manner changed. The beating he had taken had aroused all the ferocity innate in his being. He pushed open the door and walked in and toward the office of the president. Geslin went to one window, and Starr to the other. Starr took the man who was standing there and spun him sharply, smashing a Colt down over the man's skull.

"All right," he said, "sack it up!"

The cashier looked, paled, gulped, and reached for a sack. Mailer had the president out, and with three men under their guns and the fourth on the floor out cold, they proceeded to strip the bank.

Across the street Johnny Mulhaven was coming out of the saloon, and Johnny Mulhaven had more nerve than brains. He saw the sudden collection of horses, he saw two men facing the street with rifles, and he let out a shrill Texas yell and went for his gun.

Ethridge dropped the rifle on him and fired... the shot was too quick and too high. It hit Johnny in the shoulder and he dropped his gun, but caught it in the air with his left hand and snapped a quick shot at Ethridge. His shot was quick but lucky. Ethridge caught the bullet where his ribs parted and dropped his rifle.

The old Comanche fighters dove for shelter, two of them under the walk, one behind a watering trough; another dashed for the saloon. Without doubt he was

headed for a drink to ballast his shocked nerves, but he was doomed to die thirsty. He caught a slug from Socorro's rifle and went down on the very step of his goal, and in a matter of seconds the street was laced with gunfire, stabbing, darting flames.

Young Johnny Mulhaven was still on his feet, carrying enough lead for three men to die, and he was still firing left-handed. Scar Ethridge had made one attempt to get up, but Johnny made sure of him with a bullet through the skull. One of the horses sprang away, and then the bank door burst open and three men charged into the street.

Mulhaven took the full blast of their fire and went down hard, blood staining the gray boards of the walk. A rifle spoke from the livery stable, another from the store. Three men were unlimbering guns from within the saloon. Old Pete, at the first shot, had come erect with a lunge, swallowed his chewing tobacco, and methodically pulled his old pistol, aimed, shot, and put a slug into Kane Geslin.

And then, suddenly as it had begun, it was over. Five men had come into town, and four rode out. Two of them were wounded.

It was only then that the full story was known. Within the bank, the slugged man told it. He had come out of it just in time to see Mailer strike the banker down, then unlimber his pistol and kill all three of the men within the bank. Wisely, he lay still and lived.

Four men were dead, but Johnny Mulhaven, miraculously, was still alive, but with nine wounds.

Headed east and riding fast were the four remaining outlaws. Geslin had a flesh wound and Socorro had come out of it with a bloody but merely burned shoulder. All four were ugly, despite the success of their venture, and three of them were worried. They had known Mailer for a long time, but not the Mailer in the bank. They were all men who had killed and would kill again, yet those three killings were cold-blooded, unnecessary, and dangerous to their safety. Dangerous because while many a western town might overlook a bank robbery, they would never overlook a cold-blooded killing.

They swung north, leaving the trail for the rough country, and circled west, heading for a crossing above White Canyon. They had good horses, and doubted if a pursuit would immediately get under way. Silent, brooding, and bloody, the four men crossed the Rio Grande and headed up Pajarito Canyon, crossed to Valle de los Posos, and headed for the Rio Puerco.

Nobody talked. Geslin had lost blood and felt sick and sore. The movement of the horse hurt him. Sweat smarted the burn on Socorro's arm and his mood became vile. Steadily, they pushed on under a baking sun, their shirts stained with blood and sweat, their horses plodding more wearily. Behind them there might be pursuit, and they could easily be followed. There were Indian trackers at Aztec Crossing.

No clouds marred the faint blue of the sky where the sun hung brassy and broiling. Nothing moved but the sage, and there was no wind, only a heavy, stifling heat. Sam Starr alone seemed unaffected, but from time to time his eyes turned toward the huge sullen figure of Frank Mailer. Mentally, he told himself he was through. When I get mine, he told himself, I'm pullin' stakes.

Alkali dust lifted in soft clouds and dusted a film over their clothing. Socorro cursed monotonously and Geslin stared ahead with bleak, desperate eyes, his lips dry, his body aching for rest and water. Frank Mailer, indomitable and grim, rode on ahead. Starr stared phlegmatically before them, his eyes squinting against the intense white glare of the sun. He watched his horse carefully, keeping it to good ground whenever possible, knowing how much depended on it.

At last the night came and shadows reached out and touched them with coolness. In a tiny glade on the Rio Puerco, the men swung stiffly from their horses. Starr eyed the sacks thoughtfully, and Socorro with greedy, eager eyes, watchful eyes, too, for they shifted vaguely to the night, and then with more intentness on the men close by.

Bulking black against the starry sky, looming almost above them, were the rugged San Pedro Mountains. Starr got some food together, and nobody talked. Geslin bathed his wound and bandaged it; Socorro did likewise. Mailer stared into the flames, hulking and dangerous.

"Will we make it back tomorrow?" Socorro asked suddenly.

"No," Geslin replied, "there isn't a chance."

"Let's split the money now," Socorro suggested.

Starr wanted nothing more than that, but he was hesitant to agree. His eyes shifted to Mailer and they all waited for him to speak, but he said nothing. Starr had seen men like this before when killing was on them. There was only one end to it. Death. They killed and killed until they themselves were slain. He wanted no part of it. He wanted to get away. He also wanted his money.

Dawn found them pushing northeast, heading up Capulin Creek. With the San Pedros to the south and the bulk of Mesa Prieta to the north, there was no way to see if there was any pursuit or not. Geslin was willing to bet there was, and Starr agreed. They told each other as much during a moment when they had fallen behind.

It was dusk when they drew up at a spring and slid from their horses. "We'd better stop," Geslin said. "My arm's givin' me hell!"

Mailer turned on him. "What's the matter?" He sneered. "You turnin' into an old woman?"

Geslin's face whitened and for an instant they stared at each other. "Go ahead!" Mailer taunted. "Reach for it!"

Sam Starr stepped back, his eyes watchful. Geslin was in no shape for this. The man's nerves were shot, he was weakened from loss of blood, and beaten by the endless riding.

"What's the matter?" Mailer said. "You a quitter? You yellow?"

Geslin's hand flashed for his gun, and Frank Mailer swung his pistol up with incredible speed. An instant it held, then the shot bellowed, thundering between the cliffs. Geslin went down, his gun spouting fire into the dirt, shot through the heart.

Socorro touched his lips with his tongue, and Sam Starr stood very still, staring at Mailer. The man was fast; he was chained lightning.

Mailer's eyes went to Socorro, then sought Starr, but Sam had his back to darkness and shooting at him would have been a poor gamble. "Anybody sayin' "

anything?" Mailer demanded. He waited while one might have counted five, and neither man spoke. Then he turned away. "No time for loafin'. We're ridin' on."

Three days before, Lance Kilkenny had set out on the trail of what he suspected was a thirteen-year-old murder. Following Lona's vague memories of the journey to the Blue Hill ranch and his own knowledge of the best route to that area from Santa Fe, Kilkenny cut across country to a spot he hoped would intersect the path the Markham wagon had taken. By morning he was in Canyon Largo, headed west, with the sun at his back. Lona had told him that she had gone on only one more day after she'd been told that her father had traveled on ahead. That meant that the site of that last camp and possibly the site of the killing was relatively close to the ranch. By going a good sixty miles farther east than would seem necessary, Kilkenny hoped to follow the best path for a wagon and therefore have some hope that he might discover the exact way that Markham, Lona, and Poke Dunning had approached the ranch. He was covering ground faster than any wagon could have, not bothering to look for any true clues of the Markham family's passing, just getting a feel for the slope of the land, watching for deep arroyos and trying to think like a man would when driving with a heavy load.

By noon he had stopped at a place where the stream had eddied back on itself and made a good watering hole. From the growth of trees and brush, Kilkenny figured that it was a place that had remained unchanged for many years and was not the creation of some recent alteration in the flow of water.

He got down and, leaving Buck to graze on whatever grass he could find, scouted around on foot. In twenty minutes he had discovered nothing, so he mounted up and headed off again figuring that he'd cross and head on out north of Angel's Peak. He had not gone a score of yards when he saw it.

He drew up staring at a crude drawing scratched on the rock wall of Canyon Largo. It was scarcely three feet from the ground and was a crude, childish representation of a girl with stick legs and arms. An Indian drawing? he wondered. But no Indian had ever made a drawing like that!

He rode straight up now, his eyes searching the canyon walls and the sandy bed. Although he had found no campsite, and Lona had not mentioned making this drawing, he was sure that he had stumbled onto their route.

The following morning, scarcely ten miles from the ranch, he watered his horse and rested on the east side of Thieving Rock. Idly wandering about, Lance Kilkenny suddenly saw a charred wheel, then some bolts.

Near a sheltering overhang, half hidden by brush, were the old remains of a large fire. Here a few stones had been huddled together and blackened with soot. He dropped to his knees and dug in the sand, feeling around to see what he might turn up.

At the bottom of the inner wall, the water or wind of some bygone age had scoured out a small crevice in the stone. It was partly covered, but his eye caught a glimpse of something more than sand, and stopping, he prodded at it with a stick. It moved and he saw that it was an iron box!

Kneeling, he grabbed the corner, and brushing away the sand, he pulled out the box. It was ancient and badly rusted, so picking up a stone he struck at the lock.

