

The Captives

by Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013

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Chapter 1

HE COULD HEAR the stagecoach, the faraway creaking and the muffled rumble of it, and he was thinking: It's almost an hour early. Why should it be if it left Contention on schedule? His name was Pat Brennan. He was lean and almost tall, with a deeply tanned, pleasant face beneath the straight hat brim low over his eyes, and he stood next to his saddle, which was on the ground, with the easy, hip-shot slouch of a rider. A Henry rifle was in his right hand and he was squinting into the sun glare, looking up the grade to the rutted road that came curving down through the spidery Joshua trees.

He lowered the Henry rifle, stock down, and let it fall across the saddle, and kept his hand away from the Colt holstered on his right leg. A man could get shot standing next to a stage road out in the middle of nowhere with a rifle in his hand.

Then, seeing the coach suddenly against the sky, billowing dust hanging over it, he felt relief and smiled to himself and raised his arm to wave as the coach passed through the Joshuas.

As the pounding wood, iron, and three-team racket of it came swaying toward him, he raised both arms and felt a sudden helplessness as he saw that the driver was making no effort to stop the teams. Brennan stepped back quickly, and the coach rushed past him, the driver, alone on the boot, bending forward and down to look at him. Brennan cupped his hands and called, „Rintooooon!“

The driver leaned back with the reins high and through his fingers, his boot pushing against the brake lever, and his body half turned to look back over the top of the Concord. Brennan swung the saddle up over his shoulder and started after the coach as it ground to a stop.

He saw the company name, *hatch & hodes*, and just below it, Number 4 stenciled on the varnished door; then from a side window, he saw a man staring at him irritably as he approached. Behind the man he caught a glimpse of a woman with soft features and a small, plumed hat and eyes that looked away quickly as Brennan's gaze passed them going up to Ed Rintoon, the driver.

„Ed, for a minute I didn't think you were going to stop.“

Rintoon, a leathery, beard-stubbled man in his mid-forties, stood with one knee on the seat and looked down at Brennan with only faint surprise.

„I took you for being up to no good, standing there waving your arms.“

„I'm only looking for a lift a ways.“

„What happened to you?“

Brennan grinned and his thumb pointed back vaguely over his shoulder. „I was visiting Tenvoorde to see about buying some yearling stock and I lost my horse to him on a bet.“

„Driver!“

Brennan turned. The man who had been at the window was now leaning halfway out of the door and looking up at Rintoon.

„I'm not paying you to pass the time of day with“—he glanced at Brennan— „with everybody we meet.“

Rintoon leaned over to look down at him. „Willard, you ain't even part right, since you ain't the man that pays me.“

„I chartered this coach, and you along with it!“ He was a young man, hatless, his long hair mussed from the wind. Strands of it hung over his ears, and his face was flushed as he glared at Rintoon. „When I pay for a coach I expect the service that goes with it.“

Rintoon said, „Willard, you calm down now.“

„Mr. Mims!“

Rinton smiled faintly, glancing at Brennan. „Pat, I'd like you to meet Mr. Mims.“ He paused, adding, „He's a bookkeeper.“

Brennan touched the brim of his hat toward the coach, seeing the woman again. She looked to be in her late twenties and her eyes now were wide and frightened and not looking at him.

His glance went to Willard Mims. Mims came out of the doorway and stood pointing a finger up at Rinton.

„Brother, you're through! I swear to God this is your last run on any line in the Territory!“

Rinton eased himself down until he was half sitting on the seat.

„You wouldn't kid me.“

„You'll see if I'm kidding!“

Rinton shook his head. „After ten years of faithful service the boss will be sorry to see me go.“

Willard Mims stared at him in silence. Then he said, his voice calmer, „You won't be so sure of yourself after we get to Bisbee.“

Ignoring him, Rinton turned to Brennan. „Swing that saddle up here.“

„You hear what I said?“ Willard Mims flared.

Reaching down for the saddle horn as Brennan lifted it, Rinton answered, „You said I'd be sorry when we got to Bisbee.“

„You remember that!“

„I sure will. Now you get back inside, Willard.“ He glanced at Brennan. „You get in there, too, Pat.“

Willard Mims stiffened. „I'll remind you again—this is not the passenger coach.“

Brennan was momentarily angry, but he saw the way Rinton was taking this and he said calmly, „You want me to walk? It's only fifteen miles to Sasabe.“

„I didn't say that,“ Mims answered, moving to the coach door. „If you want to come, get up on the boot.“ He turned to look at Brennan as he pulled himself up on the foot rung. „If we'd wanted company we'd have taken the scheduled run. That clear enough for you?“

Glancing at Rinton, Brennan swung the Henry rifle up to him and said, „Yes, sir,“ not looking at Mims; and he winked at Rinton as he climbed the wheel to the driver's seat. A moment later they were moving, slowly at first, bumping and swaying; then the road seemed to become smoother as the teams pulled faster.

Brennan leaned toward Rinton and said, in the noise, close to the driver's grizzled face, „I wondered why the regular stage would be almost an hour early, Ed, I'm obliged to you.“

Rinton glanced at him. „Thank Mr. Mims.“

„Who is he, anyway?“

„Old man Gateway's son-in-law. Married the boss's daughter. Married into the biggest copper claim in the country.“

„The girl with him his wife?“

„Doretta,“ Rinton answered. „That's Gateway's daughter. She was scheduled to be an old maid till Willard come along and saved her from spinsterhood. She's plain as a 'dobe wall.“

Brennan said, „But not too plain for Willard, eh?“

Rinton gave him a side glance. „Patrick, there ain't nothing plain about old man Gateway's holdings. That's the thing. Four years ago he bought a half interest in the Montezuma Copper Mine for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and he's got it back triple since then. Can you imagine anyone having that much money?“

Brennan shook his head. „Where'd he get it, to start?“

„They say he come from money and made more by using the brains God gave him, investing it.“

Brennan shook his head again. „That's too much money, Ed. Too much to have to worry about.“

„Not for Willard, it ain't,“ Rinton said. „He started out as a bookkeeper with the company. Now he's general manager—since the wedding. The old man picked Willard because he was the only one around he thought had any polish, and he knew if he waited much longer he'd have an old maid on his hands. And, Pat—“Rinton leaned closer—„Willard don't talk to the old man like he does to other people.“

„She didn't look so bad to me,“ Brennan said.

„You been down on Sasabe Creek too long,“ Rinton glanced at him again. „What were you saying about losing your horse to Tenvoorde?“

„Oh, I went to see him about buying some yearlings—“

„On credit,“ Rinton said.

