

The First Death

Apache, #1

by William M. James, 1938-

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Dedication



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Names, characters and incidents in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons living or dead is purely coincidental.



*For D. Z. and A. E.
because of their enthusiasm*

Cuchillo was a warrior to be feared, but he was not a man easily driven to war. Even when the brutal and sadistic Lieutenant Pinner removed two of his fingers for allegedly stealing his ornamental knife, and branded him 'Cuchillo Oro'—the Golden Knife—he sought a peaceful solution.

Then the true thieves came after him, but still he kept his head.

But then Lieutenant Pinner took his squaw and his baby boy hostage... and that was when Cuchillo Oro decided that the white-eyes had gone too far...

Chapter 1

THE SUN-BURNISHED, almost handsome face of Lieutenant Cyrus L. Pinner was set in an expression of tight-lipped anger as he rode at the head of the cantering patrol of cavalry troopers, leading them through the arid hill country north of Sonora in the Arizona Territory of the Department of New Mexico. The six men eating his dust knew there was going to be trouble and guessed that one of the Apaches on the Borderline *Rancheria* was due to suffer as a result of whatever was riling the officer.

For Pinner was not the sort of man to store up his rage. He was quick to take offense and lightning fast to unleash his temper. Thus, if a soldier back at Fort Davidson or one of those assigned to the patrol had incurred his wrath, the blow-up would have happened already. But the slow burn had been smoldering when the patrol moved out of the fort in the cold light of dawn. And throughout the mounting heat of morning and under the eyeball-frying fierceness of the afternoon sun, Pinner had been carefully stoking the fire which glowed inside him.

Never a man to socialize with his subordinates, Pinner had been more taciturn than usual during the long, circular swing of the patrol's route. He had confined his remarks to curt orders and terse responses. It was not until mid-afternoon, when Pinner refused a request for the normal rest halt and set a fast pace south toward the *rancheria*, that the soldiers behind him realized that the key to unlock his anger would be found at the Apache encampment.

Now the patrol was almost there, at the final regular port of call before the easy three-mile ride along a well-beaten trail east to the fort. The irregular rows of buffalo hide tepees came into sight as the horse-soldiers crested a low ridge at the northern end of a broken plateau. It would soon be time to eat, and the cooking fires under the tripods were piled with fresh kindling. Squaws squatted by the fires, stirring the contents of the blackened cooking pots. Young children raced between the tepees in play now that the sun was low in the west, losing its heat and lengthening the shadows. A few braves tended to the corralled horses, but most rested in their tepees after a long, hard day.

It was a peaceful scene and attractive to tired, red-rimmed eyes, for distance and drifting wood smoke drew a subtle veil across the harsh squalor. And such was the men's discomfort that when Pinner had led them down the long, shallow slope to the edge of the encampment they were still able to subjugate their distaste for the Apaches and the Apache way of life.

The soldiers' faces were stubbled and streaked with dirt. Their clothing was adhered to their flesh by stale sweat. Their bones ached from so many hours in the saddle, their eyes stung from the sun's glare, their throats were dry with dust, and their stomachs were painfully empty. The trickle of a stream that curved around the western boundary of the *rancheria* offered a satisfying if brackish relief for their thirst. The aroma of stew mingling with the drifting smoke set the men's hunger on fire. And the shade beyond the opened flaps of the tepees extended a promise of more than fifty cool places to rest.

Often, these soldiers and others were welcomed into the camp and invited to rest and refresh themselves. And at the end of such an arduous patrol there were few who could resist the temptation to set aside their natural enmity and accept the invitation. But never men on a patrol commanded by Lieutenant Pinner. Apache hospitality was never extended to such a patrol—and the men knew better than to ask for such a simple favor as a drink of water from an Indian if there was the slightest chance that Pinner would overhear the request.

As soon as the seven horse-soldiers were close enough to the camp for their grizzled faces to be recognized, a change came over the *rancheria*. It was dramatic, but not achieved dramatically. The name *Pinner* was spoken softly from tepee to tepee and from one fire to the next. Squaws looked up from their cooking chores and down again. The occupants of tepees crept forward to crouch in the doorways. The braves at the corral sidled together to form a protective group. The children halted their games and crept close to their mothers. The heat-heavy silence, which had been merely restful, was suddenly ominous.

Furtively, not daring to be caught in the act, every brave, squaw, and child glanced toward Pinner, then fearfully away. A single glimpse was enough. The lieutenant had ridden into their camp with his heart of stone glowing red with the fire of anger. It meant bad trouble for someone—perhaps everybody.

Pinner rode ramrod stiff in the saddle and looked neither to left nor right as he set a direct course to the large tepee which belonged to Chief Black Horse. He well knew the effect his expression and bearing had on the Apaches: his very presence in the camp, irrespective of his mood, invariably caused a tremor of collective apprehension to quiver in the very stinking air that hung over the plateau. For of the ninety-five officers and men assigned to Fort Davidson, he was the one most

hated by the Apaches of the Borderline *Rancheria*. And this was a source of great pride to him. From the day of his arrival at the fort six months previously, he had lost no opportunity to engender the hatred of the braves and their squaws, who he regarded purely and simply as murdering savages awaiting a propitious moment to unleash slaughter on the white man. In Pinner's view, the only way to hold back that moment was to strip the Indians of every last vestige of self-respect. And it was not enough to force them to fear a white face above the blue uniform. He would make them hate that face and constantly pound home the message that there was no outlet for the hatred: in such a way their spirits would be broken.

"Hey, Black Horse! Come out here!"

Pinner had halted his horse directly in front of the doorway of the chief's tepee. The men formed into two ranks of three behind him. There were no nervous glances around, and dirt-grimed hands gripped easily at reins, far from holstered Colts and booted Spencers. The Apaches had lived peaceably on the plateau for a long time. Whether by dictate of Black Horse or fear of the consequences, no soldier from Davidson had ever been molested. But the soldiers were far too interested in what was eating the lieutenant to spare even a thought for the many pairs of impassive black eyes staring at them from every part of the camp.

Black Horse allowed only a few seconds to pass before he shuffled forward from the darkened interior of the tepee and squinted up at the uniformed figure. Pinner was no more than a silhouette against the bright western sky, but the chief had received word of who was leading the patrol today. Apart from that, no other officer from Davidson would have summoned the chief so curtly. None gave him genuine respect, but all others save Pinner treated him with a degree of decorum.

The chief was over eighty, his once strong body emaciated and stooped. His copper-brown face was heavily wrinkled and the skin at his throat hung in loose sacs. But his eyes were clear and penetrating as they peered from deep sockets. They still held a great deal of pride which somehow negated the drooping feathers in his headdress and the rents and stains of his hide robe. But not to the prejudiced, insolent gaze of Pinner. At twenty-eight, the lieutenant was enjoying the peak of his physical strength. He did rigorous exercises each morning to maintain his fitness; he stood an inch over six feet, and weighed a little under two hundred pounds. But not an ounce of this was fat, so that where his powerful body bulged beneath the dusty uniform, the irregularities were caused by layers of well-developed muscle. He had a short neck from which his head jutted forward in an arrogant way. His features, beneath heavily-greased, close-cropped black hair, were well-sculptured and he would have been handsome had it not been for the constant sneer on his lips and the animosity with which he viewed the world from his deep-set green eyes.

Now, as these eyes surveyed the bent frame, crinkled face, and ragged garb of the old Apache chief, they showed blatant contempt. His voice was harsh, ignoring the old man's gesture of welcome. "I've come for my dagger and the thieving Apache who stole it!"

The soldiers—a sergeant, a corporal, and four troopers—exchanged knowing glances as their bodies stiffened. Their fatigue and hunger were immediately forgotten as they realized just what kind of trouble Pinner was looking for. There could be few men within the jurisdiction of Davidson, be they soldiers; civilians, or

Indians; who did not know about Lieutenant Pinner's dagger. Apart from his devotion to duty and his iron attitude to military discipline, it was the only thing in the world he cared about. It was an Italian *cinquedea* dating from the fifteenth century—double-edged, with a curved hilt and contoured handle. But it was no ordinary weapon. Its blade was of finest steel, honed to perfect sharpness at both edges and to a needle point at the tip. The hilt was of gold, inlaid with precious stones, and the handle was of ivory. The dagger had been presented to his father, and Lieutenant Pinner had inherited it, as the last surviving member of his family. He prized it highly.

The squinting gaze of Black Horse did not waver. "You know that a brave stole this thing, Lieutenant?" he asked levelly, his English good.

"I know," Pinner answered curtly. "You will ask the guilty one to admit his crime and surrender himself and the dagger." The lieutenant looked ominously to left and right, his scornful eyes sweeping the impassive faces of the watching Apaches. "That way, only he will suffer for his crime."

Some of the women betrayed their fear by clutching their children closer. When Pinner returned his gaze to Black Horse, the old man gave no outward sign that the officer's threat had provoked him.

"I cannot do what you ask unless you tell me why you ask it?" the chief asked.

Pinner's rage expanded, stoking the fires in his eyes and setting up a pounding pulse in his temple. The men saw the short hairs spring up on the nape of his neck. Taking their lead from the sergeant, they unfastened the flaps on their holsters. Fresh sweat oozed.

"You intend to disobey me?" Pinner snapped.

Silently, but without furtiveness, a brave emerged from a tepee to the left of where Black Horse stood. The soldiers knew him as White Dog, constantly in trouble because of his attempts to turn Apache discontent into active resistance. Five more braves stepped out into the open and moved forward toward the chief. They, too, were known to the military because of their allegiance to White Dog's call to action.

"No!" Black Horse commanded in his native tongue, and the braves stopped short. They knew better than to disobey his order and confined themselves to staring at the soldiers with unconcealed hatred and fingering the metal heads of their tomahawks. Black Horse moderated his tone as he addressed Pinner again. "Major Anson has spoken of how such matters should be conducted," he said. "You must speak your reasons. Then I find thief and surrender him to white man's justice. Major Anson said this thing."

Pinner's face became almost purple before he succeeded in forcing a curb on his anger. What the old man had said was true. The commander of Fort Davidson did attempt to maintain peace with the Indians by adopting what Pinner considered to be a soft line. Allowing the chief authority to apprehend wanted men within the confines of the *rancheria* was just one aspect of Anson's compromise with the Apaches. Pinner bit back an angry retort, but kept his tone harsh.

"There's no doubt it was taken by one of your savages!" he snarled. "The dagger was kept locked in a bureau in my quarters. When I returned from duty last night, my quarters had been entered, the bureau broken open, and the dagger gone. At least a dozen Indians were at the fort while I was on duty."

Pinner felt he was belittling himself by offering this explanation, and he was glad his men were behind him. But it was necessary in view of the attitude adopted by Black Horse—and his own respect for the Army's chain of command. He had hoped to browbeat the chief into subservience, but had failed.

Black Horse considered the lieutenant's accusation for a few moments, then shrugged his thin shoulders. "It is true that some of the braves were employed at the fort last night," he allowed. "By special request of Major Anson to assist the horse-soldiers with the unloading of a supply train. But there were others. Soldiers. And men from the trading post. I must know more."

The pulse began to work frantically at Pinner's temple again. "Sergeant!" he barked.

"Sir?"

"You will cover that man!" He raised a hand and pointed a slightly trembling finger at Black Horse. "If any savage attempts to hinder our search, you will shoot him."

The sergeant didn't like the order. He knew that Pinner had paid mere lip service to the major's dictates regarding cooperation with the Apaches at the *rancheria*. But the sergeant unbooted his Spencer and cocked it as he levelled it at the chief. The major was back at the fort. Pinner was here and had his temper on a very short fuse indeed.

"It's done, sir!"

Pinner nodded without taking his gaze away from the suddenly angry face of Black Horse. "You had your chance. I and my men will now carry out a search of every lodge in this camp. If the dagger is not found, every brave will be stripped. If that fails, the girls and the squaws will be disrobed."

The old man's anger, and that of White Dog and his fellow dissidents, intensified with each word Pinner spoke. "Major Anson—"

"I have abided by my commanding officer's orders," Pinner cut in. "And I have six witnesses to testify to that fact. Translate my intentions to your people, Black Horse. Ensure that they know you will die at the first sign of interference."

It was unnecessary. Even as Pinner was announcing his plans for the search of the tepees, to be followed by the strip searches if this failed, the *rancheria* had been buzzing with whispers as those who did not understand English had been informed of what was to happen.

"Stay in the saddle, Sergeant!" Pinner ordered. "The other men, dismount!"