Another blow and the box broke open. Within it were a few silver pieces, black with age, and a handful of papers. Carefully, he picked them up. A birth certificate for Lona! Markham's marriage certificate! A last will and testament! And the deed to the ranch, placing it in Lona's name, along with the old original deed given him when he himself acquired the ranch!

Probably he had been afraid of Dunning and had concealed this box each night to prevent it being found by him if anything happened.

That evening Kilkenny had ridden down the Old Mormon Trail to Blue Hill. Rusty Gates was mending a bridle and he glanced up at him as he rode in. Gordon Flynn was working around the corral and Lona saw him coming and smiled nervously as he swung down. "I'm hunting Poke Markham," Kilkenny said loudly. "Is he around?"

Dunning appeared in the door. He was wearing two guns, Kilkenny noticed, whereas he had worn but one heretofore. "Come on in!" Poke said, and turned and walked back into the room.

Lance followed him across the porch, then stopped, closing his eyes for an instant so he would see better inside away from the sunlight. He took in the room with one quick glance. A glance that gauged the distance to all the doors and placed the main articles of furniture. A lot might happen before he left this room.

"You wanted to see me?"

Poke Dunning looked up from under shaggy gray brows. His eyes were hard, measuring. "You're Kilkenny?"

"That's right."

"You whipped Frank Mailer the other evening. You reckon he will take it lyin' down?"

"He can take it as he chooses."

"He'll meet you with a gun, Kilkenny, and he's fast as greased lightnin'."

Kilkenny waited, saying nothing. This old man wore his guns with the butts well forward. Some gunmen liked them that way.

"You can't get away from meeting him unless you run, an' you don't set up like a running man. I want you to meet him right away. Soon as he comes back."

"Where's he gone?"

"How'd I know? Don't care, neither. He's a bad hombre, that one, and he's got to be killed. You got to kill him, anyway, but if you hunt him down or kill him as soon as he gets back, any way you like, I'll give you five hundred dollars!"

The way he said it made the sum sound big... but was it big enough? What were the stakes to Poke Dunning?

"No. I'll meet him when I have to. I won't hunt him down." Kilkenny pulled out his tobacco and began to build a smoke. "Nice place you've got here. Had it long?"

Dunning tightened up inside. The old fear was always on him. "Quite a spell," he replied. "Been some changes made."

"I heard it belonged to your daughter, to Lona."

"Well, you're right. I gave it to her when she was just a child."

"You going to start another place someday?" Kilkenny touched the tip of his tongue to his cigarette, then placed it in his mouth. He dug out a match and lit up, glancing through the first smoke at Dunning. "Let her have her inheritance?"

"Maybe," Poke said flatly. "Someday." Poke Dunning stared at Kilkenny. What was this, anyway? He had the man out here to try to hire him, and now he was asking questions. Too many questions.

"I was wondering... Why is it that they call you *Poke*, Mr. Markham? What was your given name?"

He faced Kilkenny. "What's it to you?"

"Just curious."

"Too durned curious! You ain't takin' me up on Mailer?" Poke wanted to change the subject.

"No." Kilkenny moved a step toward the door. "But I'll be back to see you, *Poke*." He stopped at the door. "You see, Ike Markham was a friend of mine!" As he spoke he stepped quickly back into the shadows, dropped a hand to the porch rail, and vaulted it neatly. "Buck!" he called.

The horse came to him, holding his head high and to one side so as not to step on the trailing bridle reins. Catching them up, Lance Kilkenny wheeled the horse and vanished into the darkness.

He need not have hurried. In the big room of the old ranch house, Poke Dunning was standing where Kilkenny had left him, his face ashen, his cheeks sunken and old.

For all these years he had been afraid of just this. A dozen times he had thought of what he might do if ever faced with somebody who knew Markham, and now the moment had come and gone, and he had let the man get away. He should have killed him! But why, if someone had to come, did it have to be Kilkenny, of all people?

Alone in his room, he paced the floor. After all these years! Why, there had to be a way out! There had to be! There was no justice in it!

Mailer! If he could only steer Mailer into Kilkenny! They might kill each other off, or at least make it easy for him to kill the survivor. In that case, there might still be a chance.

He paced the floor, cursing Mailer's absence as once he had blessed it, eager for the man to return.

It was this fear that had caused him to keep the gunmen on the payroll even after he had given up banditry and rustling. This fear that someday, someone would come over the Old Mormon Trail who knew the truth. He had made a bold play, that long-ago night in the dark shadow of Thieving Rock... Markham had been a friendly man when they met, and he had talked cheerfully of the ranch he had for his young daughter, and little by little Poke had worked the information out of him, that his wife was dead, that he had no near relatives but Lona. Poke Dunning could see his big chance, and in the following nights he sat across the fire from the man who was carrying him west, and waited for his chance. It came, finally, only a day's drive from the ranch itself. It came when he was growing desperate with anxiety, and he knew that Markham had begun to suspect him, that the man moved his bed at times, shifting it from one place to another after they had turned in.

Yet, in the accomplishment, it had been easy. He had tossed a stone into the darkness near the horses, and Markham, seeing him lying there, apparently asleep, had risen and walked out to the horses, fearful that a mountain lion might

come down on them. Poke Dunning had slid out of his blankets and followed him in his sock feet. He had used a pick handle, and it was only after the third and last blow had fallen that little Lona called from her blankets and he had replied that everything was all right, keeping his voice low.

The next day he told the child her father had gone on ahead to make ready for them. Later he told her that he was off doing business for the ranch and made arrangements to send her to school. Once she was gone, he had gambled that she would not remember after the years. He had even gone so far as to change his own ways, to use gestures and mannerisms the father had used, and even grow a beard in the same style as her father. It had been a bad moment when she returned on her first holiday, but after eleven years the memory had dimmed, and although he saw doubt in her eyes, he soon managed to make her forget those doubts. When she finally came home after many years, the memories from when she was five or almost five had been erased but for a few moments. The rest was a shadowland where memory and fantasy mingled, where the face of her father was never quite distinct.

Poke Dunning had made his big gamble, and he had won. Now he might lose. He would lose if something was not done. For years he had built up the ranch. Though Lona was the actual owner, in his mind the ranch was his and his alone. And now he was threatened.

When she had first returned from school, Poke had been worried and he had started planning how to take back control without raising a lot of questions. Frank Mailer had been his first hope.

He had hoped that Frank Mailer, the outlaw that owed him for so much, would be a fitting partner in the ranch. But now he was increasingly sure that Frank had his own plans and that Poke Dunning did not figure in them. Mailer could be handled, but somehow he must stall him on marrying Lona until after Kilkenny was out of the way. Then he could take care of big Frank, and he would enjoy doing it. He was going to make sure that Mailer died. He was going to make sure that Kilkenny died. And now that his long-held plan to legally wrest ownership of the ranch from Lona had fallen apart, he would kill her, too. If she died, wouldn't he, as her only surviving relative, inherit the ranch? After all, wasn't he supposed to have given it to her?

Only *Lona's* death had to look like an accident. Gunmen like Kilkenny and outlaws like Mailer were always dying violently. He could shoot Mailer himself, and if he carefully revealed what he knew about the big man's outlaw past and various aliases, no one would think twice about it. But killing a woman, a girl, was another thing entirely.

As if his murderous fantasy was echoing in his mind, Dunning suddenly heard her voice. She was in the kitchen talking to old Betts, and something was said about coffee. At this hour on nearly every night Dave Betts made coffee for the two of them. Dunning suddenly heard a new voice, Flynn's, making some laughing comment.

Poke's eyes narrowed. What was going on here? What was Flynn doing in the house so late at night? The hands rarely came for coffee this late unless working cattle close by, and they were not now. He turned and started for the kitchen.

Voices suddenly stilled as he opened the door. He glanced at Lona, her face bright with laughter, the light catching in her auburn hair, and then at Flynn. Dave had drawn back near the big cooking range, his face drawn.

"What's goin' on here?" Dunning demanded. "Flynn, you should be in bed asleep. Ain't nothin' for you at the house this time of night."

"I was just palaverin'," Flynn replied.

"We was havin' coffee," Betts offered. "You want a cup?"

"Yes, won't you have some?" Lona looked up at him, and there was something level and hard in her eyes that he had never seen there before. "I like to talk to Gordon."

"So it's Gordon, is it?" He glared balefully at the puncher. "Get out!" he growled.

Flynn hesitated, and Dunning's gun flashed in his hand. He was thinking that something else had been going on behind his back, that this Flynn... "Get out!" he said quickly.

Gordon Flynn backed to the door. Never before had he seen the old man go for a gun, and on his best day he could not have come within twice the time to match that draw. He was no gunfighter. On the other hand, his eyes met Lona's. "Go, Gordon. I'm all right." She spoke softly and he opened the door and backed out, his face white.

Poke Dunning stood very still, first glaring at Dave, then at Lona. "You come in here!" he said. "I want to talk to you!"

"All right." Lona got to her feet. She felt a queer, frightened sensation inside her, yet in another sense she was perfectly calm, her thoughts working carefully.

Kilkenny had come to see Dunning. The man might know his secret, kept for so long, was now about to be exposed. What would he do? What would he try?

She stepped past him into the big room and walked past the long dining-room table in the huge old parlor of the ranch house. She crossed to the fireplace, and stood there straight and looking suddenly taller than she was as she awaited him.

Poke Dunning slammed the door behind him and crossed the room. He dug his pipe into a can of tobacco and tamped it home. Then he looked up, his eyes bitter and hard, like flecks of steel under his shaggy brows. "We've got to have a talk. Sorry I got sore out there. Don't like to think of you wastin' time on those cowhands. You're too good for them."