Brennan nodded. „Though I was going to pay him some of it cash. I told him to name a fair interest rate and he'd have it in two years. But he said no. Cash on the line. No cash, no yearlings. I needed three hundred to make the deal, but I only had fifty. Then when I was going he said, ‚Patrick—you know how he talks—I'll give you a chance to get your yearlings free,‘ and all the time he's eyeing this claybank mare I had along. He said, ‚You bet your mare and your fifty dollars cash, I'll put up what yearlings you need, and we'll race your mare against one of my string for the winner.‘“

Ed Rinton said, „And you lost.“

„By a country mile.“

„Pat, that don't sound like you. Why didn't you take what your fifty would buy and get on home?“

„Because I needed these yearlings plus a good seed bull. I could've bought the bull, but I wouldn't have had the yearlings to build on.“

„That's what I told Mr. Tenvoorde. I said, ‚This deal's as good as the stock you're selling me. If you're taking that kind of money for a seed bull and yearlings, then you know they can produce. You're sure of getting your money.‘“

„You got stock down on your Sasabe place,“ Rinton said.

„Not like you think. They wintered poorly and I got a lot of building to do.“

„Who's tending your herd now?“

„I still got those two Mexican boys.“

„You should've known better than to go to Tenvoorde.“

„I didn't have a chance. He's the only man close enough with the stock I want.“

„But a bet like that—how could you fall into it? You know he'd have a pony to outstrip yours.“

„Well, that was the chance I had to take.“

They rode along in silence for a few minutes before Brennan asked, „Where they coming from?“ Rinton grinned at him. „Their honeymoon. Willard made

the agent put on a special run just for the two of them. Made a big fuss while Doretta tried to hide her head.“

„Then“—Brennan grinned—„I’m obliged to Mr. Mims, else I’d still be waiting back there with my saddle and my Henry.“

Later on, topping a rise that was thick with jack pine, they were suddenly in view of the Sasabe station and the creek beyond it, as they came out of the trees and started down the mesquite-dotted sweep of the hillside.

Rinton checked his timepiece. The regular run was due here at five o’clock. He was surprised to see that it was only ten minutes after four. He remembered then, his mind picturing Willard Mims as he chartered the special coach.

Brennan said, „I’m getting off here at Sasabe.“

„How’ll you get over to your place?“

„Hank’ll lend me a horse.“

As they drew nearer, Rinton was squinting, studying the three adobe houses and the corral in back. „I don’t see anybody,“ he said.

„Hank’s usually out in the yard. Him or his boy.“

Brennan said, „They don’t expect you for an hour. That’s it.“

„Man, we make enough noise for somebody to come out.“

Rinton swung the teams toward the adobes, slowing them as Brennan pushed his boot against the brake lever, and they came to a stop exactly even with the front of the main adobe.

„Hank!“

Rinton looked from the door of the adobe out over the yard. He called the name again, but there was no answer. He frowned. „The damn place sounds deserted,“ he said.

Brennan saw the driver’s eyes drop to the sawed-off shotgun and Brennan’s Henry on the floor of the boot, and then he was looking over the yard again.

„Where in hell would Hank’ve gone to?“

A sound came from the adobe. A boot scraping—that or something like it—and the next moment a man was standing in the open doorway.

He was bearded, a dark beard faintly streaked with gray and in need of a trim. He was watching them calmly, almost indifferently, and leveling a Colt at them at the same time.

He moved out into the yard and now another man, armed with a shotgun, came out of the adobe. The bearded one held his gun on the door of the coach. The shotgun was leveled at Brennan and Rinton.

„You-all drop your guns and come on down.“ He wore range clothes, soiled and sun bleached, and he held the shotgun calmly as if doing this was not something new. He was younger than the bearded one by at least ten years.

Brennan raised his revolver from its holster and the one with the shotgun said, „Gently, now,“ and grinned as Brennan dropped it over the wheel.

Rinton, not wearing a handgun, had not moved.

„If you got something down in that boot,“ the one with the shotgun said to him, „haul it out.“

Rinton muttered something under his breath. He reached down and took hold of Brennan’s Henry rifle lying next to the sawed-off shotgun, his finger slipping through the trigger guard. He came up with it hesitantly, and Brennan whispered, barely moving his lips, „Don’t be crazy.“

Standing up, turning, Rinton hesitated again, then let the rifle fall.

„That all you got?“

Rinton nodded. „That’s all.“

„Then come on down.“

Rinton turned his back. He bent over to climb down, his foot reaching for the wheel below, and his hand closed on the sawed-off shotgun. Brennan whispered, „Don’t do it!“

Rinton mumbled something that came out as a growl. Brennan leaned toward him as if to give him a hand down. „You got two shots. What if there’re more than two of them?“

Rinton grunted, „Look out, Pat!“ His hand gripped the shotgun firmly.

Then he was turning, jumping from the wheel, the stubby scattergun flashing head-high—and at the same moment a single revolver shot blasted the stillness. Brennan saw Rinton crumple to the ground, the shotgun falling next to him, and he was suddenly aware of powder smoke and a man framed in the window of the adobe. The one with the shotgun said, „Well, that just saves some time,“ and he glanced around as the third man came out of the adobe.

„Chink, I swear you hit him in midair.“

„I was waiting for that old man to pull something,“ said the one called Chink. He wore two low-slung, crossed cartridge belts and his second Colt was still in its holster.

Brennan jumped down and rolled Rinton over gently, holding his head off the ground. He looked at the motionless form and then at Chink. „He’s dead.“

Chink stood with his legs apart and looked down at Brennan indifferently. „Sure he is.“

„You didn’t have to kill him.“

Chink shrugged. „I would’ve, sooner or later.“

„Why?“

„That’s the way it is.“

The man with the beard had not moved. He said now, quietly, „Chink, you shut your mouth.“ Then he glanced at the man with the shotgun and said, in the same tone, „Billy-Jack, get them out of there,“ and nodded toward the coach.

Chapter 2

KNEELING NEXT to Rinton, Brennan studied them. He watched Billy-Jack open the coach door, saw his mouth soften to a grin as Doretta Mims came out first. Her eyes went to Rinton, but shifted away quickly. Willard Mims hesitated, then stepped down, stumbling in his haste as Billy-Jack pointed the shotgun at him. He stood next to his wife and stared unblinkingly at Rinton’s body. That one, Brennan was thinking, looking at the man with the beard—that’s the one to watch. He’s calling it, and he doesn’t look as though he gets excited... And the one called Chink...

Brennan’s eyes went to him. He was standing hip-cocked, his hat on the back of his head and the drawstring from it pulled tight beneath his lower lip, his free hand fingering the string idly, the other hand holding the long-barreled .44 Colt, pointed down but cocked.

He wants somebody to try something, Brennan thought. He’s itching for it. He wears two guns and he thinks he’s good. Well, maybe he is. But he’s young,

the youngest of the three, and he's anxious. His gaze stayed on Chink and it went through his mind: Don't even reach for a cigarette when he's around.

The one with the beard said, „Billy-Jack, get up on top of the coach.“

Brennan's eyes raised, watching the man step from the wheel hub to the boot and then kneel on the driver's seat. He's number-three man, Brennan thought. He keeps looking at the woman. But don't bet him short. He carries a big-gauge gun.