"It is wrong," Black Horse said, his voice rising as all the soldiers save the one with the leveled Spencer slid from their saddles. "But I will tell you the names of those braves who were at the fort. Only they and their belongings should be searched."

Pinner spat into the dust. "No. I don't trust you to name the right braves. And the dagger is easy to pass from one to another."

White Dog and his followers transferred their attention from Pinner to the chief. Black Horse sensed the eyes of every Apache in the *rancheria* were upon him. He knew he maintained control of his people by a narrow margin. Partly this was formed by traditional respect of the Apaches for their chief. But since they had come to live in virtual confinement at the *rancheria*, a great deal of his authority rested upon his ability to retain as much dignity as was possible under the

domination of the whites. If Pinner was allowed to proceed with his plan, it was likely that White Dog's following would be swelled far beyond the five hotheads he now controlled.

"I will ask my people if one of them is a thief," the chief said suddenly, his voice croaky with emotion.

Pinner shook his head violently as he drew his Colt. "Your chance has gone!" he snapped, anxious to grasp the opportunity to unleash his pent-up rage that had been nurtured throughout the long, hot day. He swung his head around to look up at the mounted man. "You understand my order, Sergeant?"

The non-com swallowed hard. He had been watching White Dog and his followers. And had cast the occasional glance toward the many other Apaches surrounding the small group of soldiers. He had no doubt that if it proved necessary to kill the chief, it would be the final act of his life. For the massed fury of the Indians which was held in check made Pinner's overt anger seem puny as he strode purposefully towards the nearest tepee, his Colt half drawn. With his free hand he gestured to the soldiers and pointed to other nearby tepees.

"Let them!" Black Horse called in the Apache tongue, and glanced piercingly to left and right, his penetrating stare daring the hotheads to countermand the order.

They folded their arms across their powerful chests and remained angrily silent. Women backed from the paths of the soldiers, dragging their children after them. Young braves and old men stepped from the tepees' doorways, and the soldiers went inside. In the silence, which previously had been disturbed only by the crackle of the cooking fires, the crash of metal implements and the renting of bed blankets sounded very loud. The sergeant, who had stood solitary guard duty many times during his twenty years of service, had never felt so alone, perched astride his motionless mount in full view of scores of Apaches on the point of violent reaction.

"You tell 'em to behave, Black Horse," the sergeant said, forcing authority into his voice.

"I'm old, but life is still sweet," the chief replied. "So it is the same as always. If I must die at the white man's hand it will be in a fight my people have a chance to win."

The sergeant knew what he meant and his fear abated. It would be very easy for the Apaches to massacre the patrol. But the price would be a full-scale attack from Fort Davidson in which superior fire power would quickly reduce the Indian advantage in numbers.

White Dog grimaced to show his attitude toward such a view. The red man was killing the white-eyes all over Apacheria. To the west of the rancheria, Cochise made no attempt to hold his Chiricahua braves in check. While to the east, Mangas Coloradas was proving that the Mimbrenos were not all servile wretches in the manner of the braves at Borderline. But still Black Horse clung to his dream of a mass uprising with Cochise and Mangas Coloradas, Ponce of the Pinals and Gian-na-tah of the Mescalero, together with all the other chiefs, acting in concert to drive out the white-eyes. It was an old man's dream. Youth demanded action.

"Be nice if all you Injuns felt that way," the sergeant said pointedly, using his sleeve to wipe his brow. A woman screamed.

Only the sergeant did not look toward the piercing sound.

"I warned you!" Pinner yelled at the squaw who had stumbled to the ground as he shoved her from his path toward a tepee entrance.

The squaw scrambled to her feet in a crouch and screamed at the lieutenant in Apache. He swung away from her to enter the tepee, but she threw herself into the entrance. Pinner emitted a low growl and swung up his gun hand. The muzzle of the Colt crashed into the squaw's chin and the front sight raked a gash into the flesh. The squaw was flipped up and then over on to her back, senseless, blood pouring from the wound. Pinner whirled and there was fear in his eyes. But the sergeant was still pointing the Spencer in a rock-steady aim, his finger curled around the trigger but holding back from the fatal squeeze.

"Tell them again, Black Horse!" Pinner roared. "No interference." Although relieved his order had not been carried out, Pinner could not allow such disobedience to pass. "Sergeant, you're on report!"

The soldiers had completed their searches of the nearest tepees, but hesitated before entering the next ones. All drew their Colts and their eyes flicked nervously to left and right, looking for the merest sign that the Apaches had been pushed too far.

A medicine man appeared in the entrance of the tepee the squaw had been guarding. His high-pitched tones cut through the silence and Black Horse gave a nod of acknowledgement.

"You are requested not to enter," the chief called. "A squaw is shortly to give birth to a child. It is not permitted for strangers to interrupt."

The tacit threat of the Indians was suddenly more ominous. They continued to be rooted to the spots where they stood, but, without exception, all raised their shoulders and canted their bodies forward. They were like athletes tensed to lunge toward a desperately desired goal. As Pinner raked their blank faces with his sweeping gaze, he became aware that he dared not enter the tepee of the expectant mother. He knew the limits beyond which an Indian could not be pushed. This was a new one.

"All right," he allowed. "This tepee will not be touched unless we fail to find the dagger elsewhere." He was going to continue, but blocked the threat. By withdrawing at this point he had acknowledged defeat in this respect. He swung towards his men. "What the hell are you waiting for? Move. And fast. We don't want this to take all night."

He shouldered his way between a group of braves and ducked into the entrance of a tepee. More sounds of a hurried, destructive search fed the anger of the silent Indians. The troopers adopted the same tactics, using boots, elbows and jabbing revolver muzzles to move recalcitrant Apaches out of their paths as they made for the tepees.

They worked systematically, with each man choosing a straggling line of tepees and moving along it from the center of the camp to the edge in one direction and then in the other. The sun dipped behind the western peaks in a blood-red blaze and then darkness raced down from the eastern slopes. The cooking fires provided flickering pockets of light to brighten the soft blueness of the moon glow, but there were many shadowed areas where each of the searching soldiers could have been silently murdered as he went into or came out of a tepee.

But although eager fingers caressed tomahawks, knives and clubs—even the occasional bow—the soldiers were unmolested. For the fire burned brightly before the chief's tepee so that Black Horse and the sergeant with the pointing rifle could be clearly seen from every section of the *rancheria*.

Cuchillo hauled on the rope reins of his pony and stared down in shocked surprise at the scene. It came into view as he rounded a rock outcrop on the trail from the fort and trading post. The arid ground sloped away from him toward the *rancheria* and thus he had a panoramic view across the entire plateau. From the stooped figure of Black Horse and his mounted captor, Cuchillo swept his gaze to left and right, taking in the tense immobility of the braves and the frightened attitudes of the squaws, many of whom clutched their children protectively against them.

To see his fellow Apaches forced into subservience under the unbending rule of the soldiers from Fort Davidson was nothing new to Cuchillo. The most minor misdemeanor, real or imagined, which the whites considered had been committed by an Indian, inevitably resulted in a visit from the soldiers. But always in the past the investigations had been carried out on a small scale. The soldiers rode in, discussed the matter with Black Horse and then did what they had to do in company with a brave designated by the chief. The life of the *rancheria* continued, marred only by an atmosphere of hostility generated by its inhabitants. But this was different: Black Horse was being held at gunpoint to force the entire camp into compliance. It had to mean big trouble, yet Cuchillo had left Fort Davidson less than thirty minutes ago and there had been no talk there of dissent between the Army and the Apaches.

Cuchillo spent a long time surveying the scene and spotting the positions of the soldiers as they moved from tepee to tepee before he dug his moccasined heels into the flanks of his pony to start the piebald down the sloping trail.

He was a big man, at six feet three inches the tallest brave living on the *rancheria*. Although only eighteen years old, he looked to be much older and was known to have wisdom beyond his years—at least by those Apaches who did not sympathize with the views of White Dog and his followers. For Cuchillo was able to talk persuasively of his belief that one day the Indians and whites would live as equals without having to fight for the privilege. Such talk, had it come from an ordinary brave, would have been disregarded. But Cuchillo was the grandson of the great chief Mangas Coloradas. Thus, such a future, portended by a young man whose grandfather had spoken of appeasement before white treachery forced him to take to the warpath, commanded respect in many quarters. It provided hope for those Apaches who held no brief for White Dog's impulsiveness nor could subscribe to the unfulfilled promise of power to come so often put forward by Black Horse. Opponents of Cuchillo maintained his brain had been addled by the white-eyes' teachings.

Halfway down the slope, Cuchillo halted his pony once more, and concentrated his dark-eyed gaze upon one spot in the camp. They were narrow eyes, set in a proudly handsome face. The brow was high and flat, the nose flaring to broad nostrils, the cheekbones high and the mouth wide above a resolute jaw, the whole framed by jet black hair that flowed from under a wide headband to brush his

shoulders. The expression of quizzical surprise was wiped from his features to be replaced by a look of slow anger, which grew in intensity as he realized what was happening below and ahead of him. His body, clothed in an unadorned buckskin shirt and patched leggings, became tense.

The soldiers were searching the tepees and one of the uniformed figures was moving toward the one Cuchillo shared with his wife and ten-week-old son.

The brave's anger found vocal outlet in a low grunt, and then he heeled his pony forward into a headlong gallop down the incline. The piebald's unshod hooves beat urgently against the hard-packed dirt and drew every pair of eyes toward him. As he raced across the edge of the camp between the tepees and fires, braves shouted to him but he did not listen to them. His only concern was for his wife, who stood in the path of an advancing soldier, and his baby son, who he knew would be sleeping inside the tepee.

With great skill, he skidded the pony to a halt and slid to the ground immediately in front of his terrified wife. He stared coldly into the confused face of the middle-aged corporal who had stopped short, his Colt hanging limply in his hand.

"The horse-soldiers must search the tepees," Chipeta whispered, having to go up on to her toes to put her mouth close to her husband's ear. "Black Horse has said this."

The corporal motioned with his gun for Cuchillo to step out of his way.

"Why?" the young brave demanded.

The end of the fast gallop had signaled another pregnant silence, and Cuchillo's single word shattered it with the force of a rifle shot. Pinner thudded his heels hard against the ground as he swaggered into the area before the tepee. He had his Colt aimed at Cuchillo and his eyes raked arrogantly over the Apache, finding no overt sign of a weapon.

"Your chief will be shot unless you get out of the way," the lieutenant snapped. "You and your squaw, too."

Cuchillo held his ground and his wife knew better than to urge him to do otherwise. She had warned him once and it was his decision whether or not to ignore what she had said.

"You will tell me the reason, then I will consider it," he told Pinner.

The lieutenant was already close to breaking point again. The face he had lost by having to back down over the tepee where a baby was about to be born was as nothing to the triumph of enforcing the search. But it still irked him, and the frustration of failure to find the stolen dagger could not be assuaged by destroying stinking bedding and kicking over the pitiful belongings of the destitute Apaches. He was in no mood to allow a savage to talk back to him.

"Get... out... of... the... way!" Pinner said, slowly and distinctly. He punctuated the command by cocking the Colt. The fires ceased to crackle until the click of metal had faded far into the distance.

"Cuchillo!" Black Horse shouted. "You of all braves should not do this thing."

Pinner thrust his head forward, peering into the brave's face. "Cuchillo," he hissed. "I know you. Teacher Hedges' brightest pupil."

Cuchillo inclined his head. "I have learned much from Mr. Hedges, Lieutenant. Amongst other things he has taught me that the first principle of peace is respect

for law. But the law must respect the individual. If you have a good reason for entering my tepee, I will stand aside.”

“Cuchillo, they are looking for something stolen from the officer,” Black Horse shouted in Apache. “A dagger—richly decorated. The officer says an Apache brave stole it.”

Cuchillo betrayed no reaction to what his chief announced. Pinner was still peering closely at him.

“The big man tell you why?” the lieutenant asked.

Cuchillo nodded. “And there is no need to enter my tepee and disturb my son.”

As if by some pre-arranged signal, the baby awoke. The interior of the tepee was dark and the boy sensed its emptiness and the lack of his mother to comfort him. He cried his fear and hunger. Chipeta, nervously inexperienced in the ways of motherhood, reacted sharply to the sound of distress. She whirled and lunged toward the entrance of the tepee.

“Corporal!” Pinner yelled in an impulsive reflex to the sudden movement exploding out of tense stillness.