"But you approve of Frank Mailer?" she asked coolly.

He looked up then, measuring her with his glance. "No," he said flatly, "and you ain't goin' to marry him. That was a bad idea."

"I agree." Lona waited, wondering.

He rubbed his chin. "Lona," he said hesitantly, "I got a confession to make. When Mailer first come down here, I figured him a right up-standin' young feller. Lately, he ain't seemed so much what he should be; in fact I been hearin' some things from up Durango way."

"Things?" She looked at him, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Stories. Stories of robberies and such. When he comes back I may have to fire Frank Mailer."

At that moment they both heard a shout, then a sound of running horses, and Mailer's hard voice, talking to Socorro.

Dunning turned on the girl. "Get to your room!" he said. "An', Lona, you keep your mouth shut to what we've been talking about!"

Chapter 5

Miles back, along the trails north and west of Aztec Crossing, there rode a small, grim-faced group of men. In the van were three men on gray horses, three men who answered to the names of Jim, Pat, and Terry Mulhaven, the brothers of Johnny, who was alive but badly shot up back in Aztec.

There were eight of these men in all, headed by an Apache tracker, and these were the men who had built the Crossing from nothing to a fairly stable little outpost. Storekeeper Worth, answering to the name of Bill, was among them, his old Sharps across his saddlebow.

The peace and contentment of their town had been violated and good citizens had been done to death, so the attitude of the posse, self-appointed, was harsh and determined. A dozen times they had lost the trail, and a dozen times they had found it again. Their progress had been slow, but it was relentless.

Most often, it was the distinctive tracks of the blood bay ridden by Mailer that they found. They knew this horse by sight, and they knew his tracks.

"I wonder how much farther?" Worth asked.

"We got all summer," Jim Mulhaven replied shortly. "This is one trail I ain't leavin' until those hombres stretch hemp."

A good day and a half behind the outlaws, they had come upon the body of Kane Geslin. The sign made evident what had happened here. "Killed by one of his own men," Worth commented.

"One less for us," Pat said grimly. "Let's be ridin'!"

They rode on, into the hot, still afternoon, their eyes grimly upon the trail.

At Blue Hill, Mailer had wasted no time in facing Poke Dunning. He went at once to the ranch house, opened the door, and closed it, looking at the older man across the big room. "Poke, let's get this over with. Come Saturday, I'm marrying Lona!"

He could see that something had happened—what, he did not know—but Mailer was a changed man, not suddenly insistent, demanding, but with some deeper, more deadly change.

"I don't think so, Frank. She doesn't want to marry you. And now I agree with her."

Frank Mailer looked at old Poke Dunning through narrowed eyes. "You double-crossin' me, Dunning?" he asked.

"It could be I'm protectin' myself from a double cross. An' don't think that I'm scared of you telling people who I really am. I've been here for years and most of those that haven't forgot who Poke Dunning was are dead."

"What if you died, mighty sudden," Mailer suggested, his eyes holding Poke's, "an' I married Lona?"

Dunning shrugged. “The trouble with that is”—he spoke carefully, knowing how slender was the thread along which their course was holding, a thread that might snap with a burst of gunfire at any moment—“that Kilkenny knows.”

“Who?” Mailer started at the name. “Kilkenny? Is he here?”

“Who do you think whipped you, Frank?” Dunning asked. “That was him, all right. Kansas tipped me off.”

“Kilkenny!” All thoughts were suddenly gone from Mailer’s mind but the one. It was fantastic. He had heard of the gunfighter for years, but had never seen him. Remembering the description that Gates had given in the saloon the first night they met, he knew Poke was telling the truth. Despite himself, he was awed and worried.

Had anyone suggested that the name frightened him, he would have scoffed at it. He had never been frightened of anything, but one could not hear the countless stories surrounding that name without it taking on an almost magical quality. He felt a strange, deadly chill within him.

Kilkenny! And the man had beaten him with his fists, but perhaps with a gun...?

“Look,” Poke said softly, “we’ve had our troubles, Frank. We both have it in for each other, but it ain’t necessary. We started in this deal an’ we can do all right with it yet. I can’t let you marry Lona yet... not until I can trust you. We can settle this; the only thing in the way is this Kilkenny. We’ve got to get rid of him.”

“We?” Mailer looked at Dunning, trying to assemble his thoughts. The knowledge that Kilkenny was in this deal disturbed him.

“Sure! Look, alone neither of us can win. Together we can. As long as Kilkenny is in the picture, we stand to lose, so what we’ve got to do is get him out of it. Then we can settle this deal between us, or work partners on it. Our first job is to be rid of him.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Mailer agreed grudgingly, “but that won’t be so easy. Got any ideas?”

“Sure. I’ve been thinking about it. Look, he came over to the ranch once, so we can get him here again. He was a friend of Lona’s father. All right, we send him a message from her. He’ll come, an’ when he does, we’ll be waitin’ for him. Geslin, Starr, Socorro, an’ us.”

“Not Geslin. He’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yeah.” Mailer’s cold eyes shifted to Dunning’s. “We had some words an’ he tried to draw on me. I killed him.”

Poke Dunning absorbed that and didn’t like it. He had known Mailer was good, but if he was good enough to get Geslin and not even collect a slug in the process, then he was even more dangerous than Poke had believed.

“Ethridge is dead, too.” Mailer was rolling a smoke. “We took that bank at Aztec Crossing.”

Rage boiled up inside of Poke Dunning. He had refused to allow anything of the kind. This was going directly against his orders. For an instant he was about to give vent to his fury, but he throttled his anger. “That’s no matter. We can use Socorro an’ Starr. It will be easy enough. You an’ me an’ Starr will be out of sight.

We can have Socorro mendin' a saddle or something. Kilkenny rides in, an' we take him in a cross fire. Four guns. He won't beat that."

"All right," Mailer agreed. "It's a good plan. Can you get word to him?"

"Sure. Through Kansas or that Spanish girl."

"You're right, there's something between them."

"Yeah"—Dunning nodded—"we should have guessed it. She's that Nita Riordan who was with him on the border and at the Cedars. Remember? We heard about her."

So that was it? Kilkenny's girl? But after Kilkenny died?

"Poke," Mailer said suddenly, "I think I'm goin' to like this. You get word to Kansas or the girl. Let's get started on this an' get it over with."

Sam Starr walked into the bunkhouse and pulled off his boots. Behind him Socorro followed, and Rusty Gates opened his eyes and looked at them in the darkness. He could see only vague outlines, but he heard Socorro's muttered curse, then Starr's low question. "How do you feel?"

"Bad," Socorro said. "My whole arm and shoulder are so stiff it hurts to move."

"You feel better than Geslin."

Socorro did not say anything for a minute. Then he said, "Frank should have buried him. If there's a posse, they are liable to stumble on the body."

Rusty Gates was wide-awake now. What went on here? To speak would cause them to clam up, and he wanted to hear more. He lay still and listened.

"There *will* be a posse," Starr said. "Aztec is a tough place. I knew that kid who opened up on us. He was one of the Mulhaven boys, an' there's four or five more."

"Gunfighters?"

"No, but tough hands, and clannish as all get-out. You can bet we've got a Mulhaven on us now, somewhere."

"What you plannin' to do?"

Sam Starr let that question slide. It was not that he did not know, but Socorro was pretty thick with Mailer. Starr planned to get his share of the loot and light a shuck for Texas. But fast.

A long time after, Gates saw Gordon Flynn come into the room, get something out of his bunk, and leave again. Mailer still had not come in. When he did he undressed and fell right into bed.

After Mailer left him, Dunning moved swiftly. He had to prepare for battle on two fronts. The trap had to be set for Kilkenny and he needed to be ready for Mailer's next move, whether they'd done in Kilkenny or not. He crossed the patio and rapped lightly on Lona's door. "Who's there?" she asked.

"It's me... Pa. Get your clothes an' come out of there. You sleep in the back room tonight. Beside Dave Betts."

Lona thought quickly. Why Dunning wanted her to move she could not guess, but being close to Dave would make her feel much safer. She knew the old man's affection for her, and his loyalty. "All right," she said after a minute.

"You'll be all right there. Mailer's back."

She said nothing but went to the room mentioned, barred the door, and climbed into bed. Poke Dunning walked into Lona's bedroom and sat down on the empty bed with his six-shooter in his hand.

His hunch might be wrong, but Lona was the pawn in the game now. Possession of her person was as important as possession of the ranch itself, even more important, as things stood. If Mailer came... it was almost daylight when he heard the soft rustle of grass, then heard a low voice. "Lona!"

He sat very still, and then a head and shoulders loomed at the open window. "Lona!" the voice called.

Poke Dunning fired.

Mailer, Gates, and Starr came awake on the instant. Starr thought first of a posse, Gates and Mailer were thinking of Kilkenny. Gates kicked off the blankets and reached for his boots. Mailer stared at him, then leaned back in bed. Going out into that yard was something he had no idea of doing right now. Firing a pistol and then waiting might be just the trick Poke Dunning would try. "See what it is," he said, and sagged back in his bunk.

Rusty Gates walked out into the yard, but there was no sound and no movement. He waited, then crossed the hard-packed earth of the ranch yard toward the house. He heard a faint stirring and turned toward the wing of the house. Someone had lighted a lantern, and he rounded the corner to see the dark figure of a man bending over another one on the ground.