„Frank, there ain't nothing up here but an old saddle.“

The one with the beard—Fraunk Usher—raised his eyes. „Look under it.“

„Ain't nothing there either.“

Usher's eyes went to Willard Mims, then swung slowly to Brennan.

„Where's the mail?“

„I wouldn't know,“ Brennan said.

Frank Usher looked at Willard Mims again. „You tell me.“

„This isn't the stage,“ Willard Mims said hesitantly. His face relaxed then, almost to the point of smiling. „You made a mistake. The regular stage isn't due for almost an hour.“ He went on, excitement rising in his voice, „That's what you want, the stage that's due here at five. This is one I chartered.“ He smiled now. „See, me and my wife are just coming back from a honeymoon and, you know—“

Frank Usher looked at Brennan. „Is that right?“

„Of course it is!“ Mims's voice rose. „Go in and check the schedule.“

„I'm asking this man.“

Brennan shrugged. „I wouldn't know.“

„He don't know anything,“ Chink said.

Billy-Jack came down off the coach and Usher said to him, „Go in and look for a schedule.“ He nodded toward Doretta Mims. „Take that woman with you. Have her put some coffee on, and something to eat.“

Brennan said, „What did you do with Hank?“ Frank Usher's dull eyes moved to Brennan. „Who's he?“

„The station man here.“

Chink grinned and waved his revolver, pointing it off beyond the main adobe. „He's over yonder in the well.“

Usher said, „Does that answer it?“

„What about his boy?“

„He's with him,“ Usher said. „Anything else?“

Brennan shook his head slowly. „That's enough.“ He knew they were both dead and suddenly he was very much afraid of this dull-eyed, soft-voiced man with the beard; it took an effort to keep himself calm.

He watched Billy-Jack take Doretta by the arm. She looked imploringly at her husband, holding back, but he made no move to help her. Billy-Jack jerked her arm roughly and she went with him.

Willard Mims said, „He'll find the schedule. Like I said, it's due at five o'clock. I can see how you made the mistake“—Willard was smiling—„thinking we were the regular stage. Hell, we were just going home ... down to Bisbee. You'll see, five o'clock sharp that regular passenger-mail run'll pull in.“

„He's a talker,“ Chink said.

Billy-Jack appeared in the doorway of the adobe. „Frank, five o'clock, sure as hell!“ He waved a sheet of yellow paper.

„See!“ Willard Mims was grinning excitedly. „Listen, you let us go and we'll be on our way“—his voice rose—„and I swear to God we'll never breathe we saw a thing.“

Chink shook his head. „He's somethin'.“

„Listen, I swear to God we won't tell anything!“

„I know you won't,“ Frank Usher said. He looked at Brennan and nodded toward Mims. „Where'd you find him?“

„We just met.“

„Do you go along with what he's saying?“

„If I said yes,“ Brennan answered, „you wouldn't believe me. And you'd be right.“

A smile almost touched Frank Usher's mouth. „Dumb even talking about it, isn't it?“

„I guess it is,“ Brennan said.

„You know what's going to happen to you?“ Usher asked him tonelessly.

Brennan nodded, without answering.

Frank Usher studied him in silence. Then, „Are you scared?“

Brennan nodded again. „Sure I am.“

„You're honest about it. I'll say that for you.“

„I don't know of a better time to be honest,“ Brennan said.

Chink said, „That damn well's going to be chock full.“

Willard Mims had listened with disbelief, his eyes wide. Now he said hurriedly, „Wait a minute! What're you listening to him for? I told you, I swear to God I won't say one word about this. If you don't trust him, then keep him here! I don't know this man. I'm not speaking for him, anyway.“

„I'd be inclined to trust him before I would you,“ Frank Usher said.

„He's got nothing to do with it! We picked him up out on the desert!“

Chink raised his .44 waist high, looking at Willard Mims, and said, „Start running for that well and see if you can make it.“

„Man, be reasonable!“

Frank Usher shook his head. „You aren't leaving, and you're not going to be standing here when that stage pulls in. You can scream and carry on, but that's the way it is.“

„What about my wife?“

„I can't help her being a woman.“

Willard Mims was about to say something, but stopped. His eyes went to the adobe, then back to Usher. He lowered his voice and all the excitement was gone from it. „You know who she is?“ He moved closer to Usher. „She's the daughter of old man Gateway, who happens to own part of the third richest copper mine in Arizona. You know what that amounts to? To date, three quarters of a million dollars.“ He said this slowly, looking straight at Frank Usher.

„Make a point out of it,“ Usher said.

„Man, it's practically staring you right in the face! You got the daughter of a man who's practically a millionaire. His only daughter! What do you think he'll pay to get her back?“

Frank Usher said, „I don't know. What?“ „Whatever you ask! You sit here waiting for a two-bit holdup and you got a gold mine right in your hands!“

„How do I know she's his daughter?“

Willard Mims looked at Brennan. „You were talking to that driver. Didn't he tell you?“

Brennan hesitated. If the man wanted to bargain with his wife, that was his business. It would give them time; that was the main thing.

Brennan nodded. „That's right. His wife is Doretta Gateway.“

„Where do you come in?“ Usher asked Willard Mims.

„I'm Mr. Gateway's general manager on the Montezuma operation.“

Frank Usher was silent now, staring at Mims. Finally he said, „I suppose you'd be willing to ride in with a note.“

„Certainly,“ Mims quickly replied.

„And we'd never see you again.“

„Would I save my own skin and leave my wife here?“

Usher nodded. „I believe you would.“

„Then there's no use talking about it.“ Mims shrugged and, watching him, Brennan knew he was acting, taking a long chance.

„We can talk about it,“ Frank Usher said, „because if we do it, we do it my way.“ He glanced at the house. „Billy-Jack!“ Then to Brennan, „You and him go sit over against the wall.“

Billy-Jack came out, and from the wall of the adobe Brennan and Willard watched the three outlaws. They stood in close, and Frank Usher was doing the talking. After a few minutes Billy-Jack went into the adobe again and came out with the yellow stage schedule and an envelope. Usher took them and, against the door of the Concord, wrote something on the back of the schedule.

He came toward them folding the paper into the envelope. He sealed the envelope and handed it with the pencil to Willard Mims.

„You put Gateway's name on it and where to find him. Mark it personal and urgent.“

Willard Mims said, „I can see him myself and tell him.“

„You will,“ Frank Usher said, „but not how you think. You're going to stop on the main road one mile before you get to Bisbee and give that envelope to somebody passing in. The note tells Gateway you have something to tell him about his daughter and to come alone. When he goes out, you'll tell him the story. If he says no, then he never sees his daughter again. If he says yes, he's to bring fifty thousand in U. S. scrip divided in three saddlebags, to a place up back of the Sasabe. And he brings it alone.“

Mims said, „What if there isn't that much cash on hand?“

„That's his problem.“

„Well, why can't I go right to his house and tell him?“

„Because Billy-Jack's going to be along to bring you back after you tell him. And I don't want him someplace he can get cornered.“

„Oh...“

„That's whether he says yes or no,“ Frank Usher added.