The corporal would probably not have fired his Colt. But with Cuchillo positioned in such a way that he could lunge to protect his wife from a physical attack, the soldier’s only course of action was to snap up his revolver. The corporal was going to shout a command to halt. But he never had the opportunity.

Cuchillo powered himself forward into a lightning fast spring from a flat-footed start. His right hand snaked into the opening at his shirt front and whipped out. An explosive gasp ripped from the throat of every man and woman who saw what it was the leaping brave had snatched from his belt sheath: a dagger with a gleaming blade and a hilt that seemed alive with dancing colors as the precious stones reflected the firelight.

The corporal screamed in naked fear and swung to face his attacker. He got his thumb over the hammer but did not have time to pull it back before Cuchillo slammed into him and crashed down on to his falling body. The gun spun out of his hand and he wrenched his head to the side as the flashing blade of the dagger zoomed toward his face. That move alone would not have saved him. For Cuchillo’s speed would have enabled him to alter the course of the stabbing blow and plunge the blade deep into the fear-widened right eye of his victim. But Pinner’s reflexes were also attuned to great speed. He saw his dagger and an instant of delight surged through him. Then he made a split-second decision not to kill the man who had it—yet. Next he took a step forward and brought the barrel of his Colt crashing down against the side of Cuchillo’s head.

The brave was knocked unconscious by the blow. But his grip remained frozen around the handle of the dagger and his arm continued to drive the blade toward the helpless corporal. The man screamed again, and this time it was with pain. Cuchillo fell awkwardly upon the man and rolled to the side, finally releasing his grip.

The corporal’s comrades gasped in horror. The Apaches in the immediate vicinity looked on dispassionately, any urge to voice their joy muted by concern for the senseless Cuchillo. The corporal, although fully conscious, was as inert as the Apache. His head was held fast against the ground, pinned there by the dagger

which had penetrated the hollow of his ear and plunged deep into the dirt. The arid soil drank in the gushing blood like new rain.

Pinner's expression was merciless as he holstered his gun, crouched down to press a hand over the corporal's face and jerked out the dagger. The injured man emitted a high-pitched scream of agony, and fainted.

"You've killed him!" Chipeta wailed from the entrance of the tepee as she held her now silent baby to her breast and stared in horror at the still form of Cuchillo.

"A man who steals from me doesn't die that easy," the officer muttered as he stropped the dagger blade on his uniform breeches, wiping it clean of blood.

On the far side of the *rancheria*, a new baby uttered its first shriek of life within the tepee Pinner had been forbidden to enter.

"One's born and one's going to die," a soldier said softly.

Another looked down at the bloodied head of the corporal. "Kinda eerie, ain't it," he said.

Chapter 2

THERE WAS NO longer a guard on Chief Black Horse and the old man surveyed Cuchillo with the same brand of cold contempt as the mounted horse-soldiers. White Dog and his companions had dispersed to their tepees, to take out their frustrations upon their squaws, berating the women for not having the meal ready. Chipeta had withdrawn into her tepee with the baby. The remainder of the Apaches had formed into two silent rows to provide a corridor of shame from the center to the edge of the *rancheria*.

Cuchillo was a prisoner. His wrists had been lashed together behind his back and a rope was noosed around his neck with the other end tied to Lieutenant Pinner's saddlehorn. His anger swamped his humiliation.

Pinner's face was twisted by a grin of triumph as he looked down at the old chief. "Next time I say I know something, you'd better believe me, Injun!" he crowed.

Black Horse tore his scornful gaze away from the bound figure of Cuchillo. It pained him to pull his arthritic body to full stature, but he succeeded, achieving an attitude of somehow pathetic pride. "I, Chief of these people, offer the soldiers regret for the act of thievery committed by one of us. As we do not judge all white men by the sins of one, I ask the soldiers not to—"

"Forget the speeches, old man," Pinner cut in harshly. "This no-good Apache happened to get caught, that's all."

He heeled his horse forward and Cuchillo, detached in the private world of his own self-anger, was jerked violently in the wake of the animal. The sudden tautness of the rope at his throat and the need to correct his stumbling gait plunged him back into the reality of the present.

Behind him, the other soldiers urged their horses into a walk. The corporal with the blood-crust-ed ear and shock-whitened face had the privilege of leading the group. He was so close to the prisoner that Cuchillo could feel the hot breath of the non-com's horse against his neck.

Nobody had said anything to Cuchillo since he had been slapped back to consciousness, and the silence continued as he was led between the twin walls of unmoving Apaches. This stillness seemed somehow to add weight to the icy contempt which shone from so many eyes. But, again, the young brave was able to withdraw into himself and could thus ignore the tacit accusation which he alone knew was without foundation.

Perhaps he would have the opportunity to defend himself. And perhaps not. If he did, he would tell the truth and resign himself to the outcome. There was nothing else an Apache prisoner of the whites could do. So it was not this aspect of his predicament which engaged Cuchillo as he was forced by the tug of the rope to move at an unnatural and awkward half-trot behind his captor. He was angry at himself for giving away to the impulse to act instinctively. And he could not excuse himself with the plea that it had been in defense of his wife and son. For the result of responding to the trigger of his temper was that he was a helpless prisoner who might possibly be executed; leaving Chipeta to bear the shame, and the task, of explaining to the boy the reason for his father's death.

Pinner derived a great deal of pleasure in exhibiting his prisoner to the Apaches. It was a twin joy, comprised of humiliating an Indian and boasting of his own triumph. But he was irked that Cuchillo's attitude was not as he had expected it to be: despite being in a situation which would have driven most men into a pit of trembling terror, this bastard had the gall to be preoccupied.

Clear of the camp, and on the upgrade of the trail, Pinner maintained the pace at a walk. But he jerked violently at the rope. Cuchillo stumbled and almost pitched to the ground. The shod hooves of the corporal's horse pounded at the hard-packed dirt, warning what could happen if the prisoner did fall.

A cruel grin curved Pinner's lips as he looked back over his shoulder. "Haven't you got anything to say for yourself, Injun?" he demanded.

Cuchillo had picked up the rhythm of the pace again and returned the officer's level gaze. "You will listen?" he responded.

"If it's something I want to hear," Pinner told him.

"I did not steal your knife," the brave replied.

Pinner's very white teeth shone as a harsh laugh ripped from his mouth. "You just happened to find it in my bureau drawer!" he exclaimed.

Despite the exertion of the ungainly trot, Cuchillo was breathing easily. But the three miles to Fort Davidson was a long way on foot and he realized he would be wasting his energy to no avail by further denials.

"Knife!" the sergeant said suddenly from the rear of the group. "That's what his name means."

"What's that, Sergeant?" the lieutenant snapped, interested.

"Cuchillo is the Apache word for knife, sir," came the reply.

Pinner looked back at his prisoner and arched his eyebrows. "That right, Injun?"

Cuchillo nodded.

"How about that?" Pinner muttered. Then: "Hey, don't you Apaches change your names when something important happens to you?"

Cuchillo gave another nod.

"Sergeant?"

"Sir?"

“What’s the Apache for thieving bastard?”

“Don’t know, sir,” the sergeant answered. “I only know a few words of their lingo. I only just remembered about *cuchillo*.”

“You know one that might fit him?”

The non-com was deep in thought for a few moments.

“Why don’t you ask the Injun, sir?” the corporal suggested.

Pinner spat. “I’m not about to believe anything he says!”

“Oro means golden, sir,” the sergeant announced at length. “You gotta turn it around. Cuchillo Oro.” Pinner repeated the name, nodded and swung in the saddle to show his cruel grin to the brave. “Golden Knife,” he said. “That’s what you’re going to be hanged for, Injun. Least we can do is carve it on your grave marker.”

Cuchillo showed no reaction to the taunt. He was beginning to sweat now, but the beads sheened a powerfully handsome face that showed no other signs of strain. Pinner glowered, but blocked his irritation until the crest of the rise had been reached. He wanted to make the brave suffer, but he also wanted him to be alive when they reached the fort. To have forced the pace up the gentle but long incline would have exhausted the prisoner too early.

Behind them on the plateau, *rancheria* life had returned to normal. The cooking fires burned brightly, serving the joint purpose of holding back the dark and cold of the night and heating out of the tough meat what little flavor it held. Black Horse held counsel with the elders to decide what action should be taken against Cuchillo in the unlikely event that he escaped execution or imprisonment by the white men. The garishly-painted shaman elected to call the newborn baby boy Troubled Night. The squaws attending to the needs of their families pointedly avoided looking toward the tepee of Cuchillo, where the mournful wails of Chipeta drowned out those of her son. White Dog called his companions together and discussed plans to rescue Cuchillo from the horse-soldiers. They knew it was hopeless, but merely talking about grandiose schemes such as this helped to alleviate their misery and frustration.

“Step it up, men,” Pinner instructed when the trail had completed the upgrade and he led the way around the outcrop to start the mostly downhill trek to Fort Davidson. “We don’t want to miss supper.”

He heeled his mount into a slow trot. The tightening noose at Cuchillo’s neck and the faster, harder beat of the hooves behind him, forced the brave into a run. He could no longer berate himself for what had happened and, in setting the events of the past where they belonged, he acknowledged it had been a foolish exercise. He had to direct all his concentration to staying upright and matching his pace with that of the horses. This was what was important: survival in the present. The past served no purpose beyond the lessons it taught. The future? If there was to be one for him, he would consider it when the risk of a broken neck and trampled body had been evaded.

Cuchillo kept his eyes wide, except to blink away the stinging droplets of sweat that splashed down from his forehead. His mind was fully engaged in coordinating his voluntary physical movements: lifting his feet and pumping them down in a rhythmic cadence that required the minimum amount of energy. And maintaining his balance without the natural swing of his arms to steady his equilibrium.

Strong as he was and endowed with the natural speed of the Indian, he knew that he would be unable to ward off exhaustion for long. Free of the bonds that trapped his wrists and neck, he would have been able to run for a day and a night without tiring, alternately sprinting and jogging. Mental fatigue would have overtaken him before physical weariness. But this enforced, unnatural gait at an unvarying pace stretched the distance between the *rancheria* and the fort by many times.

Staring at the rising and falling rump of Pinner's horse with the animal's hypnotically swinging tail, Cuchillo wondered if the lieutenant had chosen this method to punish him. To run him until his heart was close to bursting, his legs collapsed from under him and he fell with the sharp crack of a broken neck. Such cruelty was in keeping with all that every Indian in the area knew about the hate-filled soldier.

Occasionally, Pinner glanced over his shoulder and each time he experienced a fusion of anger and amazement at the stoically impassive set of Cuchillo's features visible through the slick sheen of sweat. He knew the brave was suffering and was deeply resentful that he showed no sign of it. Many times, Pinner's anger drove him close to thudding in his heels and lunging the horse into a gallop. But he resisted, unwilling to trade the fleeting joy of jerking the Apache to sudden death for the greater, longer-lasting pleasures ahead.

As they neared the fort, Pinner's backward glances became more frequent. For he was worried that Cuchillo might suddenly pitch to the trail without warning and be killed. When lights showed ahead, he gave the hand signal for the pace to be reduced to a walk. Cuchillo reacted late and crashed into the hindquarters of Pinner's horse.

"You stupid bastard, look where you're going!" the lieutenant roared as he fought to control his mount, made skittish by the collision.

Cuchillo had to fight for his breath, but he did not panic into taking rapid gulps. He forced his lungs to expand and contract with careful regularity in the same way that he had maintained his leg muscles at a measured work load throughout the long run. But the strain of his endurance was audible in his voice, which had a pained croakiness.

"I apologize," he rasped, "to the horse's ass."

Pinner became stiff in the saddle and started to turn. But a muffled guffaw from one of the men halted the move. Such an insolent response, had it come out on the trail, would have pushed him beyond his limit and Cuchillo would have died. But the end of the journey was now in sight and the flickering light of the kerosene lamps warned him against hasty action. The Apache was going to die, so what else could be done to him? Pinner contented himself with the promise that he would discover which man had laughed at the crack and put him on report.

Fort Davidson was situated at the head of a rocky valley, with a steeper and higher slope to the east than the west. It consisted of a headquarters block with adjacent officers' quarters, three bunkhouses for the men, stables, a cookhouse, a supply store, and an arsenal. This last was of adobe. The other buildings were of timber. A dry ditch had been dug around the perimeter as a token of defense. Outside the ditch, to the west of the military installations, were the adobe

buildings of a small trading post: a store, an Indian agency, a saloon, and half-a-dozen crude dwellings.