Rusty had his gun out. "Who is it?" he demanded.

Dunning turned, saw Gates, and saw the gun. "It's Flynn," he said. "He tried to get into Lona's window and got shot."

"Shot? Lona shot Flynn?" Gates could not believe that.

He bent over the cowhand. "Dead?"

"No, he ain't, but he's bad hurt. Let's get him inside."

Poke was cursing his luck, for when he fired he was sure that it was Mailer he had under his gun. But why was Flynn here? Had Lona planned to escape?

When they put the boy down on Lona's bed, Gates worked over him, and Dunning watched. "Where do you stand in this, Gates?" Poke asked suddenly.

Rusty looked up. He had wondered if he would be asked. "Now, that's a good point, Dunning. I don't know where I stand. I don't know what the fuss is all about. However," he added, "this is a deal where I'd look to see where the money was."

"I've got it. You work for me an' you can make yourself a fast stake."

"That sounds good to me. What do I do?"

"Saddle a horse an' see that girl at the Fandango. Tell her Poke Dunning wants to see Kilkenny tomorrow at three. Then you get back here and stand ready to side me ... against anybody."

"What does it get me?" Rusty knew the question was expected.

"Two-fifty for five days. Double if you have to fight."

Rusty saddled up and rode out of the ranch but he did not ride more than a half mile before he swung off the road and headed for Monument Rock. He would

ride directly to Kilkenny. Whatever this meant he did not know, but Kilkenny could make his own decision after he apprised him of the facts.

Kilkenny heard him out in silence. The return of three men to Blue Hill when five had gone out, the shooting of Gordon Flynn. "No," Gates said, when asked, "he's not dead. But he's got a bad wound and lost a lot of blood. When I left, Dave was takin' care of him, and old Betts is a good hand with a gunshot."

Kilkenny got to his feet and paced nervously beside the fire. It was daylight now, but the morning was still cool. They wanted him there at three o'clock, and between now and three many things could happen, and Gates was here. "You get back to the ranch," he said. "You watch your chance, and if there is one, get that girl out of there. If there isn't, watch her close. Maybe it's just best to do that."

"Are you comin' at three?"

"I think so."

"It may be a trap."

"Could be. Anyway, tell him I'll be there."

He watched Rusty go with misgiving. Dunning, Mailer, Starr, and Socorro would be there to meet him, yet there seemed to be no suspicion of Rusty, and it would be only a matter of hours until he would go himself.

Over his coffee, he considered the whole setup at Blue Hill, remembering every detail of the ranch and its layout.

This was to be a showdown, he knew that. Whether or not Poke Dunning wanted to talk business, Kilkenny knew very well that if he did not agree to whatever Dunning demanded, he would have to fight his way out. Knowing this, he made plans to stay in. Dunning was going to deal the cards, but he would play his own hand the way that suited him best.

The killing of Geslin interested him. Frank Mailer was fast, for Geslin had been very fast and an excellent shot. And Mailer had killed him.

From what Gates said, they had been in some sort of a gun battle, for Ethridge, too, was dead. They had brought back sacks stuffed with money, and that might mean a holdup at any one of a dozen places.

Shortly before noon Kilkenny mounted the buckskin and left his hideout, but he did not ride out into the flatlands toward Blue Hill; instead he crossed Salt Creek Wash and rode up the canyon that opened opposite Monument Rock and ran due north. Emerging from the canyon at a place just west of Popping Rock, he struck an old trail across the highlands back of the cliffs that formed the northern boundary of the Blue Hill range. It was a trail he had used before, and one he well knew. Within an hour of easy riding, he was on the point of rocks opposite Blue Hill, and here, after concealing his horse among the piñons, he found a place on the crest of the cliffs and began to make a systematic study of the ranch through his glasses.

His point of observation could scarcely have been better, for he was at an altitude of some six thousand feet, while the ranch itself was all of five hundred feet lower and scarcely a mile away. From his vantage point in the clear mountain air, he could easily see the figures and, knowing them, could distinguish one from the other, even though features would not be discernible. Yet after fifteen minutes of careful study, he saw no one.

Becoming increasingly anxious, Kilkenny moved down a little lower and somewhat closer to the edge of the cliff, and studied the terrain still more carefully. A few of the buildings were concealed by the bulk of the nearer peak, but the house and the bunkhouse he could plainly see, and there was still no movement.

He got up at last and rode west. He had a ride of at least two miles before there was a way down from the rim, and when he made it, he was on the Old Mormon Trail. Worried, he studied the trail, but there was no evidence of any recent travel. Turning off the trail, he chose a way that would keep him close against the cliffs, where he would have the partial cover of desert brush, piñon, and fallen boulders until he could reach a point that would put the bulk of the peak between himself and the ranch buildings.

From time to time he halted and studied the ranch anew through his glasses, and there was still no movement. The place might have been deserted for years; it lay silent and crystal clear in the bright noonday sun.

Far away across the desert the heat waves danced weirdly, and the towering shoulders of Monument Rock were purple against the sky, while between rolled the salmon, pink, and shadowed magenta of the desert, flecked with islands of cloud shadow. The air was so still that one felt as if a loud voice might shatter it to fragments, or dissolve the whole scene like something reflected in the rounded surface of a soap bubble.

Uneasily, Kilkenny pushed back his hat and mopped the perspiration from his brow and face. It was very hot. No breath of wind stirred the air. He dried his palms on his handkerchief and stared thoughtfully at the silent ranch, then let the buckskin pick his way forward another hundred yards. He hesitated again, every sense alert for danger, and he loosened the guns in their holsters and squinted his green eyes hard against the glare.

He studied the ranch again, near enough now to discern the slightest movement, but there was none. Removing the glasses from his eyes, he wiped them off, then studied the ranch again. If he went much farther, he would have to ride out in the open, and a marksman atop the peak would have him in easy shooting distance. For a long time he studied the rim of the nearer peak, then the buildings and corrals of Blue Hill, yet he saw nothing.

Something was radically wrong. Something had happened, and it must have happened since Rusty left the ranch... or after Rusty returned, for there was no sign of him, either.

If it were indeed a trap, it had been set much too soon, for he was not due for almost an hour. Furthermore, they would have left somebody in sight; they would have had some natural, familiar movement to lull his suspicions. Yet there was nothing; for all the movement, the scene might have been painted on glass.

Far away over the range a lonely steer moved, heading for water, miles away. Above, the heat-dancing air, where a buzzard swung on lazy, waiting wings. Kilkenny shoved his glasses back in the saddlebag and rode forward, clinging still to the cliff shadow and its slight obscurity. Now he slid his Winchester from the scabbard and, turning the buckskin away from the cliff, rode directly across to the shadow of the peak opposite.

When he could ride no closer without presenting too large a target, he swung down from the buckskin, and speaking to him softly, he moved forward. Always light on his feet, he moved now like a wraith, then halted, scarcely forty yards away from the ranch house, to look and listen. He waited there while a man might have counted a slow fifty. There was no sound, no movement. A flat, uneasy stillness hung over the place.

What had happened?

Kilkenny arose swiftly from behind the shrub and moved with swift, silent strides to the wall of the building and along the wall to Lona's window, from which he had seen the girl's shadow on that first day before she emerged to wave to him. The window was open, and the lace curtain hung limp and lifeless in the dead, still air.

Inside the room a mirror hung on the wall, and from the side he could see it, and it gave him a view of most of the inside of the room. There was nothing. He had left his Winchester with the horse, but now he slid a Colt into his hand and stepped quickly past the window to get the view from the opposite side. The room was empty. He stepped over the sill and stood inside.

There was some blood on the sill where Flynn had been shot the previous night. The door was open on the silent, sunlit patio. Kilkenny returned his gun to his holster and crossed to the door, studying the patio.

Under the eaves of the porch hung an *olla*, its sides dark with the contents of clear, cold water. Several strings of peppers hung from the eaves across the way and a spring bubbled from the ground into a tiny pool in the center of the patio, then trickled off through a stone pipe to empty into the water trough away at the corral.

Listening, he heard nothing. Yet within any one of the half dozen windows or two doors, a gun might wait. Back inside the window where he would be invisible, either Dunning or Mailer might stand, gun in hand. A gourd dipper hung near the *olla* and another at the spring. Kilkenny's mouth was dry and he longed for a drink. His ears straining with the effort to hear some sound, he waited a moment longer, then stepped out into the patio, and crossed it, to the door opposite. As he walked he glanced sharply right toward the open side from which he could see the corrals and the stable. All was bright and still.

The kitchen was empty. He placed a hand on the coffeepot, and it seemed to be vaguely warm. Lifting the lid of the stove, he saw a dull red glow among the few coals atop the gray of ashes and the grate. He stepped past the stove and walked into the dining room, and then he stopped.

In a doorway on his left a hand was visible, lying flat and lax, palm down on the floor. It was an old hand, worn and brown.

Stepping quickly around the table, Kilkenny saw the man who lay there, his bald head rimmed with a fringe of graying hair, his shirt dark with blood, and the floor beneath him stained with it.

A six-shooter lay near his hand and he still wore the apron that marked him for who and what he was. Dave Betts was dead. He had been shot twice through the chest.

Stepping quickly past him, Kilkenny looked into the room from which Betts had apparently emerged. It was definitely bachelor quarters. Turning to the room

beside it, he found a mussed bed, and bending over, he sniffed the pillow, detecting a faint perfume. This, then, was where Lona had spent the night, but where was she?