Mims was silent for a moment. „But how'll Mr. Gateway know where to come?“

„If he agrees, Billy-Jack'll give him directions.“

Mims said, „Then when he comes out you'll let us go? Is that it?“

„That's it.“

„When do we leave?“

„Right this minute.“

„Can I say good-bye to my wife?“

„We'll do it for you.“

Brennan watched Billy-Jack come around from the corral, leading two horses. Willard Mims moved toward one of them and they both mounted. Billy-Jack reined his horse suddenly, crowding Mims to turn with him, then slapped Mims's horse on the rump and spurred after it as the horse broke to a run.

Watching them, his eyes half closed, Frank Usher said, „That boy puts his wife up on the stake and then he wants to kiss her good-bye.“

He glanced at Brennan. „You figure that one for me.“

Brennan shook his head. „What I'd like to know is why you only asked for fifty thousand.“

Frank Usher shrugged. „I'm not greedy.“

Chapter 3

CHINK TURNED AS the two horses splashed over the creek and grew gradually smaller down the road. He looked at Brennan and then his eyes went to Frank Usher. „We don't have a need for this one, Frank.“ Usher's dull eyes flicked toward him. „You bring around the horses and I'll worry about him.“

„We might as well do it now as later,“ Chink said.

„We're taking him with us.“

„What for?“

„Because I say so. That reason enough?“

„Frank, we could run him for the well and both take a crack at him.“

„Get the horses,“ Frank Usher said flatly, and stared at Chink until the gunman turned and walked away.

Brennan said, „I'd like to bury this man before we go.“

Usher shook his head. „Put him in the well.“

„That's no fit place!“

Usher stared at Brennan for a long moment. „Don't push your luck. He goes in the well, whether you do it or Chink does.“

Brennan pulled Rinton's limp body up over his shoulder and carried him across the yard. When he returned, Chink was coming around the adobe with three horses already saddled. Frank Usher stood near the house and now Doretta Mims appeared in the doorway.

Usher looked at her. „You'll have to fork one of these like the rest of us. There ain't no lady's saddle about.“

She came out, neither answering nor looking at him.

Usher called to Brennan, „Cut one out of that team and shoot the rest,“ nodding to the stagecoach.

Minutes later the Sasabe station was deserted.

They followed the creek west for almost an hour before swinging south toward high country. Leaving the creek, Brennan had thought: Five more miles and I'm home. And his eyes hung on the long shallow cup of the Sasabe valley until they entered a trough that climbed winding ahead of them through the hills, and the valley was no longer in view.

Frank Usher led them single file—Doretta Mims, followed by Brennan, and Chink bringing up the rear. Chink rode slouched, swaying with the movement

of his dun mare, chewing idly on the drawstring of his hat, and watching Brennan.

Brennan kept his eyes on the woman much of the time. For almost a mile, as they rode along the creek, he had watched her body shaking silently and he knew that she was crying. She had very nearly cried mounting the horse—pulling her skirts down almost desperately, then sitting, holding on to the saddle horn with both hands, biting her lower lip and not looking at them. Chink had sidestepped his dun close to her and said something, and she had turned her head quickly as the color rose from her throat over her face.

They dipped down into a barranca thick with willow and cottonwood and followed another stream that finally disappeared into the rocks at the far end. And after that they began to climb again. For some time they rode through the soft gloom of timber, following switchbacks as the slope became steeper, then came out into the open and crossed a bare gravelly slope, the sandstone peaks above them cold pink in the fading sunlight.

They were nearing the other side of the open grade when Frank Usher said, „Here we are.“

Brennan looked beyond him and now he could make out, through the pines they were approaching, a weather-scarred stone-and-log hut built snugly against the steep wall of sandstone. Against one side of the hut was a hide-covered lean-to. He heard Frank Usher say, „Chink, you get the man making a fire and I'll get the woman fixing supper.“

There had not been time to eat what the woman had prepared at the stage station and now Frank Usher and Chink ate hungrily, hunkered down a dozen yards out from the lean-to where Brennan and the woman stood.

Brennan took a plate of the jerky and day-old pan bread, but Doretta Mims did not touch the food. She stood next to him, half turned from him, and continued to stare through the trees across the bare slope in the direction they had come. Once Brennan said to her, „You better eat something,“ but she did not answer him.

When they were finished, Frank Usher ordered them into the hut.

„You stay there the night ... and if either of you comes near the door, we'll let go, no questions asked. That plain?“ The woman went in hurriedly. When Brennan entered he saw her huddled against the back wall near a corner.

The sod-covered hut was windowless, and he could barely make her out in the dimness. He wanted to go and sit next to her, but it went through his mind that most likely she was as afraid of him as she was of Frank Usher and Chink. So he made room for himself against the wall where they had placed the saddles, folding a saddle blanket to rest his elbow on as he eased himself to the dirt floor. Let her try and get hold of herself, he thought; then maybe she will want somebody to talk to.

He made a cigarette and lit it, seeing the mask of her face briefly as the match flared, then he eased himself lower until his head was resting against a saddle, and smoked in the dim silence.

Soon the hut was full dark. Now he could not see the woman, though he imagined that he could feel her presence. Outside, Usher and Chink had added wood to the cook fire in front of the lean-to and the warm glow of it illuminated the doorless opening of the hut.

They'll sit by the fire, Brennan thought, and one of them will always be awake. You'd get about one step through that door and bam. Maybe Frank

would aim low, but Chink would shoot to kill. He became angry thinking of Chink, but there was nothing he could do about it and he drew on the cigarette slowly to make himself relax, thinking: Take it easy: you've got the woman to consider. He thought of her as his responsibility and not even a doubt entered his mind that she was not.

She was a woman, alone. The reason was as simple as that.

He heard her move as he was snubbing out the cigarette. He lay still and he knew that she was coming toward him. She knelt as she reached his side.

„Do you know what they've done with my husband?“

He could picture her drawn face, eyes staring wide open in the darkness. He raised himself slowly and felt her stiffen as he touched her arm. „Sit down here and you'll be more comfortable.“ He moved over to let her sit on the saddle blanket. „Your husband's all right,“ he said.

„Where is he?“

„They didn't tell you?“

„No.“

Brennan paused. „One of them took him to Bisbee to see your father.“

„My father?“

„To ask him to pay to get you back.“

„Then my husband's all right.“ She was relieved, and it was in the sound of her voice.

Brennan said, after a moment, „Why don't you go to sleep now? You can rest back on one of these saddles.“

„I'm not tired.“

„Well, you will be if you don't get some sleep.“

She said then, „They must have known all the time that we were coming.“

Brennan said nothing.