To the men of the patrol approaching the moon-shadowed buildings squared with the guttering light of lamps, the fort appeared insubstantial against the time-worn, craggy majesty of the valley it had been erected to defend. But they knew it had served its dual purpose well over many years: dissuading the Mexicans from crossing the mountainous borderland to the south and ensuring that this particular section of the Arizona Territory did not suffer from the savagery of the Chiricahua, Coyotero, Pinal, Mimbrenos and Mescalero Apaches which was perpetrated almost daily in other parts.

So the men set aside the beginnings of fear about what would happen to Davidson and its men if ever the Mexicans attacked in force or the Indians massed for an uprising. And thus the fort became a welcoming refuge after the heat and the cold, the hunger and thirst, the bone-deep weariness and nerve-stretching tensions of the patrol.

So clear and still was the air that the men heard the sentry at the wooden bridge announce their arrival when they were more than a half mile away. They knew that the officer of the day would have binoculars trained upon them. Pinner was particularly conscious of this, and he veered his mount slightly to one side, bringing the wretched figure of Cuchillo into full view. There was no more shouting, but a sudden explosion of activity as men ran across the compound, and wedges of light falling from the opening doors of the bunkhouses told Pinner that it had been noted he was bringing in a prisoner.

Word reached across the planks bridging the ditch so that, by the time the lieutenant led Cuchillo and his patrol among the buildings of the trading post, even the civilians had braved the chill of the night to look at his prize.

“Hey, man, what you got there?”

Cuchillo looked coldly at the speaker. It was Jess Grainger, the Indian Bureau agent who regarded cattle more highly than Indians because it was easier to ride herd on cows and they made good eating.

“If you brought him for me, the price is a hundred dollars gold.” This from Annie Colbert, who claimed to be the most overworked whore west of the Mississippi.

“Mr. Pinner just lifted up a rock...” Nathan Ford, the storekeeper, opened.

“And that’s what crawled out,” his son, Armstrong, completed.

Cuchillo ignored the whore and Grainger. But he showed the Fords a look of blazing hatred which was so intense that both men took a backward step despite the Apache’s helplessness. Then the dark eyes fell upon the puzzled countenance of John Hedges and the fire in them was extinguished immediately.

The Apache almost halted, his mind racing for the form of an explanation he could offer to the only true friend the Apaches had in this part of the territory. But the drag of the noose around his neck forced him to keep up with the pace set, by the grinning Pinner.

Moments later, the hooves of the officer’s mount clopped against the planking of the bridge, and the prisoner was led among a group of soldiers. There were no taunts now. Just the snapped orders which instructed the dismount and care of the animals. The lack of banter surprised Cuchillo momentarily, but then, as the horses were led toward the stable block and Pinner ordered the bystanders to the

side, the brave saw Major Anson standing at the foot of the steps below the stoop fronting the headquarters building.

“Be respectful to the major, Injun,” Pinner hissed, taking up the free end of the rope and ensuring there was slack in it before he led the prisoner toward his commanding officer.

Anson was tall and thin with a drooping moustache that seemed too large for his lean face. He was almost fifty but looked younger because of his erect bearing. Up close, however, his speckled hands and heavily-lined face showed his true age and more. He was a life-long soldier who had served his country efficiently but without distinction—this because he had never been granted the opportunity: all his commands had been nothing more than care-taking roles at posts and forts where common sense was in greater demand than more aggressive military virtues. He had always resented this: to a soldier, it had to be classed as ill-fortune. And from this resentment had grown a bitterness which he sometimes allowed to influence his otherwise fair-mindedness. But tonight, Anson was even-tempered. For a dispatch had arrived recalling him to the East for an important reassignment. He felt certain this was connected with intelligence reports indicating the possibility of rebellion in the southern states of the Union. Civil War? It was too early to say.

Pinner transferred the rope from his right to his left hand, came smartly to attention, and threw up a copybook salute. Anson’s response was casual. But his tones were strong.

“What has this man done, Lieutenant?” he demanded, glancing fleetingly at Cuchillo, then fixing Pinner with a piercing stare.

“He stole from the fort, sir.”

“Stole what?”

“My presentation dagger, sir. Permission to execute the Indian, sir.”

The men grouped in a half-circle around the front of the headquarters block held their breath. Outside the perimeter, barred from crossing the bridge by the sentry, John Hedges heard Pinner’s harsh words and reacted in the same way as the watching soldiers. Summary execution of Indians was frowned upon by Washington, but condoned to the extent that the Government allowed military commanders in the West to use their discretion in consultation with the local Bureau agent. Hedges glanced back toward the post and was in time to see Jess Grainger enter the saloon with the Fords.

“Permission denied, Lieutenant Pinner,” the major said evenly.

The massed sigh was like the wafting of the first wind in advance of a storm. Cuchillo swayed as if his body had been bent by such a wind. He was on the very brink of collapse now. Every muscle in his body ached and his flesh felt ice-cold as the night air dried the sweat which fastened his shirt and leggings to his skin. There was a buzzing in his ears. The tall figure of the major appeared to recede and return into perspective with the same measured timing.

“But, sir—”

“The dagger is not military property,” Anson interrupted. “You have led the man all the way from Borderline in the same manner you entered the fort?”

“Yes, sir!” Pinner snapped unashamedly. “He resisted arrest. Attacked one of my men with the dagger. Corporal!”

This last was shouted, and the injured non-com scuttled forward and came to attention. Anson looked at the ugly, blood-encrusted wound.

"Go to the sick bay," Anson ordered, and waited until the corporal had swung into dismissal and was pacing across the compound before he turned to address Cuchillo. "You did what the officer has told me?"

"The soldiers were going to enter my tepee. Maybe shoot my wife. Harm my son. I told them no need for that. I had dagger inside shirt."

The need to talk seemed to give Cuchillo strength. The ache in his legs had abated and the bones had felt as if they were melting. But now the pain returned and in struggling against it he had to maintain control of himself.

"You stole the dagger?"

"No, Major."

Pinner made a throaty sound of disbelief, which Anson chose to ignore, continuing his open examination of Cuchillo's face.

"It was stolen last night, sir," Pinner put in. "There were at least a dozen Indians at the fort last night."

"Were you here?"

"Yes."

"You had the dagger," Anson pointed out.

"I traded for it."

"With whom?"

Cuchillo set his mouth in a firm line.

Anson sighed. "All right. With what? What did you trade?"

"A stallion. A wild stallion I caught."

"Did you trade with a white man or an Indian? A soldier? A man from the trading post?"

Again the tacit set of lips which sealed the answer within the brave.

"Sir," Pinner said impatiently. "I caught the Indian with the knife and he refuses to offer a proper explanation of how he came by it. We have to assume he stole it."

"We don't have to assume anything," Anson replied acidly. "You have obviously reached your own conclusion. I reserve the right to arrive at my own."

"Sir!" Pinner acknowledged, stiffening his shoulders.

The men were enjoying the scene being played before them. A hanging would be entertaining, and that had not yet been completely ruled out. Meanwhile, the sight of Pinner failing to get his own way and being bawled out to boot was a very pleasant diversion.

"Major Anson!" Hedges called, feeling unable to stand on the sidelines any longer. "I'd appreciate being allowed to talk with the prisoner."

The sound of his friend's voice sent a new surge of strength through Cuchillo. Because of his height, he was able to see across the beads of the soldiers to where Hedges waited anxiously on the far side of the bridge. And he was also able to see along the short street of the post. There, at the end in the outer fringe of light from the saloon windows, White Dog and his five blood-brothers sat astride their ponies.

"Indians," somebody exclaimed.

"I see them," the major muttered, then raised his voice. "Let Mr. Hedges through, sentry."

The soldier lowered his Spencer and stepped to the side. Hedges walked hurriedly over the bridge. The group of young braves maintained their silent, unmoving watch on the proceedings. The half-circle of soldiers parted to allow the schoolteacher through.

Hedges was not a very imposing figure of a man. He was small in stature, with slim shoulders, a paunchy stomach, and stubby legs. His neck was overlong and his balding head seemed to be balanced atop it precariously. His features were nondescript and only his bright, clear blue eyes gave a clue to the intelligence which lurked behind the dull-looking face. In his Eastern suit complete with derby, he looked like a drummer. In fact, he was a trained schoolteacher with a social conscience which had urged him to forsake a brilliant academic career to work among the Indians.

"One of your boys?" Anson asked somewhat sardonically after Hedges and Cuchillo had exchanged fleeting, strained smiles.

"The best pupil I've ever had," Hedges answered. "In ten years of teaching whites and fifteen working with Indians."

"Then he should know right from wrong," the major countered.

"He does," the schoolteacher confirmed. He looked earnestly at Cuchillo. "Just tell the major the truth," he urged.

"I've got trouble enough already, Mr. Hedges," the Apache answered with a shake of his head.

Hedges sighed and became thoughtful for a few moments. Then he eyed Anson. "I don't think Cuchillo stole the dagger, Major. I think he did make a trade for it. He might be protecting one of his own people, but I know he has respect for our laws. He'd name the man. No, I think he made the trade with a white man. And he's afraid of the consequences if he makes such an accusation."

"Afraid for himself?" Anson asked, unconvinced.

Hedges shook his head. "He has a wife and baby son."

Now it was Anson's turn to show a reflective frown as he considered the problem which faced him. Pinner and Hedges waited anxiously to hear the outcome of the major's consideration. Cuchillo showed nothing of what he was thinking. Actually, behind the blank mask of his face, he was suffering a pang of remorse that he had been unable to correct his friend's version of why he remained silent. But how could he announce openly that he intended to reap his own vengeance upon the man who had engineered this situation?

"The Apache has suffered his punishment for being in possession of the dagger," Anson announced at length. "He has been humiliated before his own people and I have no doubt that you, Lieutenant Pinner, showed him little compassion on the journey from the Borderline *Rancheria*."

"Sir, I wish to put it on record that—"

"You will not interrupt me again!" Anson bellowed, his lean face darkening. He paused, glaring at the junior officer. Pinner stared ahead, not moving a muscle voluntarily. The sparse flesh at his temple pulsed frantically. "However," the major went on, moderating his tone and transferring his attention to the Apache, "he committed the grave offense of attacking a uniformed soldier in the execution of his military duty. Under different circumstances, with a less irascible officer in charge, I would consider such an offense punishable by the death penalty."

However, I am prepared to accept there were mitigating circumstances on this occasion. The Indian had every reason to believe, rightly or wrongly, that his family was being threatened.”

Anson held up his right hand, pointing toward the cold light of the stars with his index finger. “This finger will be removed from the accused man’s hand. He will be turned loose after sentence has been carried out. That is all.”

The major came to attention, executed a weary salute, and turned to go to his quarters. Nobody moved or said anything until his door had banged closed. The sound seemed to resound along the entire length of the valley. It vibrated in the air and the lamp hanging from the stoop roof above the steps trembled. Its light showed that Cuchillo had not altered his expression an iota since his punishment had been announced.

Pinner relaxed from his ramrod stiffness by slow degrees and a bone in his leg cracked as the tension was eased. The sound seemed to be made by his lips as they folded back in an evil grin. As he turned toward the Apache, he drew the ornate dagger from where it was stored beneath his revolver holster. His narrowed eyes flicked toward Hedges.

“The Injun’s been a naughty boy, teacher,” he hissed. “He’s going to have to hold out his hand to get what’s coming to him.”

Hedges ignored the comment as he stepped up close to Cuchillo and eased the noose from around the brave’s neck. He had to reach up a long way, for the Apache towered more than twelve inches above him. Cuchillo refused to drop his blank gaze and therefore did not see the pitying, close-to-tears look in Hedges’ eyes.

“What kinda punishment is that?” a voice muttered from the midst of the excitedly expectant crowd of soldiers. “The Apache’s proved he ain’t a fingerman.”

Chapter 3

JOHN HEDGES STOOD where he was, running the noosed rope back and forth through his hands as Pinner forced the Apache to angle across the compound, pressing the point of the dagger between his shoulder blades. The soldiers hurried after them, splitting to by-pass the slight figure of the schoolteacher and then reforming a tight-knit group. The sentry at the bridge and others in position around the perimeter ditch looked on enviously as their comrades crowded around the entrance of the blacksmith’s shop at one end of the stable block.

The forge fire was out but the shop still retained a residue of heat from the day’s work. At an order from Pinner, Cuchillo halted and stood absolutely still in the open doorway as the sergeant who had been on the patrol struck a match and lit a single lamp. Then, under the prodding of the knife point, the Apache moved to one of the three anvils.