And where were they all?

Stepping past the old man's body, Kilkenny moved the length of the long table and stepped through the open door into the large living room.

No one. This, too, was empty and still.

Somewhere, thunder rumbled distantly, mumbling in the far-off hills like a giant disturbed in his sleep. A faint breath of wind coming alive stirred out over the desert, and he heard the rustle of the peppers on their strings in the patio, and the curtain stirred faintly as though moved by a ghostly hand.

Kilkenny mopped his face of sweat and moved carefully across the room. The wind stirred again, and suddenly he heard another sound, a sound that sent a faint chill over him, making his shoulders twitch with the feeling of it. It was the sound of a strained rope, a rope that hung taut and hard, creaking a little, with a burden.

He stepped quickly to the door, his mouth dry. As though drawn by foreknowledge, his eyes went to the stable, whose wide-open door he could now see. From the cross beam over the high door, made high to admit racks of hay, he saw a long and heavy form suspended by a short rope.

Nearer, sprawled upon the ground in the open, lay an outstretched body. Gun in hand, Kilkenny stepped quickly outside, his eyes shooting right and left, then he ran across to the stable. One glance at the face, and he straightened, sorely puzzled. The man was a total stranger!

Crossing to the barn, he found where the rope was tied and unfastened it, lowering the man who had been hanged. His spurs jingled as the dead man's heels touched the ground. One glance at the blue face and he knew. It was Socorro.

Walking to the bunkhouse, he hesitated, for the steps were bloodstained. Then he moved inside. On the floor before him lay another stranger, his body fairly riddled with bullets, and against the end of the room sat Sam Starr, his head hanging on his chest, guns lax near his hands, and his shirt and trousers soaked in blood.

Crouching beside him, Kilkenny lifted Starr's chin, and miraculously, the man's lids stirred, and his lips worked to form words. "Shot... me," he whispered, his lips working at the words he could not shape, "Mulhavens."

Kilkenny motioned to the dead man inside the door. "Is that a Mulhaven?"

Starr indicated assent. "Tough," he said, "plenty... tough."

"Where's Dunning?"

Starr shook his head.

Kilkenny grasped the dying man's shoulder. "Tell me, man! Where's that girl! Where's Lona? Dammit, speak up!"

Starr's eyes forced themselves open and he struggled to speak. "D... d... don't know. Poke, he... away."

"Poke Dunning has her," Kilkenny said. "Is that it?"

Starr nodded. "Mailer's craz... y. Plumb gone bats..." Sam Starr's voice trailed away, and he fainted.

Carefully, Kilkenny eased the man to a prone position and grabbed a pillow for his head from the nearest bunk.

Swiftly, he worked over the dying man, doing what he could to ease his position and his pain. Then he hurried from the bunkhouse and made a quick survey of the ranch.

He found no one else. Four dead men and the dying Sam Starr. Dunning, Mailer, Lona, Rusty Gates, and Gordon Flynn were all gone.

Hurrying back with a bucket of cool water, he found Starr conscious. Holding a gourd dipper to the man's mouth, he helped him drink. Starr looked his gratitude. "Mailer's gone after... after your girl," he gasped. "He's crazy!"

"My girl?" Kilkenny was dumbfounded. "At Salt Creek?"

Starr nodded weakly. "An'... an' the Mulhavens are after G... G... Gates."

"What?" Kilkenny sprang to his feet. "But he wasn't an outlaw!"

"You try tellin' 'em that!" Starr's face was turning gray.

Kilkenny stood flat-footed and still above the dying man. Frank Mailer, kill-crazy and full of fury, was gone to Salt Creek after Nita. Somewhere, Poke Dunning was escaping with Lona, and his friend Rusty Gates, the man who had come into this only to help him, and probably with a wounded man for company, was riding to escape a blood-hungry posse whose reason had been lost in a lust for revenge for the killing of their own friends and brothers!

Kilkenny knew of the Mulhavens. A family of tough Irishmen, three of them veterans of the Indian wars. Hard, honest, capable men. He knew, too, the men of Aztec Crossing, and they were not men to take the blood-letting Mailer had visited upon them without retaliation. If they had trailed those men to this ranch, they would regard all upon it as tarred with the same brush and would make a clean sweep. Two of their group had died here, and that would make matters no easier.

Leaving Starr, he dashed outside and stopped in the sunlight. Where to go? Nita was in danger. Rusty was being pursued by a hanging mob, and Lona...

Kilkenny forced himself to coldness. Brigo was at Salt Creek with Nita, and so was Cain Brockman. He would have to gamble that they were protection enough. Lona, wherever she was, must wait, for it was not immediately apparent what danger she might be in. Rusty had evidently taken Flynn and somehow managed an escape, knowing that the wounded Flynn would certainly be taken as one of the outlaws. Rusty had come into this only to help him, and to have him hanged by mistake would be a horrible responsibility.

He took swift strides toward the corral, glancing over the remaining horses. Rusty's mount was not there.

Turning, he whistled shrilly, and in a moment saw Buck come trotting around the building toward him.

Again in the saddle, Kilkenny began a painstaking sweep of the ranch, yet his job was in a measure simplified by knowing that Gates must make his escape by some route that would take him from the rear of the buildings. Forcing himself to take his time, Lance Kilkenny soon found the tracks of Gates's horse and another. He studied the hoofprints of this other horse carefully, then mounted and worked the trail out of the brush and rocks to a shallow dip south and west of Blue Hill.

Apparently, Rusty was heading for the rough country of Malpais Arroyo, and walking his horses. Was that because of the wounded Flynn? Or to keep from attracting attention?

He was something over a mile south of the ranch when a bunch of tracks made by hard-running horses came in from the north. Lance felt his stomach turn over within him. The Aztec posse! They had seen them and were in pursuit. Touching a spur to the buckskin, he went into a lope, then a run. The tracks were easy to follow now. The wind whipped at his face, and thunder rumbled over the mountains beyond Monument Rock. The brim of his hat slapped back against his skull, but the buckskin, loving to run, ate into the distance with swiftly churning hoofs.

The trail dipped into the arroyo and led along it, and heedless of ambush, thinking only of his friend, Kilkenny rode on, his face grim and hard. He knew mobs and how relentless and unreasoning they could be. There would be no reasoning with this bunch. If he met them, it could well be a payoff in blood and bullets. He had never, to his knowledge, killed an honest man, but to save his friend he would do just that.

Suddenly he saw that the pace of the horses he followed had slowed, and he drew up himself, walking his horse, and listening. Then, carried by the echoing walls of the arroyo that had now deepened to a canyon, he heard a yell. Soon somebody called, "Boost him up here, durn it! Let's get this job over with!"

The voices were just around a bend in the rocks ahead. His stomach muscles tight and hard, his mouth dry, Kilkenny slid from his horse. His hands went to walnut-butted guns and loosened them in their holsters, then he moved around the bend and into sight.

There, beneath a huge old cottonwood, stood Rusty Gates, and beside him, Gordon Flynn. The wounded man was being held up by a man who stood directly in front of him. There were seven men here, seven hard, desperate men.

Flynn's eyes went past them and he saw Kilkenny.

"Kilkenny!" he yelled.

As one man, the posse turned to face the owner of that dread name.

He spoke, and his voice was clear and strong. "Step back from those men, damn you for a lot of brainless killers! Get away, or I'll take the lot of you!"

Chapter 6

Surprise held the men of the posse immobile, and in the moment of stillness Kilkenny spoke again. His voice was sharp and clear. "You've got the wrong men there! While you try to string up a couple of honest cowhands, the real killers are gettin' away!"

"Oh, yeah?" Terry Mulhaven's voice was sharp. He had suddenly decided he was not going to be bluffed, Kilkenny or no Kilkenny. "You keep out of this! Or maybe," he added, his voice lowering a note, "you're one of them?"

Kilkenny did not reply to him. Instead, he asked quickly, "Did any of you see the holdup? Actually see it?"

"I did," Worth said sharply. "I saw it."

"All right, then. Look again at these men. Were they among those you saw?"

Worth hesitated, glancing uneasily at Terry Mulhaven. "The redhead wasn't. I saw no redheaded man, but we wounded two of them, anyway, and this man is wounded." He gestured at Flynn. "That's enough for me."

"It's not enough!" Kilkenny returned crisply. "If all you want to do is kill, then kill each other or try killing me. But if you want justice, then try thinking rather than stringing up the first men you meet!"

"All right, mister. You tell us how we should be thinking. You talk quick, though."

"That man was shot by Poke Dunning when he tried to help a girl get away from that bunch of outlaws." Kilkenny spoke swiftly, for he had them listening now, and he knew western men. Quick to anger and quick to avenge an insult or a killing, they were also, given a chance, men of good heart and goodwill, and essentially reasonable men. They were also men of humor. Such men had been known to let a guilty man go free when he made some humorous remark with a noose around his neck, or under a gun. They respected courage, and given a chance to cool down, they would judge fairly.

He had them talking now, and he meant to keep them talking. "The men who rode to the Crossing were led by Frank Mailer, the worst of the lot," he continued rapidly, arresting and holding their attention by his crisp, sharp speech and the confidence of his knowledge. "With him rode Geslin, Sam Starr, Socorro, an' Scar Ethridge.

"Ethridge never came back. You hanged Socorro and killed Starr at the ranch. You also killed an honest man, Dave Betts."