„Didn't they?“

„I don't know, ma'am.“

„How else would they know about ... who my father is?“

„Maybe so.“

„One of them must have been in Contention and heard my husband charter the coach. Perhaps he had visited Bisbee and knew that my father...“ Her voice trailed off because she was speaking more to herself than to Brennan.

After a pause Brennan said, „You sound like you feel a little better.“

He heard her exhale slowly and he could imagine she was trying to smile.

„Yes, I believe I do now,“ she replied.

„Your husband will be back sometime tomorrow morning,“ Brennan said to her.

She touched his arm lightly. „I do feel better, Mr. Brennan.“

He was surprised that she remembered his name. Rintoon had mentioned it only once, hours before. „I'm glad you do. Now, why don't you try to sleep?“

She eased back gently until she was lying down and for a few minutes there was silence.

„Mr. Brennan?“

„Yes, ma'am.“

„I'm terribly sorry about your friend.“

„Who?“ „The driver.“

„Oh. Thank you.“

„I'll remember him in my prayers,“ she said, and after this she did not speak again.

Brennan smoked another cigarette, then sat unmoving for what he judged to be at least a half hour, until he was sure Doretta Mims was asleep.

Now he crawled across the dirt floor to the opposite wall. He went down on his stomach and edged toward the door, keeping close to the wall. Pressing his face close to the opening, he could see, off to the right side, the fire, dying down now. The shape of a man wrapped in a blanket was lying full length on the other side of it.

Brennan rose slowly, hugging the wall. He inched his head out to see the side of the fire closest to the lean-to, and as he did he heard the unmistakable click of a revolver being cocked. Abruptly he brought his head in and went back to the saddle next to Doretta Mims.

Chapter 4

IN THE MORNING they brought Doretta Mims out to cook; then sent her back to the hut while they ate. When they had finished they let Brennan and Doretta come out to the lean-to. Frank Usher said, „That wasn't a head I seen pokin' out the door last night, was it?“

„If it was,“ Brennan answered, „why didn't you shoot at it?“

„I about did. Lucky thing it disappeared,“ Usher said. „Whatever it was.“ And he walked away, through the trees to where the horses were picketed.

Chink sat down on a stump and began making a cigarette.

A few steps from Doretta Mims, Brennan leaned against the hut and began eating. He could see her profile as she turned her head to look out through the trees and across the open slope.

Maybe she is a little plain, he thought. Her nose doesn't have the kind of a clean-cut shape that stays in your mind. And her hair—if she didn't have it pulled back so tight she'd look a little younger, and happier. She could do something with her hair. She could do something with her clothes, too, to let you know she's a woman.

He felt sorry for her, seeing her biting her lower lip, still staring off through the trees. And for a reason he did not understand, though he knew it had nothing to do with sympathy, he felt very close to her, as if he had known her for a long time, as if he could look into her eyes—not just now, but anytime—and know what she was thinking. He realized that it was sympathy, in a sense, but not the feeling-sorry kind. He could picture her as a little girl, and self-consciously growing up, and he could imagine vaguely what her father was like. And now—a sensitive girl, afraid of saying the wrong thing; afraid of speaking out of turn even if it meant wondering about instead of knowing what had happened to her husband. Afraid of sounding silly, while men like her husband talked and talked and said nothing. But even having to listen to him, she would not speak against him, because he was her husband.

That's the kind of woman to have, Brennan thought. One that'll stick by you, no matter what. And, he thought, still looking at her, one that's got some insides to her. Not just all on the surface. Probably you would have to lose a woman like that to really appreciate her.

„Mrs. Mims.“

She looked at him, her eyes still bearing the anxiety of watching through the trees.

„He'll come, Mrs. Mims. Pretty soon now.“

Frank Usher returned and motioned them into the hut again. He talked to Chink for a few minutes and now the gunman walked off through the trees.

Looking out from the doorway of the hut, Brennan said over his shoulder, „One of them's going out now to watch for your husband.“

He glanced around at Doretta Mims and she answered him with a hesitant smile.

Frank Usher was standing by the lean-to when Chink came back through the trees some time later. He walked out to meet him.

„They coming?“

Chink nodded. „Starting across the slope.“ Minutes later two horses came into view crossing the grade. As they came through the trees, Frank Usher called, „Tie up in the shade there!“ He and Chink watched the two men dismount, then come across the clearing toward them.

„It's all set!“ Willard Mims called.

Frank Usher waited until they reached him. „What'd he say?“

„He said he'd bring the money.“

„That right, Billy-Jack?“

Billy-Jack nodded. „That's what he said.“ He was carrying Rinton's sawed-off shotgun.

„You didn't suspect any funny business?“

Billy-Jack shook his head.

Usher fingered his beard gently, holding Mims with his gaze. „He can scare up that much money?“

„He said he could, though it will take most of today to do it.“

„That means he'll come out tomorrow,“ Usher said.

Willard Mims nodded. „That's right.“

Usher's eyes went to Billy-Jack. „You gave him directions?“

„Like you said, right to the mouth of that barranca, chock full of willow. Then one of us brings him in from there.“

„You're sure he can find it?“

„I made him say it twice,“ Billy-Jack said. „Every turn.“

Usher looked at Willard Mims again. „How'd he take it?“

„How do you think he took it?“

Usher was silent, staring at Mims. Then he began to stroke his beard again. „I'm asking you,“ he said.

Mims shrugged. „Of course, he was mad, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. He's a reasonable man.“

Billy-Jack was grinning. „Frank, this time tomorrow we're sitting on top of the world.“

Willard Mims nodded. „I think you made yourself a pretty good deal.“

Frank Usher's eyes had not left Mims. „You want to stay here or go on back?“

„What?“

„You heard what I said.“

„You mean you'd let me go ... now?“

„We don't need you anymore.“

Willard Mims's eyes flicked to the hut, then back to Frank Usher. He said, almost too eagerly, „I could go back now and lead old man Gateway out here in the morning.“

„Sure you could,“ Usher said.

„Listen, I'd rather stay with my wife, but if it means getting the old man out here faster, then I think I better go back.“

Usher nodded. „I know what you mean.“

„You played square with me. By God, I'll play square with you.“

Mims started to turn away.

Usher said, „Don't you want to see your wife first?“

Mims hesitated. „Well, the quicker I start traveling, the better. She'll understand.“

„We'll see you tomorrow then, huh?“

Mims smiled. „About the same time.“ He hesitated. „All right to get going now?“

„Sure.“

Mims backed away a few steps, still smiling, then turned and started to walk toward the trees. He looked back once and waved.

Frank Usher watched him, his eyes half closed in the sunlight.

When Mims was almost to the trees, Usher said, quietly, „Chink, bust him.“

Chink fired, the .44 held halfway between waist and shoulders, the long barrel raising slightly as he fired again and again until Mims went down, lying still as the heavy reports faded into dead silence.