“Justice should be seen to be done, Injun,” the lieutenant rasped, and shoved Cuchillo behind the anvil, turning him to face the blood-lusting audience of soldiers. “Two men to hold the bastard still?” Pinner asked evenly.

The sergeant was already in position behind the Apache. There was a scuffle in the doorway and a trooper in uniform breeches and a grubby red undervest won and darted forward.

Because he was human, Cuchillo was afraid. But he was an Indian and had therefore learned to mask his fear. And the cruel initiation rites which had marked his transition from puberty into adulthood had taught him the way to endure great suffering. A prime requisite of such endurance was to will the spirit into complete tranquility in preparation for the pain to come. Thus, as the sergeant cut him free of his bonds, grasping him firmly at the shoulders, and the trooper took hold of his right wrist and forced his palm down against the cool solidity of the anvil, the Apache withdrew deeper into the detached world of his own making. He was aware of the evil grin on Pinner's face and the almost tangible aura of excitement generated by the witnesses, but he was able to ignore it as he concentrated every fiber of his being toward the vital goal.

And he attained it.

The yellow light of the oil lamp shed a bright cone over the four figures grouped around the anvil. Pinner had so positioned it that none of the men cast a shadow across the splayed hand. Eyes flicked from the gleaming blade of the descending knife to the doomed finger.

"Even money the Apache don't scream," a soldier offered.

"Like hell," another responded. "I know Injuns. They're like deaf mutes when they're hurt."

"That's 'cause they're too dumb to feel pain."

The silence descended suddenly once more. Pinner rested the blade at the very base of Cuchillo's index finger.

"No," he said softly. "Too easy for him."

Abruptly, he lifted the blade and moved it down the finger. He rested it between the nail and the first joint, moving his head from side to side like a woman considering the first cut in slicing up a fresh cake. There was a mass exhalation of breath as he began to saw.

The edge was extremely sharp. It cut through skin and flesh with little more than its own weight. Blood spurted. Cuchillo stared ahead in a fixed gaze across the heads of the ghoulish watchers. But he did not see the moonlight on the compound or the dark shapes of the trading post beyond. The figures of Hedges in the middle distance and the mounted Apaches in the far background did not register with him. Instead, his mind's eye peered far beyond these realities to paint a picture of the high peaks of the Dragoon Mountains. It was night and winter and very cold. He was small, just a boy, listening to his grandfather, the great chief Mangus Coloradas, talking to him of the dream that there would one day be peace with equality between the Indians and the whites. Before the dream came true, Coloradas had warned, there would be much blood spilled on both sides. There were good and bad men in both races and it would be the evil ones who brought about the slaughter and the pain. But the good would have to suffer as much as the bad, for it was noted that nothing worthwhile was achieved without struggle.

What the great chief had spoken of served no purpose to Cuchillo now. The dream had been firmly implanted in his mind to be nurtured later by John Hedges. The Apache had chosen to call upon this incident in his life simply

because he had never been so cold as he was on that night. And by remembering the agonizing chill which had attacked his body then, he was able to generate an artificial coldness now. It was a trance-like state which produced an effect of being encased in a solid block of ice. And thus the fibers of his body were numbed against pain.

The blade sawed through the gristle of the finger joint and Pinner's enjoyment increased as he found he had to apply greater pressure. Then the finely-honed edge screeched against the anvil. The lieutenant flicked his wrist and the severed fingertip was flipped to the dirt floor.

Men craned forward to see the blood-sodden piece of flesh, then looked quickly up at Cuchillo's face. The freezing cold was only in the Apaches mind. His copper-colored features were beaded and run with sweat. His nostrils were flared wide. His eyes bulged from his head. His forehead was deeply creased. His mouth was clamped so tightly closed that his lips were merely a thin fine of a lighter color than the rest of his face.

Blood was merely trickling from the pulpy end of his shortened finger now. But there was an explosive spurt from a new source as Pinner turned the dagger upright, rested the point below the middle joint and struck the top of the handle a sharp blow with the heel of his fist. Bone shattered. The veins stood out against Cuchillo's neck and his cheeks expanded. But he forced back the cry. Pinner turned the dagger to a crosswise position again and drew it fast into the bloody wound. Another wrist movement sent a second piece of flesh to the floor of the shop.

Nobody watched it fall this time. For all eyes save those of the three men directly engaged in the torture were fastened upon the sheened face of the Apache. And in many of these eyes there was an expression akin to grudging respect. Others showed simple amazement. None of them liked Indians. Some distrusted them; others hated them. All regarded them as the enemy. But could not an enemy demand respect?

The blade was lowered for the final act of the torture. It was rested diagonally across the flesh at the base of the finger. Pinner stretched up to his full height and then sank down to apply as much of his weight as possible to the dagger handle. The blade bit, without sawing. It hit bone and would sink no further. Pinner cursed. He withdrew the knife, took hold of the blood-slippery point and hurled the weapon across the blacksmith's shop. It bit into a roof support and quivered. He jerked the Colt from his holster and cocked it as he rested the muzzle against the bloodied flesh. The shot was amplified by the confined space. The bullet blasted off the remaining portion of the Apache's index finger, flattened, and ricocheted against the anvil. It severed the middle finger as it whined upward.

"Jesus!" a soldier exclaimed as the powder-blackened, blood-dripping whole finger splatted to the ground at his feet.

"Accidents happen," Pinner said casually. "You going to sue me, Injun?"

Only Cuchillo's eyes moved. First he glanced down at his mutilated hand. Then he looked at Pinner. They were flat and bottomless.

"Let him go!" Pinner said with a grimace.

The sergeant and the trooper complied and backed away.

"I leave now?" Cuchillo said, his tone adding the query.

“Sure,” Pinner answered, and split his lips into a sardonic grin. “Can you make it on your own, or do you want a hand?”

He laughed harshly at his own joke. Nobody joined in his amusement. Cuchillo side-stepped around the anvil, then walked slowly forward. The gunshot had shattered his mentally-erected defenses. White-hot pain extended from the open wounds at his fingers to suffuse his entire hand, arm and shoulder. The agonies of the long run from the *rancheria* attacked his legs again. He walked stiffly, with great effort. The group at the doorway parted to allow him through. The cold air of night dried the sweat on his face. His clothing was patched with wet stains. Not a man who watched him thought he could take another step without collapsing into unconsciousness. But they were wrong. With a somehow pathetic dignity, the Apache walked clear of the blacksmith’s shop with both arms hanging limply at his sides, droplets of blood splashing to leave a trail of elongated stains as trail markers.

“Cuchillo!” John Hedges rasped, breaking into a run towards the towering, ramrod erect Apache.

“No,” Cuchillo croaked as the slightly-built teacher reached out a hand toward him. “I need no help.”

Hedges hesitated, then nodded and fell in beside the Apache, not touching him. He understood: Cuchillo did need help but he was unprepared to accept it within sight of the man who had tortured him.

The shot had attracted the attention of the civilians, and they stood in a group before the saloon again. There was no respect in their eyes, even though they could see the mutilated right hand leaving its trail of bloody markers and the dried sweat of silent suffering sheening the proud features. They were merely surprised that an Apache brought in by Lieutenant Pinner under such circumstances was being allowed to walk out of the fort.

The sentry stepped away from the plank bridge and Hedges dropped back a pace to allow Cuchillo to take the lead. White Dog and the other Apaches moved their horses further into the area of light and halted when they were sure Cuchillo had seen them.

“You’ll allow me to bind your wounds?” Hedges asked, falling into slow step beside the Apache again.

Cuchillo glanced at his friend and tutor and saw the need to be of help written in his features.

“Indian-lover,” Nathan Ford said in a rasping whisper.

“That’s no insult to me,” Hedges retorted.

“Aw, he’s as thick-skinned as an Apache, Pa,” the younger Ford chided.

“You want me to report this to the Bureau, man?” Grainger asked as he raised a glass of foaming beer to his sneering lips.

“What purpose would it serve?” Cuchillo asked, addressing the agent, but flicking his eyes from Nathan to Armstrong Ford and fixing the younger man with a level stare.

Armstrong was twenty, with his father’s small, brown eyes and rather weak mouth line. But whereas Nathan was almost bald, his son had a great deal of thick, red hair. And his build was much bigger, with broad shoulders, a barrel chest and muscular arms and legs. He stood only an inch shorter than Cuchillo.

"What you giving me the evil eye for?" Armstrong demanded as Grainger shrugged in response to the Apache's point. "Weren't he that cut off your thieving fingers, Injun."

Cuchillo had stopped immediately in front of the group and he continued to hold the fixed stare. Armstrong's tongue darted out to lick his lips and he glanced to left and right, as if to make sure he was not alone.

"Pinner not know he do wrong. Only bad thing is he happy at what he did. You know."

"Hey, what you saying?" Nathan demanded, dropping a hand to cover his holstered Remington. "You accusing my boy of something, Injun?"

"You ask him," Cuchillo said cryptically, and started forward, angling across the short street towards Hedges' adobe house.

White Dog held up a hand to order his men to hold their positions. He heeled his pony to bar the way.

"That ain't no answer!" Nathan Ford snarled, his square, weathered face coloring with anger.

He was talking to the Apache's back.

"You come with us, Cuchillo," White Dog muttered in his native tongue.

Cuchillo held up his injured hand. "Soon. First Mr. Hedges treat my wounds."

"Apache medicine better than white mans," White Dog argued.

"You hear me, you thieving bastard?" the elder Ford roared, jerking his gun free and leveling it at the back of Cuchillo's sweat-stained shirt.

Hedges began to tremble. But he stepped into the line of fire, turning to face the man with the gun.

"You don't get out of the way, Mr. Hedges have to treat you, too," Cuchillo warned the mounted Apache. "I tell you, wait. I come soon."

White Dog was older than Cuchillo by three years and considered himself to be stronger, perhaps braver. But in the initiation ceremony, Cuchillo had retained his senses longer than any other young buck in living memory. And he had not uttered a single sound of agony. In White Dog's year of initiation, he had cried out twice, and had fainted two minutes earlier than Cuchillo's record-making period of endurance. This negated their difference in ages and when Black Horse died the two braves would contest leadership of the Apaches at the Borderline *Rancheria*. White Dog often considered engineering a confrontation before the appointed time came, but a voice inside his head always warned him against such a rash action when the opportunity occurred.

Now he nodded, "We wait," he said, and backed off his horse to join the stony-faced braves at the end of the street.

"Put the gun away, Mr. Ford," Hedges said, surprised at the strength he was able to put into his voice. "Cuchillo's probably delirious."

Cuchillo turned and stepped to the side, presenting himself as a target for the enraged man with the gun. "I know what I'm saying," he said. "Your son understands it. It is between him and me. You shoot me, all people wonder why."

"You—"

Grainger was suddenly worried, and he reached out a hand and gripped Ford's shoulder. The Army mistreating an Indian was one thing. That was their affair. The War Department had more pull in Washington than the Bureau. But for a

civilian to gun down an Apache—an unarmed Apache—in the presence of a Bureau agent, that was something else. Grainger valued his easy job too highly to put it in jeopardy.

“Hold it, Nath,” he urged. “Let’s calm down. You got a problem with the redskin, you handle it through me.”

“But he—”

“Another day tomorrow,” Grainger pointed out. “I know where to find him if you got an official complaint to make against him.”

“Come on,” Hedges whispered, finally able to bring his trembling under control. “Let me fix that hand for you.”

The house was comprised of two rooms: a bedroom large enough to accommodate a single bunk, bureau, and closet; and a combined living room, kitchen, and study. The teacher had lived there for five years now, existing on goods and food with which a handful of Apaches at Borderline paid for the education of their sons and, in three cases, themselves. It was a frugal life but a rewarding one for a man like Hedges, whose greatest pleasure was to conquer an academic challenge against all the odds. And there was no greater challenge than bringing education to a people regarded as savages in a climate of hostility. Not all his successes had been so triumphant as Cuchillo. But a man had to accept his satisfactions in varying degrees.

“Do you want to tell me what that was all about?” the teacher asked after a lengthy period of silence while the kettle boiled and he collected together rags for bathing, salve ointment, and dressing material.

Cuchillo was seated at the table, very erect in a straight-backed chair, with his injured hand resting on the rough wood. The bleeding had stopped and the blood was crusting to a dry blackness. He had splashed water from the jug on to his face and scrubbed at it with a towel. Without the sheen of sweat to mask it, the skin seemed paler.

“I will tell. It must not go further.”