"We got Ethridge at the Crossin'," Mulhaven said, "but if that honest man was the hombre on the floor inside the house, we didn't kill him. He was dead when we got there!"

This was news to Kilkenny. Apparently Dave had given his life in trying to protect Lona Markham. Dunning had evidently carried her off.

"Mailer's still loose and I'm after him myself," Kilkenny added. "These two men were the only honest hands on the place aside from that old man you found dead."

Bill Worth walked over to Flynn and took the noose from his neck, then he removed the loop from Rusty's neck. "Glad you showed up," he said shortly. "I tried to tell these hombres that redhead wasn't among 'em!"

Kilkenny had no time for conversation. "Rusty," he said swiftly, "get Flynn back to the ranch. I'm ridin' to Salt Creek after Mailer. Then we'll have to hunt Poke Dunning."

Turning abruptly, he swung into his saddle, and with a wave at the posse and his friends, he was off at a dead run.

Terry Mulhaven stared after him, then mopped his brow. "Man!" he said. "When I turned around an' looked into them green eyes, I figured my number was up for sure!" He glanced at Rusty. "Is he as fast as they say?"

"Faster," Gates said wryly.

Bill Worth looked at the Mulhavens. "Let's pick up the bodies," he said gently, "and head for home. The folks will be worried."

“Yeah”—Terry nodded—“we better.” He glanced sheepishly at Rusty and Flynn. “No hard feelin’s?”

Gates stared at him, then his red face broke into a grin. “Not right now,” he said, “but a few minutes ago I was some sore!”

In a tight knot, the posse headed north for the ranch, and later, with the bodies of the two fallen men across their saddles, they started toward home. They rode slowly and they talked but little, and as a result they were startled by a sudden grunt from their Apache tracker. “Look!” he said. “Big red hoss!”

They looked, and the tracks were there. Terry Mulhaven glanced at his brother, then at Worth. “Well,” he said, “we know that track. We followed it all the way from Aztec. Let’s see what we find this time!”

Grimly, they turned their horses down the trail made by Frank Mailer’s horse. This time somebody would pay the cost of the heavy burden the two lead horses carried, the burden left upon them by the murdered men in the bank.

Due east of Monument Rock and the hideout used by Kilkenny was an old prospector’s cabin. This adobe shelter had been used by drifting cowhands, by rustlers and shepherders as a temporary shelter, but for some years now it had been passed by and forgotten. It was huddled in a tight little corner of rock far down one of the southern-reaching tentacles of Salt Creek Wash, and here Poke Dunning had taken Lona Markham.

She had not gone willingly. In the confusion of the Blue Hill ranch gun battle, Poke had made his move. His first thought had been to try to put a bullet in Frank Mailer, but as he moved to the window that faced the bunkhouse and the ongoing fracas, rifle in hand, he’d spotted big Frank sliding down the side of the wash that ran across one side of the ranch yard. He had a set of saddlebags over his shoulder and was out of sight before Dunning could shoot. Poke figured that the saddlebags probably held the loot from Mailer’s robbery.

Realizing that no matter what happened during the shoot-out, he’d still have Mailer to deal with, Dunning headed for Dave Betts’s room and Lona. Knowing that he had only moments before the posse turned its attention on the main house, he plunged into the room.

“Out the window, quick!” he snapped. “We’re gettin’ out of here.”

“You go. I’m staying here.” Lona had made the mistake of thinking that Kilkenny had come, and although she had been afraid because of all the shooting, she was now sure that if Poke was running, then Kilkenny must be winning.

“Dammit, girl!” He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her toward the window.

“You hold up there, Mr. Markham!” Dave Betts was frightened by the fear he saw in Lona’s eyes ... something was wrong here. He grabbed Poke’s shoulder.

Turning, Poke drew his right-hand gun and shot Dave twice in the chest; then, as Lona opened her mouth to scream he knocked her unconscious with a diagonal swipe of the barrel. He shoved her out the window, and then dropping out after her, he headed for the corrals.

In the remote cabin, never visited in these days by anyone, he left Lona tied securely.

He had not been able to escape the ranch on either his or Lona's personal mount. Her horse, Zusa, was essential to his new plan. He was tired of playing games with Mailer and Lona and everybody else. Lona was going to die. The two of them escaped the confusion back at the ranch. Frank Mailer would be revealed to be the vicious bank robber that he was, but in their escape there would be a tragic accident... a riding accident. His daughter would pass away and no one would ask any questions about his continuing to live on the ranch. There might eventually be some documents to be filed, but the right kind of lawyer could handle that.

He was headed now for Blue Hill, intending to arrive there just after dark. With this idea in mind, he cut an old trail south and rode on until he was in the tall shadow of Chimney Rock. He drew up and got stiffly from the saddle.

This place was lonely and secure. He would wait here until almost dark, then he was going to sneak in and get Lona's horse... once he'd done that, he could take her out, kill her with a blow to the neck, and fake the fall. Seating himself on the ground in the shadow of the Chimney, he filled his pipe and began to smoke.

It bothered him to contemplate the idea of murdering the girl that had lived as his daughter for so many years. She'd always been a tool, but he would admit that he was fond of her. For a few minutes he considered taking the money he'd hidden away and starting over somewhere else, but there wasn't quite as much as he'd have liked, and after all, he'd never been a quitter.

Nearby, a huge old cottonwood rustled its leaves and he leaned back, knocking out his pipe. There would be a couple of hours to kill, and he was in no hurry. He would sleep a little while. His lids became heavy, then closed, his big hands grew lax in his lap, and he leaned comfortably back among the rocks. It was a joke on Mailer that he had taken the big bay, Frank's favorite horse. The cottonwood had a huge limb that stretched toward him, and it rustled its leaves, gently lulling him to sleep.

He did not hear the slowly walking horses, even when a hoof clicked on stone. He was tired, and not as young as he once had been, but no thought of murdered men behind him, or of the girl, bound and helpless in a remote cabin, disturbed him. He slept on. He did not awaken even when the silent group of men faced him in a crescent of somber doom. Silent, hard-faced men who knew that blood bay, and carried with them the burden of their dead. It was the creak of saddle leather when Terry Mulhaven dismounted that awakened him.

Five men faced him on horseback, another on foot. Still another had thrown a rope over that big cottonwood limb, and Poke Dunning, who had lived most of his adult years with the knowledge that such a scene might be prepared for him at any moment, came awake suddenly and sharply, and his hand flashed for a gun.

He was lying on his side, his left gun beneath him, and somehow, in stirring around, his right gun had slipped from the holster. Not all the way, but so far back that when he grabbed it, he grabbed it around the cylinder, and not the butt.

The difference might seem infinitesimal. At this moment it was not. At this moment it was the difference between a fighting end and a hanging. Pat Mulhaven's rifle spoke, and the hand that held the gun was shattered and bloody.

Gripping his bloody hand, Poke Dunning stared up at them. "What do you want me for?" he protested. "You've got the wrong man!"

“Yeah?” Pat Mulhaven sneered. “We heard that one before! We know that horse! We know you!”

“But listen!” he protested frantically. “Wait, now!” He got clumsily to his feet, his left hand gripping the bloody right. Great crimson drops welled from it and dripped slowly from his finger ends to the parched grass and sand beneath him.

He started to speak again, and then something came over him, something he had never experienced before. It was a sense of utter futility, and with it resignation. Roughly, they seized him.

“Give me a gun,” he said harshly, “with my left hand! I’ll kill the lot of you! Just my left hand!” he said, his fierce old eyes flaring at them.

“Set him on his hoss,” Bill Worth said calmly, “behind the saddle.”

Sometime later they rode on, turning their horses again toward home, and walking slowly, their task accomplished, with the feeling that their dead might ride on toward that dim cow-country Valhalla, attended by the men who had handled the guns.

Behind them, the shadow of Chimney Rock grew wider and longer, and the leaves of the cottonwood rustled gently, whispering one to the other as only cottonwood leaves will do, in just that way. And among them, his sightless eyes lifted skyward as if to see the last of the sunlit sky, and the last of the white clouds, looking through the cottonwood leaves, was Poke Dunning.

The point shadows of night had infiltrated the streets of Salt Creek when Lance Kilkenney came again to the town. The long-legged buckskin entered the dusty street with a swinging trot and did not stop until he reached the hitching rail of the Fandango. Yet already Kilkenney knew much. He knew that nothing had happened here tonight.

Before the Express, Lisa, the Portuguese, was sweeping the boardwalk, and he glanced up to see Kilkenney ride in; then, unaware of his identity, he returned to his sweeping. Before Starr’s Saloon, Al Starr smoked his pipe, unaware that his brother was at this moment lying dead and chock-full of Aztec Crossing lead on the bunkhouse floor at Blue Hill. At the Fandango, Cain Brockman was arranging his stock for a big night.

All was sleepy, quiet, and peaceful. Although it was early, a lamp glowed here and there from a cabin window, and there was a light in the Express. The advancing skirmishers of darkness had halted here and there in the cover of buildings, gathering force for an invasion of the street. Lance swung down, spoke softly to the buckskin, and stepped up onto the boardwalk. There he turned again, and swept the street with a quick, sharp, all-encompassing glance. Then he pushed through the swinging doors into the almost empty saloon.

Brockman looked up quickly and jerked his head toward the door where Brigo sat, but Kilkenney walked directly to the bar, waving aside the bottle that Cain immediately lifted. “Has Mailer been in?”