Chapter 5

FRANK USHER WAITED as Billy-Jack stooped next to Mims. He saw Billy-Jack look up, nodding his head. „Get rid of him,“ Usher said, watching now as Billy-Jack dragged Mims's body through the trees to the slope and there let go of it. The lifeless body slid down the grade, raising dust, until it disappeared into the brush far below. Frank Usher turned and walked back to the hut.

Brennan stepped aside as he reached the low doorway. Usher saw the woman on the floor, her face buried in the crook of her arm resting on one of the saddles, her shoulders moving convulsively as she sobbed.

„What's the matter with her?“ he asked.

Brennan said nothing.

„I thought we were doing her a favor,“ Usher said. He walked over to her, his hand covering the butt of his revolver, and touched her arm with his booted toe. „Woman, don't you realize what you just got out of?“

„She didn't know he did it,“ Brennan said quietly.

Usher looked at him, momentarily surprised. „No, I don't guess she would, come to think of it.“ He looked down at Doretta Mims and nudged her again with his boot. „Didn't you know that boy was selling you? This whole idea was his, to save his own skin.“ Usher paused. „He was ready to leave you again just now ... when I got awful sick of him way down deep inside.“

Doretta Mims was not sobbing now, but still she did not raise her head.

Usher stared down at her. „That was some boy you were married to, would do a thing like that.“

Looking from the woman to Frank Usher, Brennan said, almost angrily, „What he did was wrong, but going along with it and then shooting him was all right?“

Usher glanced sharply at Brennan. „If you can't see a difference, I'm not going to explain it to you.“ He turned and walked out.

Brennan stood looking down at the woman for a few moments, then went over to the door and sat down on the floor just inside it. After a while he could hear Doretta Mims crying again. And for a long time he sat listening to her muffled sobs as he looked out at the sunlit clearing, now and again seeing one of the three outlaws.

He judged it to be about noon when Frank Usher and Billy-Jack rode out, walking their horses across the clearing, then into the trees, with Chink standing looking after them.

They're getting restless, Brennan thought. If they're going to stay here until tomorrow, they've got to be sure nobody's followed their sign. But it would take the best San Carlos tracker to pick up what little sign we made from Sasabe.

He saw Chink walking leisurely back to the lean-to. Chink looked toward the hut and stopped. He stood hip-cocked, with his thumbs in his crossed gun belts.

„How many did that make?“ Brennan asked.

„What?“ Chink straightened slightly.

Brennan nodded to where Mims had been shot. „This morning.“

„That was the seventh,“ Chink said.

„Were they all like that?“ he asked.

„How do you mean?“

„In the back.“

„I'll tell you this: Yours will be from the front.“

„When?“

„Tomorrow before we leave. You can count on it.“

„If your boss gives you the word.“

„Don't worry about that,“ Chink said. Then, „You could make a run for it right now. It wouldn't be like just standing up gettin' it.“

„I'll wait till tomorrow,“ Brennan said.

Chink shrugged and walked away.

After a few minutes Brennan realized that the hut was quiet. He turned to look at Doretta Mims. She was sitting up, staring at the opposite wall with a dazed expression.

Brennan moved to her side and sat down again. „Mrs. Mims, I'm sorry—“

„Why didn't you tell me it was his plan?“

„It wouldn't have helped anything.“

She looked at Brennan now pleadingly. „He could have been doing it for all of us.“

Brennan nodded. „Sure he could.“

„But you don't believe that, do you?“

Brennan looked at her closely, at her eyes puffed from crying. „Mrs. Mims, you know your husband better than I did.“

Her eyes lowered and she said quietly, „I feel very foolish sitting here. Terrible things have happened in these two days, yet all I can think of is myself. All I can do is look at myself and feel very foolish.“ Her eyes raised to his. „Do you know why, Mr. Brennan? Because I know now that my husband never cared for

me; because I know that he married me for his own interest.“ She paused. „I saw an innocent man killed yesterday and I can't even find the decency within me to pray for him.“

„Mrs. Mims, try and rest now.“

She shook her head wearily. „I don't care what happens to me.“

There was a silence before Brennan said, „When you get done feeling sorry for yourself I'll tell you something.“

Her eyes came open and she looked at him, more surprised than hurt.

„Look,“ Brennan said. „You know it and I know it—your husband married you for your money; but you're alive and he's dead and that makes the difference. You can moon about being a fool till they shoot you tomorrow, or you can start thinking about saving your skin right now. But I'll tell you this—it will take both of us working together to stay alive.“

„But he said he'd let us—“

„You think they're going to let us go after your dad brings the money? They've killed four people in less than twenty-four hours!“

„I don't care what happens to me!“

He took her shoulders and turned her toward him. „Well, I care about me, and I'm not going to get shot in the belly tomorrow because you feel sorry for yourself.“

„But I can't help!“ Doretta pleaded.

„You don't know if you can or not. We've got to keep our eyes open and we've got to think, and when the chance comes we've got to take it quick or else forget about it.“ His face was close to hers and he was still gripping her shoulders. „These men will kill. They've done it before and they have nothing to lose. They're going to kill us. That means we've got nothing to lose. Now, you think about that a while.“

He left her and went back to the door.

Brennan was called out of the hut later in the afternoon, as Usher and Billy-Jack rode in. They had shot a mule deer and Billy-Jack carried a hindquarter dangling from his saddle horn. Brennan was told to dress it down, enough for supper, and the rest to be stripped and hung up to dry.

„But you take care of the supper first,“ Frank Usher said, adding that the woman wasn't in fit condition for cooking. „I don't want burned meat just 'cause she's in a state over her husband.“

After they had eaten, Brennan took meat and coffee in to Doretta Mims.

She looked up as he offered it to her. „I don't care for anything.“

He was momentarily angry, but it passed off and he said, „Suit yourself.“ He placed the cup and plate on the floor and went outside to finish preparing the jerky.

By the time he finished, dusk had settled over the clearing and the inside of the hut was dark as he stepped inside.

He moved to her side and his foot kicked over the tin cup. He stooped quickly, picking up the cup and plate, and even in the dimness he could see that she had eaten most of the food.

„Mr. Brennan, I'm sorry for the way I've acted.“ She hesitated. „I thought you would understand, else I'd never have told you about—about how I felt.“

„It's not a question of my understanding,“ Brennan said.

„I'm sorry I told you,“ Doretta Mims said.

He moved closer to her and knelt down, sitting back on his heels.

„Look. Maybe I know how you feel, better than you think. But that’s not important. Right now you don’t need sympathy as much as you need a way to stay alive.“

„I can’t help the way I feel,“ she said obstinately.

Brennan was momentarily silent. He said then, „Did you love him?“

„I was married to him!“

„That’s not what I asked you. While everybody’s being honest, just tell me if you loved him.“

She hesitated, looking down at her hands. „I’m not sure.“

„But you wanted to be in love with him, more than anything.“

Her head nodded slowly. „Yes.“

„Did you ever think for a minute that he loved you?“

„That’s not a fair question!“

„Answer it anyway!“

She hesitated again. "No, I didn't."