Hedges nodded as he poured boiling water into a basin. He set the basin on the table and pulled up a chair. “You have my word.”

Cuchillo nodded now, accepting the promise with the same confidence he would give to that of an Apache blood-brother. “I was at the fort last night. The pay was twenty-five cents to unload the supply train. Chipeta needs store things for the baby. My crop has not been good.”

The Apache did not have to go into details, for Hedges knew him too well and Cuchillo was aware of this. The brave did not like to work for the Army, or any white man. He had a great thirst for the vast area of knowledge which lay outside the realm of Apache lore, and he slaked this at every opportunity. But he was a proud Apache and a traditionalist who strove to cling to the Indian way—which was to raise and support his family by ancient hunting skills and the modern, unwelcome but necessary, craft of farming. But raising wheat and barley in the thin, dusty soil of the plateau in the hills was invariably doomed to failure. And hunting had been bad this year.

“And?” Hedges asked.

"Some supplies on the wagons were for the store. Armstrong Ford supervised the unloading of these. He spoke to me. I had captured a stallion. A black, very beautiful stallion. Very wild. Great spirit. I have him in a small box canyon west of the *rancheria*. Many know of this and say I will never break him. Ford say he would like to buy the horse. Not for himself. He say an officer at the fort want him. They had seen him when I was not there. I ask him how much he give for stallion. He says no money and show me the knife. I know it belong to the officer Pinner. Everyone know that. He wear it for big ceremonies at fort. Ford say I could sell dagger for a lot of money. I ask why Pinner not speak to me. Ford say how Pinner hate Apaches and I know this."

"So you made the trade?" Hedges asked, testing the water and finding the temperature satisfactory. Gently, he lifted the injured hand and began to dab at the finger stumps with a sopping rag.

In the privacy of the tiny house, Cuchillo allowed himself the luxury of wincing as the hot water put a fresh edge on the pain. "I say all right. But not to sell dagger. I want as present for my son when he old enough to feel pride in such a possession."

"Unwise," Hedges said evenly, uncritically.

"Not trade until deep thought," the Apache defended in the same tone of easy friendship. "Decide Ford not be so foolish as to steal such a well-known thing as dagger." Now, incredibly, he grinned and nodded. Humor seemed to emphasize his handsomeness. "Unwise," he agreed.

"And you didn't name him because you didn't think the Army would believe you?"

The grin was wiped away as fast as it had been raised. "One reason."

"A good one in this neck of the woods," Hedges allowed, examining the wound and finding it to be clean. He started to apply the salve. "But I've an idea your other reason is bad."

"My business, Mr. Hedges," Cuchillo said flatly.

Hedges sighed, knowing he had run up against an insurmountable barrier. Over the years of their friendship there had been a virtually free exchange in discussions on all levels. But almost from the very start, Cuchillo had used this phrase to warn that he was unprepared to speak further in the direction the talk was heading. To attempt to pursue the matter always led to storm warnings of Cuchillo's volatile temper—the only character defect Hedges had discovered in the Apache.

"You almost made it public property outside just now." Hedges ventured.

Cuchillo nodded, his stem expression suggesting annoyance at himself rather than Hedges' comment. "Anger at White Dog and Ford almost too much to keep inside."

Hedges had applied a pad of soft material to the salved wound and now began to bind it.

"It might have been Pinner's idea," he suggested. "He and Ford have anything against you?"

"I'm an Apache," Cuchillo said simply. "You only white man here not hate all Apaches. Me the unlucky one."

Hedges fastened the bandage and pulled aside the collar of the brave's shirt to look at the rope burns around his neck. "You want me to do something for that?" he asked.

Cuchillo raised his good hand and explored the hard ridge of flesh. For a moment his eyes were hard. Then they brightened and his mouth opened in a grin. "Better leave something for Chipeta to do. She like to be ..." He was lost for the words.

"A ministering angel?" Hedges suggested with a smile.

"Right," Cuchillo said, and stood up. His legs felt stiff after the rest, but most of the pain was gone—or perhaps was merely swamped by the intense, burning sensation in his hand and arm. "I'm grateful, Mr. Hedges. I hope the people of the post do not make you suffer for helping me."

"Do I look scared?" Hedges asked, broadening the smile.

"Not so much as out there," Cuchillo responded, injecting a humorous note into his voice.

"An act," Hedges lied, his grin making it a blatant one. "I always say it takes a very mean man indeed to kill a coward."

Cuchillo halted at the door and his voice and countenance became earnest. "No man is braver than a brave coward," he said.

"Apache proverb?" Hedges asked, knowing what was coming.

"Cuchillo's," the Apache replied. "Goodnight, Mr. Hedges."

He went out while the teacher was still smiling. Since learning the English language, Cuchillo had derived a great deal of simple pleasure from composing little homilies, most of which were very meaningful. Then Hedges became serious, anxious even.

Cuchillo had a grudge against Armstrong Ford which, sooner or later, he would act upon. It would cause trouble enough. But had the Apache considered a plot between Ford and Pinner before Hedges implanted the idea? If not, then Hedges would have to accept a share of responsibility for the much larger trouble which was certain to erupt if the Indian waged a personal war with an Army officer.

Outside, the short street was deserted of white men. Laughter and raucous voices from the saloon told of where they had gone. The fort was quiet, the lights from windows of the bunkhouses and officers' quarters creating false impressions of warmth against the actual cold of the moonlit air. The only movements were those of the half-dozen sentries patrolling the inner bank of the defensive ditch.

"Now you join your own people, Cuchillo?" White Dog asked.

He and the others waited precisely where he had left them when he went into the schoolteacher's house. The cold pinched their cheeks and showed their breath like puffs of smoke. But they endured it without complaint.

"You got any of the kind of medicine Mr. Hedges isn't allowed to give me?" Cuchillo asked as he halted before the group.

White Dog swung the buckskin gourd around from his back and pulled the thong over his head. He handed it down to Cuchillo, who fumbled at the stopper with his right hand before deciding to use his left. His movements were awkward, but finally he was able to raise the gourd and suck at its fiery contents. His taste for cheap whiskey was a character defect Hedges did not know about. When he

had drunk his fill and the fire in his belly matched the intensity in his arm, he handed back the gourd.

He spoke in English, smiling up at his future opponent for the chieftom of the Borderline Mimbrenos Apaches. "You're a bastard son of a bitch, White Dog," he said evenly. "But you've got your uses."

Neither White Dog – nor any of his blood-brothers – understood English. "Speak your own tongue," the mounted brave demanded.

Cuchillo swung up on to the pony behind White Dog and gripped the wrist of his injured hand with his good one in front of the other's belly. "I said let's go home," he muttered.

"And force war council on Black Horse?" White Dog replied, excitement quivering in his voice.

"One pie at a time," Cuchillo replied. "I need all the fingers I've got left to put in the one already cooking."

At an order from White Dog, the group of Apaches wheeled their horses and galloped up the trail toward the *rancheria*.

Chapter 4

IT WAS AFTER midnight and bitterly cold when Cuchillo and his escort reached the *rancheria*. The sentries admitted the group of braves without comment and word quickly spread among the tepees that the man taken by the evil Pinner had returned. More than two hundred pairs of eyes peered through slits in buffalo hide to follow the groups progress across the camp.

The riders halted their ponies before the tepee of Chief Black Horse and dismounted. Cuchillo took up a position at the front of the group and there was no need to announce his presence. For the message had been conveyed to the old man and he was fully dressed in shabby robe and molting headdress when he stepped through the flap held open by one of his wives. He placed his arms akimbo and fixed Cuchillo with a level stare.

"You have been set free?" His tone was as flat as his eyes.

"Major Anson ordered one finger removed," Cuchillo replied. "Lieutenant Pinner removed two."

"You committed the crime of which you were accused?"

"No"

Black Horse nodded. It was a simple gesture, but sufficient to express his trust in the brave's word. "Do you wish to speak of it to me?"

Most of the outside fires had been allowed to die down. A half-dozen flickered in a widely-spaced circle around the *rancheria*. But the moon was bright on the faces of the group.

"It is my own affair," Cuchillo replied evenly.

"So be it," the old man said, and started to turn.

"I do not agree!" White Dog cut in sharply, halting the chief. "The white-eyes' soldiers have insulted you, our chief, and have invaded the privacy of our tepees. Such acts cannot be allowed to pass unpunished."

Black Horse eyed White Dog's aggressively-set features and saw the nods of agreement from his blood-brothers. His own anger rose, for the young brave had committed a serious breach of etiquette by speaking to an elder without being invited to do so. But a low, ominous wave of whispered conversation rolled among the tepees and the old chief sensed it was sympathetic to the views of White Dog. So he did not reprimand the brave. He spoke in the same tone as before, but raised the level of his voice so that it would reach the ears of his people who watched and listened in every part of the *rancheria*.

"The Apache memory is long," he pronounced. "The indignities which the white-eyes made us suffer this night will be remembered together with the many others we have experienced. The time for vengeance is near. But it is not yet come."

White Dog, too, had heard the murmur of discontent and knew he had scored a point off the stooped old man. He swelled his chest and stoked the fires in his eyes. "Always you say this, Chief Black Horse," he accused. "Must we wait until we are too old to fight so that our sons will have to repay the debts of suffering owed by their fathers to the white-eyes?"

The nods were more vigorous now, and this time the murmuring was louder, more insistent. White Dog pressed home his advantage, aware that for the first time he had the chance to extend his following far beyond the mere handful of braves who had supported him for so long.

"The Mimbrenos of this *rancheria* are not alone in their suffering," he went on, raising his own voice so that all could hear his words. "Our brothers in all branches of the Apache nation share our degradation. I do not propose that we act alone. I call for a council of all chiefs and all sub-chiefs in the entire territory. I call for—"

The face of the old man seemed to be carved from dark stone as he listened to the young brave's oratory. Cuchillo, in pain and severely weakened by his ordeal, swept his gaze between the shocked chief and the agitated brave. He saw that Black Horse was in danger of losing control of the situation. It was something he did not want to happen, but felt powerless to intervene. For apart from his pain and fatigue he did not know how he was regarded by the braves. He it was who had been responsible for Pinner's foray into the *rancheria*, albeit unwittingly. Feeling against the soldiers was running high, but there could still be room in wounded hearts for resentment toward the instrument of their raid.

Cuchillo elected to make a simple test. As White Dog continued with his tirade, becoming more vehement by the moment, Cuchillo pivoted on his heels and strode away from the group, heading toward the tepee where Chipeta stood meekly waiting for him. The move interrupted White Dog's flow, and he broke his concentrated gaze upon the chief to look after the departing brave. Cuchillo sensed the angry eyes boring into his back but did not falter in his stride. Nor did he show any reaction to the faint swishing sounds of scores of tepee flaps falling back into place as the witnesses withdrew into the warm darkness of their simple abodes.

This series of slight sounds scratched the silence which followed a mid-sentence break in White Dog's speech. It generated a subtle power far greater than any of the emotive words shouted by White Dog. And this was drawn upon by Black Horse and gave the old man the strength of will to complete his turn and shuffle into his tepee. Frustration fed fuel to the anger of the rebuffed brave and he spun

around, his glowing eyes raking the *rancheria*. Those braves who had not withdrawn immediately after the lead set by Cuchillo did so now. The sentries began their patrols again. Only the five braves showed their loyalty to him by remaining at his side, awaiting his orders. White Dog realized that the opportunity offered him by Cuchillo's capture and punishment had been snatched from his grasp—and by Cuchillo.

“Attend to the ponies,” he rasped. “Tomorrow we will talk.”

Chipeta welcomed her husband with little show of emotion. But he knew she felt great joy at his safe return and deep concern for his suffering. The only outward signs of such feelings could be seen in her tear-ravaged face, but he sensed the gentleness of her hands as she applied a salve of crushed yarrow to the rope burn on his neck.

She had kept the tepee fire burning in hope of his return and as he stretched his weary body on the blanket bed its warmth nudged him toward an exhausted sleep. But his mind was not ready for rest. For it churned in a turmoil of conflicting emotions. Uppermost was hatred for Armstrong Ford. Then there was the enigma of John Hedges' theory that perhaps Pinner was involved in the trick. And why? A plot to break the uneasy peace between the Indians and the whites? It was common knowledge that Pinner was spoiling for a confrontation with the Apaches. And Ford? He was just a born troublemaker and had a grudge against the Indians ever since he was tried and acquitted for the rape of an Apache girl, for there was not an Indian or white man who did not know he was guilty of the crime.