Cain’s eyes sparked. “No, ain’t seen him. What’s up?”

“Hell to pay!” Swiftly, Kilkenney sketched out what had happened. “He was headed for here,” he added.

"Let him come!" Cain said harshly. "I've got an express gun loaded with buckshot."

Brigo was on his feet and coming over. Leaving Cain to tell him what had happened, Kilkenny went swiftly to Nita's door and rapped. At her reply, he opened the door and entered.

She stood across the room, tall, lovely, exciting. He went to her at once and took her hands, then stood and held them as he looked at her, his heart swelling within him, feeling now as no other woman had ever made him feel, as none ever could, none but this Spanish and Irish girl from the far borderlands. "Nita, I've got to find Lona and Frank Mailer... then I'm going to come back, and when I do, we're going to make this a deal. If you'll have me, we'll be married. We'll go on farther west, we'll go somewhere where nobody's ever heard of Kilkenny, and where we can have some peace, and be happy."

"You've got to go now?"

"Yes."

It was like her that she understood. She touched him lightly with her lips. "Then go ... but hurry back."

He left it like that and walked back into the saloon. Brigo and Cain turned to look at him. With them was a tall, sandy-haired cowhand.

"This fellow says he saw Dunning and Lona riding east. He was some distance off, but he said it looked like she was tied. He lost them in the canyons of Salt Creek."

"All right. We'll have a look." Kilkenny took in the sandy-haired hand with a sharp, penetrating glance. This was a good man, a steady man. "You want to ride to Blue Hill and tell Rusty? Then if you want, have a look. That girl's in danger."

"I'll look," Sandy said. "I've heard about the fightin' this mornin'."

"You be careful," Kilkenny warned. "Poke Dunning is handy with a gun."

"I know him," Sandy said shortly. "We had trouble over some strays, once. He's right handy with a runnin' iron, too."

Where to look for Lona was the next thing. While he was looking for her he had to be cautious not to run afoul of Mailer. The man was dangerous, and he would be doubly so now.

"Night and day," Kilkenny told Cain and Brigo, "one of you be around. Never let up."

In the morning Kilkenny mounted the buckskin. He returned to the house at Blue Hill and scouted around, but the profusion of tracks told him nothing. Working the trail a bit farther out proved helpful in that he found the tracks of several riders. They seemed to be scouting around some and he figured they were out looking for the lost girl, same as he was. Their tracks had obliterated the original trail and so he followed them quickly, covering ground as fast as possible.

He had stopped at a well due west of Chimney Rock when he saw a rider approaching. It was Sandy. His face was drawn and gray. "Been ridin'," he said. "Rusty is out, too. An' that Flynn."

"How is he?"

"In no shape, but he won't quit. Head poundin' like a drum, I can tell. Pale around the gills. We tracked Poke as far as Monument Rock, then lost him. Other tracks wiped his out."

"The posse, maybe?"

"I reckon." Sandy wiped his chin after a long drink. "Maybe they got him."

"If they found him, somebody is dead." Kilkenny knew the men. "They didn't like it even when I stopped them hanging the wrong men. They wanted an eye for an eye."

"Dunning won't be taken easy," Sandy said. "Where you headin'?"

"Northeast. Look," he added, "why don't you swing back and follow the posse tracks? If they turn off the route back to Aztec, you've got a lead."

Sandy turned his bronc. "See you," he said, and cantered off.

Kilkenny wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. His eyes were dark with worry. Someplace in these bleak hills that girl was with Dunning. Someplace Mailer lurked. Neither was pleasant to think of. He swung into the saddle and glanced northeast. The tower of Chimney Rock loomed against the sky, beyond it the mountains, and there was a trail into them by that route. He turned the buckskin.

He rode with a Winchester across his saddle, his eyes searching every bit of cover, his ears and eyes alert. He saw nothing, heard nothing.

On a point of rocks near Eagle Nest Arroyo, Frank Mailer, his face covered with a stubble of coarse black beard, watched Kilkenny riding north through his glasses, and he swore softly. Twice, the gunfighter had been close to him, and each time Mailer had held off rather than dare a confrontation. Being on the dodge had him worried, for too long he'd lived the easy life at Blue Hill, taking off to do jobs outside the territory but always with the safety of Dunning's ranch to return to if things got bad. He had learned of what had happened, knew of the end of Sam Starr and Socorro. He had found the body of Poke Dunning, lynched for the crimes that he, Mailer, had committed, but strangely he felt depressed. There was the man that he had wanted dead, and he was dead. He had the nine thousand dollars from the Aztec bank, a good horse, and a beltful of ammunition. But the good old days were gone. The hanging of Poke Dunning affected him as nothing else had; there was an inevitableness about it that frightened him.

Frank Mailer, six feet five in his socks and weighing over two hundred and fifty pounds, walked back to his gray horse. He stood with a hand on the pommel, and something was gone out of him. For the first time since he was a youngster, he was really on the dodge. He was running.

Poke had run, too, and it hadn't done him any good. Dunning had beat the game for years, and now look at him. Somehow it always caught up with you. Frank Mailer heaved himself into the saddle and turned his horse across country.

The sight of Dunning's body had even driven the lush beauty of Nita Riordan from his mind. He rode on, sullen and dazed; for the first time he had a feeling of being hemmed in, trapped.

Kilkenny was hunting something; was it him? Now there was something he could do. He could seek out a showdown with Kilkenny and beat him. There was a

deep, burning resentment against the man. If he had stayed out of it, all would have been well.

A mere half dozen miles north, Kilkenny rounded a sandstone promontory and saw just beyond a horseman picking his way over the rounded gray stones and gravel of a wash. The man looked up and waved. It was Sandy again. "Found her," he said when they were closer. "Flynn found her. She was tied in a shack back in the hills. Dunning left her there with water and a little grub. Never saw nothin' like it. She was tied in the middle of the 'dobe with ropes running around her body an' off in all four directions. She couldn't move an inch one way or the other, an' couldn't get free, but she had her hands loose. Those ropes were made fast in the walls an' windows, knots so far away she couldn't reach 'em. She picked at one of the ropes until her fingers were all raw, tryin' to pull it apart."

"She's all right?"

"I reckon so. They took her to Blue Hill." Sandy eyed him thoughtfully. "Dunning left her the day before yesterday. You ain't seen him?"

"No. Nor Mailer."

"I'm headin' home." Sandy was regretful. "The boss will be raisin' hell. See you." He turned his horse, then glanced back. "Luck," he said.

Kilkenny sat his horse for a moment, then turned and started south again. Now he was hunting Mailer, not to kill him, unless he had to, but to make sure he was gone, out of the country, before he relaxed his guard.

"He will want to see," Kilkenny told Buck. "If he's on the dodge but hasn't left the country, he'll have headed for the ridgelines."

Shadows grew long and crawled up the opposite wall of the mountains, and Kilkenny turned aside, and in a hollow in the rocks, he bedded down. He built no fire, but ate a little jerked beef and some hardtack before crawling into his blankets.

He was out at dawn, and had gone only a few miles when he saw the tracks of a big horse cutting across his trail. A big horse... to carry a big man. Kilkenny turned the buckskin abruptly. He had no doubt that this was Frank Mailer's horse. It was rough terrain into which the trail was leading, country that offered shelter for an ambush. Yet he followed on, taking his time, following the sign that grew more and more difficult. A bruised branch of sage, a scratch on a rock, a small stone rolled from its place, leaving the earth slightly damp where it had rested but a short time before. Once he saw a scar atop a log lying across the trail where a trailing hoof had struck, knocking the loose bark free and leaving a scar upon the bark and the tiny webs in the cracks beneath the bark.

It was a walking trail. Whether Mailer knew he was tracked or not, once in the mountains he had been exceedingly careful, and it could not be followed at a faster pace than a walk. Sometimes Kilkenny had to halt, searching for the line of travel, but always there was something, and his keen eyes read sign where another might have seen nothing, and they pushed on.

Kilkenny drew up, and sitting his horse close against a clump of piñon, he rolled a smoke. His mouth tasted bad and his hair was uncombed. He squinted his eyes against the morning glare of the sun and studied the hills before him. He put the cigarette in his lips and touched a match to it, feeling the hard stubble of

beard on his chin as he did so. His shirt felt hot and had the sour smell of stale sweat from much riding without time to change. He felt drawn and hard himself, and he worked his fingers to get the last of the morning damp out of them.

Then he rode out and he met the hard, flat sound of a rifle shot and felt the whip of it, barely ahead of his hat brim. He left the saddle, Winchester in hand, but there was no further shot. Staring up at the rocks, his eyes hard and narrow, he waited. There was no sound.

The warm morning sun lay lazily upon the sandstone and sage; a lizard came out from under a rock, and darted over another rock that was green with copper stain and paused there. Lying where he was, Kilkenny could see the beat of its tiny heart against its side. Then something flickered and he saw a vanishing leg and fired quickly, the .44 thundering in the depths of the canyon.

Chips flew from the rock where the leg had vanished and from the opposite side of the rock where his second shot had struck. Then he heard the sound of a running horse, and he came out and climbed into the saddle.

In a few minutes he had found the trail. A big horse carrying a heavy man and running swiftly. He moved after it, riding more warily now, knowing that Mailer knew he was on the trail, and that from now on it would be doubly hard.