He said, almost brutally, „Then what have you lost outside of a little pride?“

„You don’t understand,“ she said. „You’re afraid you can’t get another man—is that what it is? Even if he married you for money, at least he married you. He was the first and last chance as far as you were concerned, so you grabbed him.“

„What are you trying to do, strip me of what little self-respect I have left?“

„I’m trying to strip you of this foolishness! You think you’re too plain to get a man?“

She bit her lower lip and looked away from him.

„You think nobody’ll have you because you bite your lip and can’t say more than two words at a time?“

„Mr. Brennan—“

„Listen, you’re as much woman as any of them. A hell of a lot more than some, but you’ve got to realize it! You’ve got to do something about it!“

„I can’t help it if—“

„Shut up with that I-can’t-help-it talk! If you can’t help it, nobody can. All your life you’ve been sitting around waiting for something to happen to you. Sometimes you have to walk up and take what you want.“

Suddenly he brought her to him, his arms circling her shoulders, and he kissed her, holding his lips to hers until he felt her body relax slowly and at the same time he knew that she was kissing him.

His lips brushed her cheek and he said, close to her, „We’re going to stay alive. You’re going to do exactly what I say when the time comes, and we’re going to get out of here.“ Her hair brushed his cheek softly and he knew that she was nodding yes.

Chapter 6

DURING THE NIGHT he opened his eyes and crawled to the lighter silhouette of the doorway. Keeping close to the front wall, he looked out and across to the low-burning fire. One of them, a shadowy form that he could not recognize, sat facing the hut. He did not move, but by the way he was sitting Brennan knew

he was awake. You're running out of time, Brennan thought. But there was nothing he could do.

The sun was not yet above the trees when Frank Usher appeared in the doorway. He saw that Brennan was awake and he said, „Bring the woman out,“ turning away as he said it.

Her eyes were closed, but they opened as Brennan touched her shoulder, and he knew that she had not been asleep. She looked up at him calmly, her features softly shadowed.

„Stay close to me,“ he said. „Whatever we do, stay close to me.“

They went out to the lean-to and Brennan built the fire as Doretta got the coffee and venison ready to put on.

Brennan moved slowly, as if he were tired, as if he had given up hope; but his eyes were alive and most of the time his gaze stayed with the three men—watching them eat, watching them make cigarettes as they squatted in a half circle, talking, but too far away for their voices to be heard. Finally, Chink rose and went off into the trees. He came back with his horse, mounted, and rode off into the trees again but in the other direction, toward the open grade.

It went through Brennan's mind: He's going off like he did yesterday morning, but this time to wait for Gateway. Yesterday on foot, but today on his horse, which means he's going farther down to wait for him. And Frank went somewhere yesterday morning. Frank went over to where the horses are. He suddenly felt an excitement inside of him, deep within his stomach, and he kept his eyes on Frank Usher.

A moment later Usher stood up and started off toward the trees, calling back something to Billy-Jack about the horses—and Brennan could hardly believe his eyes.

Now. It's now. You know that, don't you? It's now or never. God help me. God help me think of something! And suddenly it was in his mind.

It was less than half a chance, but it was something, and it came to him because it was the only thing about Billy-Jack that stood out in his mind, besides the shotgun. He was always looking at Doretta!

She was in front of the lean-to, and he moved toward her, turning his back to Billy-Jack sitting with Rinton's shotgun across his lap.

„Go in the hut and start unbuttoning your dress.“ He half whispered it and saw her eyes widen as he said it. „Go on! Billy-Jack will come in. Act surprised. Embarrassed. Then smile at him.“ She hesitated, starting to bite her lip. „Damn it, go on!“ He poured himself a cup of coffee, not looking at her as she walked away. Putting the coffee down, he saw Billy-Jack's eyes following her.

„Want a cup?“ Brennan called to him. „There's about one left.“

Billy-Jack shook his head and turned the sawed-off shotgun on Brennan as he saw him approaching.

Brennan took a sip of the coffee. „Aren't you going to look in on that?“ He nodded toward the hut.

„What do you mean?“

„The woman,“ Brennan said matter-of-factly. He took another sip of the coffee.

„What about her?“ Billy-Jack asked.

Brennan shrugged. „I thought you were taking turns.“

„What?“

„Now, look, you can't be so young, I got to draw you a map—“ Brennan smiled. „Oh, I see... Frank didn't say anything to you. Or Chink... Keeping her for themselves...”

Billy-Jack's eyes flicked to the hut, then back to Brennan. „They were with her?”

„Well, all I know is Frank went in there yesterday morning and Chink yesterday afternoon while you were gone.” He took another sip of the coffee and threw out what was left in the cup. Turning, he said, „No skin off my nose,” and walked slowly back to the lean-to.

He began scraping the tin plates, his head down, but watching Billy-Jack. Let it sink through that thick skull of yours. But do it quick! Come on, move, you animal!

There! He watched Billy-Jack walk slowly toward the hut. God, make him move faster! Billy-Jack was out of view then beyond the corner of the hut.

All right. Brennan put down the tin plate he was holding and moved quickly, noiselessly, to the side of the hut and edged along the rough logs until he reached the corner. He listened first before he looked around. Billy-Jack had gone inside.

He wanted to make sure, some way, that Billy-Jack would be looking at Doretta, but there was not time. And then he was moving again—along the front, and suddenly he was inside the hut, seeing the back of Billy-Jack's head, seeing him turning, and a glimpse of Doretta's face, and the sawed-off shotgun coming around. One of his hands shot out to grip the stubby barrel, pushing it, turning it up and back violently, and the other hand closed over the trigger guard before it jerked down on Billy-Jack's wrist.

Deafeningly, a shot exploded, with the twin barrels jammed under the outlaw's jaw. Smoke and a crimson smear, and Brennan was on top of him wrenching the shotgun from squeezed fingers, clutching Billy-Jack's revolver as he came to his feet.

He heard Doretta gasp, still with the ringing in his ears, and he said, „Don't look at him!” already turning to the doorway as he jammed the Colt into his empty holster.

Frank Usher was running across the clearing, his gun in his hand.

Brennan stepped into the doorway leveling the shotgun. „Frank, hold it there!”

Usher stopped dead, but in the next second he was aiming, his revolver coming up even with his face, and Brennan's hand squeezed the second trigger of the shotgun.

Usher screamed and went down, grabbing his knees, and he rolled to his side as he hit the ground. His right hand came up, still holding the Colt.

„Don't do it, Frank!” Brennan had dropped the scattergun and now Billy-Jack's revolver was in his hand. He saw Usher's gun coming in line, and he fired, aiming dead center at the half-reclined figure, hearing the sharp, heavy report, and seeing Usher's gun hand raise straight up into the air as he slumped over on his back.