What to do about it? The schoolteacher's warning constantly intruded. As well as the words of Mangus Coloradas and of John Hedges. Thus, frustration struggled with hate. And pride was there in his mind too. He was well aware of the reason for White Dog's offer of help: the hothead was hopeful that the Army's treatment of Cuchillo would have driven him away from his moderate line. And there was no doubt that if Cuchillo and White Dog had faced Black Horse in a united stand, the old chief would have been forced to abdicate leadership of the Borderline Apaches.

Cuchillo had long known that of the two young braves, he was favored to be the next chief. This, despite the fact that deep down the vast majority of braves had a degree of sympathy for White Dog's desire to strike back at the white men. But they tempered their enmity with reason in the knowledge it was better to fight from a position of strength. And until they acquired strength, in the form of numbers and weapons to match those of the white man's army, it was better to be led by a clear-thinking chief rather than an impulsive one. So it was pride in the intelligence of his fellow Apaches which added to the conflicting thoughts keeping Cuchillo awake, not the fact of his own ability to influence their actions.

When sleep finally came, it was a deep sleep free of dreams. And it lasted many hours into the next day. The morning activity in and around the *rancheria* failed to rouse him. Hunting parties went out in search of scarce game. Other groups, on foot and mounted, headed for the widely-scattered water holes to seek fresh sources of supply now that the stream was almost drained. Closer at hand, braves went reluctantly into the arid fields to tend the weak, low-yield crops. Among the tepees, squaws damped down breakfast fires and then rekindled them for the

midday meal. In between, they repaired holes in the tepees, wove bed blankets and saw to the needs of their younger children.

It was another hot day. The brightness of the sun shone a merciless light upon the misery in the faces of the Apaches and seemed to magnify the squalor of their surroundings. Seated cross-legged in the shaded entrance-way of his tepee, Black Horse saw this and was sad. His ancient face seemed incapable of smiling and it was, in fact, a very long time since he had practiced such an expression. So it was with every Apache of the *rancheria* except for the youngest children, who knew no other life and in their innocent ignorance were able to make the best of it.

All others could recall better times, when the whole of Arizona and New Mexico territories, and Sonora and Chihuahua, was free range across which the Apaches could wander at will. So that when the game and water in one area was exhausted, it was simply a matter to break camp and set up a new *rancheria* elsewhere. Such a nomadic life was the natural way for the Indian, for only in complete freedom were the people able to experience complete happiness. Anything less was misery. So misery, made worse by the squalor resulting from broken spirits, was the lot of the Indian. And there could be no relief until the white squatters and the soldiers of the American and Mexican armies were driven back to where they had come from and the Apaches reclaimed their birthright.

Would the great chiefs of the many branches of the Apache nation ever call a war council to mass the strength of the Mimbrenos, the Chiricahua, the Mescalero, the Gila, and the Pinal? Only in this way could victory be won. Or was it to be left to braves like White Dog to whip up isolated pockets of hatred and so wage hit-and-run guerrilla warfare? If this were to happen, Black Horse reflected, such resistance was doomed to failure. And those Apaches who took no part in such conflicts would see the defeat and lose what little hope they now held.

When Black Horse saw Cuchillo emerge from his tepee just before the sun reached its midday peak, he experienced a deep surge of gratitude toward the young brave. For, he was certain, had Cuchillo joined forces with White Dog last night, the people would have rallied to them. And the ditch surrounding Fort Davidson would be filled with the twisted bodies of Apache warriors.

Cuchillo looked toward the old chief, seemed about to approach, then turned on his heels and moved lithely between the tepees toward the rope corral. Black Horse was glad to see the brave striding out so confidently and showing no sign of his ordeal. But he was not surprised. Cuchillo was strong and had learned well the Apache teachings of self-discipline which enabled his mental processes to overcome all but the most powerful physical strains.

Cuchillo felt strong, the effects of the forced run completely negated by his long period of rest. His right hand hurt and the arm was stiff, but he was able to ignore these discomforts as he cut out his piebald from the ponies in the corral and fitted a rope war bridle to the animal. He led the pony clear of the corral before mounting him barebacked, and riding around the northern edge of the *rancheria*.

There was no trail as such leading away from the encampment to the western side of the plateau. The only officially acknowledged trail in the whole area was that which spurred off the main Albuquerque-to-Tucson trail to provide a supply route to Fort Davidson. The road connecting the fort with the *rancheria* had been formed by the countless progression of army patrols and the back and forth

supply runs by Apaches to the trading post. Elsewhere, the traveler followed the route he considered the shortest between two points.

At the western edge of the plateau the ground fell away steeply into a shallow canyon, but a mile to the north the cliff gave way to a shale slope which could be negotiated by a skilled rider on a horse he trusted. This was the route which Cuchillo followed, urging the piebald gently to the top of the incline, then controlling him firmly whenever he was in danger of panicking at losing his footing on the loose, treacherous surface. Progress was slow for three-quarters of the way down. But then, as the incline steepened, any weight caused the shale to move. Cuchillo dug his knees into the sides of the pony and kept a tight grip on the rope reins. The animal, its eyes wide and glowing red with fear, locked its legs and slid fast with the cascading debris. It had made the reckless downslide many times before and was prepared for the sudden command transmitted by heels and bit. When the signs came, the animal lunged into a leap and landed four-footed on the canyon floor.

It was hot down there, for the sun was immediately overhead, the giant saguaro cacti dropping patches of shadow only at their very base. Cuchillo respected the pony's discomfort from the slide down the slope and checked him to an easy walk as he angled him across the rock and sand terrain in a northwesterly direction. The canyon was about a half mile wide at this point, with rims that sloped lower on both sides as they stretched north.

The small box canyon went off at right angles from the main gorge at the point where Cuchillo completed his crosswise ride. Its only entrance was a zig-zagging crack in the sandstone cliff face, which was broad enough to admit a horse and rider at ground level, narrowing to a slit no wider than a man's fist at the top, some thirty feet above.

Cuchillo dismounted at the entrance and hitched the pony to a patch of sagebrush. He entered the cleft, which was in deep shade, and pulled up short. The entranceway was about six feet long before it opened out on the far side into what was a deep hole in the ground: fifty yards across, a hundred from back to front, and some twenty feet deep. Ever since he had followed the black stallion into this secret place, Cuchillo had kept the animal trapped there with a large slab of rock which required all his strength to fold into position across the entrance on every occasion he came here. Now the rock lay flat on the ground, offering free access and exit to and from the box canyon. It had been in place, the stallion firmly trapped behind it, at this time yesterday when Cuchillo had come with feed and water for his prize.

The Apache crept forward, his face set in a suspicious frown, his good hand inside his open shirt and curled around the handle of the knife in its unaccustomed position on his right hip. At the far end of the entranceway, he halted again, and narrowed his black eyes to rake them across the dazzlingly sunlit floor of the tiny canyon. There was no cactus here. Mostly an uneven covering of ragged rock like a frozen lake interspersed with patches of dusty soil in which brush held an insecure foothold.

The stallion was not in sight.

Cuchillo checked the first surge of his rising temper and leaned forward to peer along the cliff face immediately on his right. The rifle muzzle jabbed hard into the nape of his neck from the left side of the entranceway.

“Freeze or die, Injun!” Nathan Ford rasped.

Cuchillo became rooted to the spot, not moving a muscle. Boot leather scraped against rock and the sneering Armstrong circled into the Apache’s range of vision. He had a Spencer nesting against his shoulder, his left eye gleaming behind the backsight.

“I got him, Pa,” the younger Ford said confidently. “Right between his sneaky eyes.”

The pressure of the muzzle was relieved from the Apache’s neck but he did not move. His left hand felt awkward curled around the knife grip.

“You can unfreeze now,” Nathan said, his tone less tense. “And bring that hand out slow... and empty.”

Cuchillo moved his hand first. Then he stepped clear of the entrance and straightened, turning to look at Nathan and then beyond him. The father wore the same kind of mean look as the son and was pointing an identical rifle at the Apache, but aimed from the hip toward the captive’s heart. Behind him were two ground-hobbled horses, unsaddled. The remains of a cold meal littered an area before two folded horse blankets. An almost empty whiskey bottle lay on its side. The Fords had been camped in the canyon for some time. Cuchillo flicked his gaze from one to the other and guessed from the floridness of their complexions and the red veins in their eyes that the bottle had been full when they arrived.

“Where my horse?” the Apache asked.

Nathan spat into the face of the cliff. The globule of moisture sizzled and vaporized. “We run him out, Injun. Skunk like you don’t deserve a proud animal like that. Maybe someone more fitting to ride him will get a rope on him.”

“You steal him!” Cuchillo accused.

Nathan shook his head. “No, Injun, we didn’t. We took that stallion back to the post, it’d make your lies seem to be the truth.”

“I not lie,” Cuchillo retorted. “Wild stallion proof I could trade. Reason you run him off.”

“I told you why I turned him loose,” Nathan snarled, his anger flaring. “But that wasn’t the only reason I come here, Injun. You threw some mud at my boy last night. The kind that can stick. I don’t like that and I aim to teach you a lesson. Keep him covered, real good, Armstrong.”

“I got him, Pa,” his son confirmed. “Make the thieving bastard scream for mercy.”

Cuchillo did not have to look toward the younger Ford to know that he was still only the squeeze of a trigger finger away from death. He continued to watch Nathan and saw him rest the Spencer against the cliff face and stoop down to root under the saddles. He came up with a vicious-looking bullwhip which had a wooden handle bound with twine and a leather thong more than four feet in length. Cuchillo viewed it dispassionately. He merely blinked & the leather cracked in a practice lash against the air.

“Turn around, Injun!” Nathan ordered.

Cuchillo ignored the command and flicked his eyes toward the leaning Spencer. He judged it to be ten feet away. It was cocked, but the distance was too great.

"I said turn around!" Nathan bellowed.

"How about I blast one of his kneecaps, Pa?" Armstrong suggested.

"You hold your tongue!" his father shouted. "I said I'd whip him, and that's what I'm gonna do. Wont nobody hold that against me. It's harsh enough for what he did."

"I told truth," Cuchillo said evenly, afraid, but as always able to hide it. "Your son is liar. How else he know where I keep stallion?"

"Because you tried to sell it to him," Nathan answered, his drunken anger unabated. "You said he could come out and take a look at the horse. But you wanted too much. The price was too high. 'Cause he wouldn't buy at your price, you held it against him. When you got caught with the dagger, you tried to switch the blame to him. That's Armstrong's story. Makes sense, considering the way an Injun's mind works. You think I'd believe a no-good Apache instead of my own son? Turn around, for Christ sake!"

Cuchillo shook his head slowly. "You want to do it, you do it face-to-face, mister," he challenged and in his voice there was now a quiver of emotion.

"Okay, you get it the way you asked for it!" Nathan roared shrilly, drawing back his arm.

The thong came clear of the ground and arced slowly to the side of Ford. Then the arm whipped out and forward and the thong made an evil hissing sound as it snaked at immense speed toward Cuchillo's face. The Apache stood as still as a saguaro on a windless day. Ford had leaned forward, but not enough. The thong cracked, its tip less than six inches in front of the Apache's face.

"Cool bastard, ain't he?" Armstrong commented flatly.

"You should ever have so much courage," his father muttered wryly, and took a step closer to the Indian. Then another. He drew back his arm.

Without giving an outward sign, Cuchillo tensed every muscle in his body. His eyes flicked from Nathan's vicious face to the tip of the leather thong. It was dragged from the ground and trailed backward. Ford's arm was held lower. Sweat broke from every pore in the Apache's skin. He knew this lash was going to strike, but not at the face. Lower. Around the upper arm and back? Perhaps the forearm, or the hand and buttocks. The hiss sounded like the threat of a copperhead. The Apache saw the tip of the thong as a blur, its speed too fast for the eye to keep pace with. But he saw enough, and his arm swept up and to the side at the right instant. Some eighteen inches of the thong curled around his forearm, the power behind the lash making itself painfully felt through the sleeve of the buckskin shirt.

Nathan Ford cursed and jerked at the whip. In the moment it took the thong to uncurl, Cuchillo should have been spun around to present his back to the white man. But, despite the intense pain of the blow, which set a ring of fire around his arm, the Apache remained clear-headed enough to set the second part of his counter-blow into action. Using the force of Ford's jerk to supplement his own strength, he continued to face the man as he leapt forward. His hand dropped to grasp the suddenly slack leather and he had a firm grip as he crashed into the shocked Ford.