He forded Coal Mine Creek, carrying little water now, and headed for the five-hundred-foot wall of the Hogback, a high, serrated ridge biting with its red saw teeth at the brassy sky. Then, suddenly, as though in a painting, horse and man were outlined sharp against the sky. An instant only, but Kilkenny's rifle leaped to his shoulder and the shot cracked out, echoing and reechoing from the wall of the Hogback. Kilkenny saw the horse stumble, then go down, and the man spring clear. He fired again, but knew he had missed.

Coming up through the brush, he dismounted near the fallen horse and returned his rifle to its boot. The Hogback reared above him in a brown and broken-toothed height that offered a thousand places of concealment. Kilkenny dug into his saddlebags and got out his moccasins. Leaving his boots slung on the pommel, he moved out after Mailer on foot.

There was no way of telling how he had gone, or where. Yet Kilkenny moved on, working his way in among the boulders. Then, at a momentary pause, he saw some birds fly up and directed his course that way, but working to get a little higher on the cliff. He was on a narrow ledge, some seventy feet above the jagged rocks below, when he heard a low call. Startled, he looked up, to see Mailer on a ledge some fifty yards higher ahead of him.

The man was smiling, and as he smiled he lifted his pistol. Kilkenny drew left-handed and snapped a shot. It was a fast draw and the shot was more to move Mailer than with the expectation of a hit. Mailer lunged sidewise and his own shot clipped the rocks above Kilkenny and spat dirt and gravel into his face.

A small landslide had scoured out a hollow in the mountain, and Kilkenny started up it. The climb was steep and a misstep might send him shooting all the way to the bottom, but the soft moccasins gave him a good toehold. When he reached the higher ledge he was panting and winded.

The sun was blazing hot here, and even the rocks were hot under his hands. The burned red sandstone was dotted with juniper and it broke off in a steep slope. Steep, but not a cliff. He moved up behind a juniper and studied the

mountain carefully. All was hot and still. Sweat smarted his eyes and he rubbed them out, then mopped the sweat from his brow and cheeks.

Overhead, an optimistic buzzard circled in widening sweeps. Far away over the valley that lay in the distance was Blue Hill. Almost due west was Salt Creek. A thin trail of smoke lifted near the town. Below, the terrain was broken into canyons and arroyos, and the color shaded from the deep green of the juniper to the gray-green of sage, and from the pale pinks and yellows of the faded sand to the deep burned reds and magentas of the rock.

Some thirty yards away a tree had died and the dry white bones of its skeleton lay scattered in a heap. Nearby a pack rat had built a mound of branches in a clump of manzanita. Kilkenny pulled his hat brim down to shade his eyes and moved out cautiously, walking on his cat feet across the mountainside.

Ahead of him a startled jackrabbit suddenly sprang from the ground and charged full tilt right at him. Kilkenny whirled aside and felt the blast of a bullet by his face. He started forward, running swiftly, and saw Frank Mailer spring up, gun in hand. Mailer fired and missed, and Kilkenny's shot blasted... too quick, but it cut through Mailer's shirt and then the man dove for him.

Kilkenny fired again, but whether he scored or not he had no idea, for he sprang forward and smashed a driving blow to Mailer's face. The punch was a wicked one and it caught the big man lunging in, caught the corner of his mouth and tore the flesh, so that Mailer screamed. Then he wheeled and grabbed Kilkenny's throat, wrenching him backward. Lance Kilkenny kicked his feet high and went over with Mailer, the sudden yielding carrying the big man off balance. Both went down and Mailer came up, clawing for his pistol, and Kilkenny drew his left-hand gun and fired. Mailer went to his knees, then grabbed wildly and caught Kilkenny's ankle. As Lance came down he lunged to his feet and dove for shelter in a nest of boulders. Flat on the ground, Kilkenny crawled to retrieve his gun, then loaded the empty chambers. Then he saw blood on the ground, two bright crimson stains, fresh blood!

A shot kicked dirt in his teeth and he spat it out and shot back, then lunged to his feet, his own position being too exposed, and sprang for the rocks and shelter.

He lit right into Mailer and the big man came up with a grunt and chopped for Kilkenny's skull with a pistol barrel. Bright lights exploded in his head and he felt his knees melting under him and slashed out with his own pistol, laying it across Mailer's face. He hit ground, heard an explosion, and Mailer fell on him.

Panting, bloody, and drunk with fury and pain, Frank Mailer leaped to his feet and stood swaying, a thin trickle of blood coming from a blue hole under his collarbone. He lunged at Kilkenny.

Exhausted, beaten, and punch-drunk himself, Kilkenny swung wildly and his fist connected with a sound like a rifle shot striking mud, and Mailer stopped, teetered, and fell.

Kilkenny backed up, his chest heaving, his lungs screaming for air, his skull humming with the blow he had recently taken. He caught up a gun and turned just as Mailer rolled on his back, a gun also in his hand. Both guns bellowed at once, and Kilkenny was knocked back on his heels, but as he staggered he pulled his gun down and fired again.

Where Mailer's ear had been there was blood, and the big man, seemingly indestructible, was getting up. With a wild, desperate kind of fury, Kilkenny flung himself on the rising man, and he heard guns bellowing, whether his own or Mailer's or both, he did not know, and then Mailer rolled free and fell away from the boulders. Slowly, ponderously, at each roll seemingly about to stop, the big man's body rolled over and over down the slope.

Fascinated, Kilkenny stared after him. Suddenly the man caught himself, and then, as if by magic, he got his hands under him. Something inside of Kilkenny screamed, *No! No!* and then he saw Mailer come to his feet, still gripping a gun.

Mailer swayed drunkenly and tried to fire, but the gun was empty. His huge body, powerful even when shot and battered, swayed but remained erect. Then, fumbling at his belt for cartridges, he began, like a drunken man trying to thread a needle, to load his gun. Kilkenny stared at him in astonishment, his own mind wandering in a sort of a sunlit, delirious world. Mailer faced him and the gun lifted, and Kilkenny felt the butt of his own gun jump and Mailer's hips jerked back grotesquely and he went up on his tiptoes. Then his gun spat into the gravel at his feet and he fell facedown on the slope.

When Kilkenny opened his eyes again, it was dark and piercing cold. A long wind moaned over the mountaintop and he was chilled to the bone. He was very weak and his head hummed. How badly he was wounded he had no idea, but he knew he could stand little of this cold.

Near the pack rat's nest he found some leaves that crackled under his touch. And shivering with such violence that his teeth rattled and his fingers could scarcely find the matches, he struck and pushed the match into the leaves. The flames caught and in a moment the nest was crackling and blazing.

He knew he had been hit once, and perhaps twice. He had a feeling he was badly wounded, and how long he could survive on this mountaintop he did not know. He did know that it was in view of Salt Creek, if anyone happened to be outside. The flames caught the gray, dead wood and blazed high and he lay there, watching the inverted cone of flame climbing up toward the stars, filled with a blank cold and emptiness.

Finally, as the fire died and its little warmth dissipated, he turned and crawled back among the boulders and lay there, panting hoarsely and shivering again with cold.

When he got his eyes open again, the sky was faintly gray. He could distinguish a few things around him and there were here and there a few scattered sticks. He got them together with a handful of grass and put them on the coals of last night's fire, then cupped his hands above the small flame. He felt a raw, gnawing pain in his side and his face was stiff and his hands were clumsy. Overhead, a few stars paled and vanished like moths flying into smoke, and he added another small stick and felt for his gun. It was gone. He moved, scraping the fire along until he was beneath the dead tree. Slowly he built up the fire around its dried-out trunk, and as it caught he rolled backward, away from the flames. He lay there as the white branches went up in a rush of smoke and flame, and as he passed out he prayed for help.

His eyes flickered open again at a sun-brightened world and he saw a huge turkey buzzard hunched in a tree not fifty yards away. He yelled and waved an arm, but the buzzard did not move. It sat there, waiting, and then its head came up, and it launched itself on lazy wings and floated off over the desert.

Kilkenny lay still, staring up into the brassy vault of the sky, his mind floating in a half-world between delirium and death. Out of it floated a voice, saying, "Here's a hat!"

And then another voice. "They can't be up there! It ain't reasonable!"

There was a long silence, and suddenly his eyes flashed open. That was no delirium! Somebody was searching! Hunting for him! He tried to call out, but his voice would muster no strength, and then he gathered himself, and picking up a small stick from near the fire, he threw it.

"He's got to be here. You saw all that smoke an' that's Buck down there, an' where you find that horse he ain't far away!"

"Do you see him?" The voice was unfamiliar, sarcastic. "I don't."

Then the other. "I'm goin' on top!"

"You're crazy!"

A long time later a loud whoop and then running feet. "Here's Mailer! Hey, would you look at that? Man, what happened up here, anyway?"

He tried to call out again, and this time they came hurrying. Cain Brockman, Rusty Gates, Gordon Flynn, his head bandaged and his face thin, and with them several men from town. "You all right, Lance?" Gates pleaded, his face redder still with worry.

"What do you think?" Kilkenny muttered.

And when he opened his eyes again, he was lying in darkness between clean white sheets and he felt vastly relaxed and comfortable. And Nita came in, walking softly, and sat down beside him. "Everything all right?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," he whispered. "As long as when I'm well we're goin' to California to sit by the sea."

She smiled. "There's a little port town called San Pedro, and I expect the railroad workers and dock men will want a gambling hall as much as anyone." She kissed him gently. "When I see you're better, I'll have Cain start packing the wagons."