Brennan hesitated. Get him out of there, quick. Chink's not deaf.

He ran out to Frank Usher and dragged him back to the hut, laying him next to Billy-Jack. He jammed Usher's pistol into his belt. Then, „Come on!” he told Doretta, and took her hand and ran out of the hut and across the clearing toward the side where the horses were.

They moved into the denser pines, where he stopped and pulled her down next to him in the warm sand. Then he rolled over on his stomach and parted the branches to look back out across the clearing.

The hut was to the right. Straight across were more pines, but they were scattered thinly, and through them he could see the sand-colored expanse of the open grade. Chink would come that way, Brennan knew. There was no other way he could.

Chapter 7

CLOSE TO HIM, Doretta said, „We could leave before he comes.“ She was afraid, and it was in the sound of her voice. „No,“ Brennan said. „We’ll finish this. When Chink comes we’ll finish it once and for all.“

„But you don’t know! How can you be sure you’ll—“

„Listen, I’m not sure of anything, but I know what I have to do.“ She was silent and he said quietly, „Move back and stay close to the ground.“

And as he looked across the clearing his eyes caught the dark speck of movement beyond the trees, out on the open slope. There he was. It had to be him. Brennan could feel the sharp knot in his stomach again as he watched, as the figure grew larger.

Now he was sure. Chink was on foot leading his horse, not coming straight across, but angling higher up on the slope. He’ll come in where the trees are thicker, Brennan thought. He’ll come out beyond the lean-to and you won’t see him until he turns the corner of the hut.

That’s it. He can’t climb the slope back of the hut, so he’ll have to come around the front way.

He estimated the distance from where he was lying to the front of the hut—seventy or eighty feet—and his thumb eased back the hammer of the revolver in front of him.

There was a dead silence for perhaps ten minutes before he heard, coming from beyond the hut, „Frank?“ Silence again. Then, „Where the hell are you?“

Brennan waited, feeling the smooth, heavy, hickory grip of the Colt in his hand, his finger lightly caressing the trigger. It was in his mind to fire as soon as Chink turned the corner. He was ready. But it came and it went.

It went as he saw Chink suddenly, unexpectedly, slip around the corner of the hut and flatten himself against the wall, his gun pointed toward the door. Brennan’s front sight was dead on Chink’s belt, but he couldn’t pull the trigger. Not like this. He watched Chink edge slowly toward the door.

„Throw it down, boy!“

Chink moved and Brennan squeezed the trigger a split second late.

He fired again, hearing the bullet thump solidly into the door frame, but it was too late. Chink was inside.

Brennan let his breath out slowly, relaxing somewhat. Well, that’s what you get. You wait, and all you do is make it harder for yourself. He could picture Chink now looking at Usher and Billy-Jack. That’ll give him something to think about. Look at them good. Then look at the door you’ve got to come out of sooner or later.

I'm glad he's seeing them like that. And he thought then: How long could you stand something like that? He can cover up Billy-Jack and stand it a little longer. But when dark comes... If he holds out till dark he's got a chance. And now he was sorry he had not pulled the trigger before. You got to make him come out, that's all.

„Chink!“

There was no answer.

„Chink, come on out!“

Suddenly gunfire came from the doorway and Brennan, hugging the ground, could hear the swishing of the bullets through the foliage above him.

Don't throw it away, he thought, looking up again. He backed up and moved over a few yards to take up a new position. He'd be on the left side of the doorway as you look at it, Brennan thought, to shoot on an angle like that.

He sighted on the inside edge of the door frame and called, „Chink, come out and get it!“ He saw the powder flash, and he fired on top of it, cocked and fired again. Then silence.

Now you don't know, Brennan thought. He reloaded and called out, „Chink!“ but there was no answer, and he thought: You just keep digging your hole deeper. Maybe you did hit him. No, that's what he wants you to think. Walk in the door and you'll find out. He'll wait now. He'll take it slow and start adding up his chances. Wait till night? That's his best bet—but he can't count on his horse being there then. I could have worked around and run it off. And he knows he wouldn't be worth a damn on foot, even if he did get away. So the longer he waits, the less he can count on his horse.

All right, what would you do? Immediately he thought: I'd count shots. So you hear five shots go off in a row and you make a break out the door, and while you're doing it the one shooting picks up another gun. But even picking up another gun takes time.

He studied the distance from the doorway to the corner of the hut.

Three long strides. Out of sight in less than three seconds. That's if he's thinking of it. And if he tried it, you'd have only that long to aim and fire. Unless...

Unless Doretta pulls off the five shots. He thought about this for some time before he was sure it could be done without endangering her. But first you have to give him the idea.

He rolled to his side to pull Usher's gun from his belt. Then, holding it in his left hand, he emptied it at the doorway. Silence followed.

I'm reloading now, Chink. Get it through your cat-eyed head. I'm reloading and you've got time to do something.

He explained it to Doretta unhurriedly—how she would wait about ten minutes before firing the first time; she would count to five and fire again, and so on until the gun was empty. She was behind the thick bole of a pine and only the gun would be exposed as she fired.

She said, „And if he doesn't come out?“

„Then we'll think of something else.“

Their faces were close. She leaned toward him, closing her eyes, and kissed him softly. „I'll be waiting,“ she said.

Brennan moved off through the trees, circling wide, well back from the edge of the clearing. He came to the thin section directly across from Doretta's position and went quickly from tree to tree, keeping to the shadows until he

was into thicker pines again. He saw Chink's horse off to the left of him. Only a few minutes remained as he came out of the trees to the off side of the lean-to, and there he went down to his knees, keeping his eyes on the corner of the hut.

The first shot rang out and he heard it whump into the front of the hut. One ... then the second ... two ... he was counting them, not moving his eyes from the front edge of the hut ... three ... four ... be ready... Five! Now, Chink!

He heard him—hurried steps on the packed sand—and almost immediately he saw him cutting sharply around the edge of the hut, stopping, leaning against the wall, breathing heavily but thinking he was safe. Then Brennan stood up.

„Here's one facing you, Chink.“

He saw the look of surprise, the momentary expression of shock, a full second before Chink's revolver flashed up from his side and Brennan's finger tightened on the trigger. With the report Chink lurched back against the wall, a look of bewilderment still on his face, although he was dead even as he slumped to the ground.

Brennan holstered the revolver and did not look at Chink as he walked past him around to the front of the hut. He suddenly felt tired, but it was the kind of tired feeling you enjoyed, like the bone weariness and sense of accomplishment you felt seeing your last cow punched through the market chute.

He thought of old man Ten Voorde, and only two days ago trying to buy the yearlings from him. He still didn't have any yearlings.

What the hell do you feel so good about?

Still, he couldn't help smiling. Not having money to buy stock seemed like such a little trouble. He saw Doretta come out of the trees and he walked on across the clearing.