Armstrong yelled in alarm and squeezed the trigger of the Spencer. The bullet whined through Cuchillo's flying hair and exploded chips from the cliff face. Then Nathan thudded to the ground and the air was gushed from his lungs under the smashing weight of the Apache dropping on top of him.

But Cuchillo held his position for only a split second before rolling off. His right arm curled around Ford's shoulders and dragged the man up on to his side as a human shield between himself and Armstrong's wavering rifle. But he did not confine his retaliation to defense. His left hand snaked inside his shirt during the roll and emerged with a firm grip on the knife handle. He rested the blade across the pulsing flesh of Nathan Ford's throat. The two men stared at each other with their noses almost touching.

"Tell son drop rifle!" Cuchillo hissed.

"I got a clear shot, Pa!" Armstrong yelled. "I can put one right through the side of his head."

He lunged forward and froze into a rock-steady aim. His father swallowed hard and the knife nicked his skin. He felt the blood trickle. The salt sweat stung in the cut. He was unable to drag his gaze away from the Apache's cold stare.

"You want the store that bad, son?" he croaked. "You shoot him, I'll be in Hell ahead of him."

Armstrong gasped, his eyes flicking away from the rifle sight to see just how threatening the knife was. "What you want me to do, Pa?" There was a whine in his voice.

"Like he says," Nathan croaked.

Armstrong hesitated for only a moment, then allowed his arms to drop limply to his sides. The rifle fell from his open hands and clattered to the ground.

"Tell him back off," the Apache rasped to Nathan.

"Back off from the gun, Armstrong."

The instruction was followed immediately. Cuchillo continued to trap the father in a tight grip and to hold the knife against the pulsing throat. The cut had ceased to bleed. The sweat was still pumping from fear-widened pores. Nathan's breath smelled of bad teeth and whiskey.

"What now?"

"Stand," the Apache replied. "Very slow. Knife stays. Cut deep if you try escape."

Nathan did have one chance. His hands were free and as soon as the men began to rise and to kneel, facing each other, the Remington in his holster was accessible. But the odds against being able to draw and blasting a hole in Cuchillo before the Indian cut his throat were longer than the Mississippi River. The two men eased to their feet, leaning against each other for leverage. The bullwhip lay at their feet. Cuchillo had noted its position as they rose. Now one of his moccasined heels stepped on it. His hand was folded into a fist around the knife handle.

Nathan got as far as thinking about drawing the revolver when the sharp edge of steel was lifted from his flesh. But the Apache was far too fast for him. There was not much room to power the blow. The fist moved back and then jabbed forward an inch. It was enough. The knuckles thudded hard into the scrawny throat and Cuchillo released his grip from the lean shoulders. Nathan's feet were entangled in the leather thong of the bullwhip.

He gave a strangled cry of pain and alarm and slammed backward like a felled tree. His head smashed against the hard ground and his veined eyes shuttered closed as he was plunged into unconsciousness. Even as he was falling, the Apache was powering himself into a backward leap that took him to the foot of the cliff. He dropped the knife and streaked out a hand to snatch up the leaning rifle.

Had Armstrong not been rooted to the spot by the sight of his father measuring his length on the canyon floor, perhaps dead, he might have been able to lunge for his own rifle and get off a shot. For Cuchillo had snapped up the gun in the manner of a right-handed man, only to find that the two remaining fingers were paralyzed into painful rigidity. Neither one would curl around the trigger. Changing the Spencer from the right to the left shoulder took time. But Armstrong's shock ensured the Apache was allowed the leeway.

"We wait for him to wake," Cuchillo said, capturing the younger Fords attention.

Armstrong snapped around his head to stare at the Apache, his face a mask of horror. "His head's bleeding!" he whined.

Cuchillo drew a bead on Armstrong's forehead, dead center. "Like father, like son, you don't tell truth."

Armstrong swallowed hard. Some of his long red hair had fallen across his face. His small brown eyes peered through, bright with fear. "All right, I'll tell you—"

"No!" Cuchillo barked. "Wait for him to wake. He must hear."

Armstrong glanced at his father's inert form. "He could die."

Cuchillo was aware of the fact. At the moment he landed the blow the anger inside him had reached a peak of intensity. For his mind's eye was filled with the image of Ford as the man had lashed the whip toward him. So Ford had gone down far harder than was necessary for Cuchillo's purpose. The fall could well have crushed the skull and driven bone splinters into the evil brain. Remorse nagged at Cuchillo, but his expression remained dispassionate, his tone sardonic. "Death occupational hazard of life. Saying of Cuchillo."

Nathan Ford's groan punctuated the comment. The Apache glanced down at the man and saw his chest was rising and falling regularly.

"Let be!" he snapped as Armstrong made a move to go to his father. "You listen. You tell father you lied. And you tell him why. You not do this, you die. Slow. Him too. Bullets in legs. I run off horses. Leave you in heat of sun. Maybe poison kill you. Maybe thirst. Don't know. Don't care."

The Apaches were a cruel race. All white men knew of their reputation and it was well deserved. Perhaps only the Sioux and the Comanche were more skilled in the art of torture and slow death. Armstrong had heard many stories of atrocities committed by Indians. He had no reason to disbelieve this particular Apache's threat.

Nathan groaned again and rolled his head from side to side. Flies droned in to feed from the blood before the arid soil claimed all of it. Relief superseded remorse in Cuchillo's heart. The Mimbrenos of Borderline had not killed or tortured for many years. Cuchillo's only experience of death other than from natural causes was seeing a brave killed in a knife duel staged according to Apache rules. But he knew, like all Apaches, of the bloody history of his people. So he traded now on his heritage, unsure of whether he was capable of carrying out the threats he made.

“Bastard!” Nathan Ford croaked as he hauled himself into a sitting position and stared at his crimson fingers after exploring the back of his head.

“My arm hurt pretty bad,” Cuchillo said pointedly. “You ready to hear the truth, mister?”

The man stayed on the ground, his forehead creasing into a confused frown as he looked from his son to the Apache and back again. The blazing sun, harsh and searing, highlighted the taut terror twisting Armstrong’s chunky features.

“Forced confession don’t mean nothing,” Nathan growled.

“You listen and you look,” Cuchillo instructed, and lowered his aim, drawing a bead on Armstrong’s left kneecap. The leg trembled.

Armstrong’s weak mouth flapped open and closed several times before he was able to force the words around the fear-created lump in his throat. “I stole the dagger,” he managed at length, his tone weak and scratchy. “I don’t like the way the Injuns been treating me since that business with the squaw bitch. Looking at me like I was cow droppings. You seen it, Pa. Them Injuns fix me with the evil eye every time they come into the store. Like they’re getting ready to kill me.”

“All Injuns look at all whites that way, boy,” Nathan muttered. “Just jealous of us, that’s all.”

“No! No, it’s different with me. That squaw bitch made it plain she wanted to put out for me. You heard me say that at the trial. Jury believed me. But the Injuns didn’t.”

“That’s right,” his father agreed absently as he tried to drive back the pain and decide whether to lunge for the discarded Spencer or draw his Remington. “No white man’s gonna believe one of his own’d go chasing after Apache ass, less she put it on a plate for him.”

“Anyway,” Armstrong went on, gaining confidence from his father’s backing. “It started to get me really riled up, the way them Injuns kept looking at me, real mean. Night before last when I went to make sure none of them stole any of the store’s supplies, they were at it again. Looking and hating. I couldn’t take it no more. Pinner was out in the compound to see the Injuns didn’t steal from the army. I went into his room and took the dagger. I knew this here Injun had the stallion so I made the trade.”

“Why me?” Cuchillo asked flatly.

“Cause you had the horse is why,” Armstrong retorted sharply, regaining his composure fully now that he knew his father had not been alienated by the treachery. He looked back at the man on the ground. “I shot him the line about Pinner wanting the stallion. And being a stupid Indian, he fell for it. Pinner being the way he is, I knowed he’d go after the Apaches when he found out his dagger was stole.” Armstrong sighed, disappointed. “Only it didn’t work out the way I figured. I figured Pinner to kill the Injun soon as he found him. And I figured the Injuns to get mad and stick him and whoever was with him.”

“And start war with soldiers,” Cuchillo added.

“Sure!” Armstrong confirmed, his eyes shining with the excitement of what might have been. “That White Dog bastard’s been spoiling for a fight. Everyone knows that. With you dead, all the crazy lunkheads out at Borderline would be behind him. They’d have been slaughtered. That would have taught them to respect Americans.”

There was a heavy silence in the small canyon after its walls had bounced Armstrong's final shouted words between them. It seemed to have a physical weight in the air, in the same way as the trapped heat.

"I didn't know that, Injun," Nathan Ford said slowly. "Now that I do, I reckon it was a good idea my boy had. If you Apaches was cleared out, could just be decent whites would settle here. And I wouldn't have to lower myself to do business with stinking Injuns."

Cuchillo realized he had been a fool to expect any other response from Nathan Ford. Both men had hated the Indians before the younger one had raped the Apache girl. And their attitudes had hardened to the same degree afterward. Then there was the blood bond between them; and there was no bond stronger than that between a father and his son.

"So what you figure to do now?" Nathan challenged.

"Another knows the truth," Cuchillo said after a short pause. "I must be content with this... and the knowledge that those who are my friends believe I was punished for a crime of which I am innocent."

The knife in the dust glinted with sunlight. He knew it would be too dangerous to try to retrieve it. He moved sideways along the foot of the cliff toward the canyon entrance, altering his aim. The Spencer's muzzle was in line with Armstrong's heart.

"That's a white man's rifle you're stealing!" Nathan accused.

"We trade," the Apache said sardonically. "You give me rifle. I give you life. And that of your son." His teeth shone white in a grin from under the Spencer's stock. "Cuchillo has better bargain. Rifle serve good purpose."

The insult was spoken at a moment when Nathan was sure the Apache was looking at Armstrong. His gnarled hand was in position, with the thumb hooked over his gunbelt just forward of the revolver butt protruding from the holster. He dropped his wrist and dragged his thumb clear. His palm fell dead center over the wooden gun butt. His thumb clicked back the hammer and his fingers curled and jerked the gun clear. It was leveled at his target and the trigger was moving back as Cuchillo spotted the draw.

The Apache's legs bent and his back arched into a crouch as he pivoted on his toe and heel. The Spencer's sharp crack sounded a split-second ahead of the Remington's report. Cuchillo had fired in a reflex action, with no time to take aim and feeling awkward in the unfamiliar left-handed stance. His bullet smashed into the cylinder of the revolver an instant before Ford's bullet cleared the muzzle. The handgun flew through midair and fate directed the course of the bullet.

Fate had a sense of rough justice and an aim that was true. The lead penetrated the precise center of Armstrong's forehead, shattering the front of his skull and ripping into his brain. Blood spouted, gushing through the curtain of hair and drenching the front of his toppling body. He smashed to the ground as hard as his father had done. And just as Armstrong had been transfixed by that shock, so Nathan now stared in immobile horror.

As silence pounced into the canyon on the heels of the retreating gunshots, Cuchillo realized his life at Borderline was finished—unless he was prepared to kill Nathan Ford. The white man dragged his gaze away from his dead son and stared at Cuchillo through a glaze of tears.

“You’re gonna have to kill me now,” he said, his voice thick with grief. “Who’d believe it happened this way?”

The Apache was within a hairsbreadth of squeezing the trigger. But he had not pumped the repeater’s action. In the time it took to do this, his decision was made. “Cuchillo need reason to kill,” he said, and backed into the cleft through the cliff-face. “To stop lies is not enough.”

“You’ll hang for this!” Ford screamed as he watched the flies swarm down upon his son’s bloodied head.

A buzzard took off from the canyon rim and circled overhead. It was joined by another. Cuchillo emerged into the broader canyon and saw the birds. The Apache in him urged him to return through the cleft and murder Nathan Ford. The buzzards would swoop down and tear the warm flesh clear of the bones. Nobody would know who had provided the birds with their meal.

He swung on to the piebald and jerked the reins free of the brush. “We go,” he said in Apache as he heeled the horse forward. “Better be hunted by man than hounded by conscience.”

Chapter 5

THERE WAS NO way to get up the shale slope with a pony and Cuchillo had to ride to the southern end of the canyon as the first stage of the return trip to the *rancheria*. The route to the north was shorter, but the Apache guessed Nathan Ford would take his dead son that way, up into the pass beyond the Borderline plateau and then due east through the Dragoons until he reached the spur trail down to Davidson. There was an even shorter route to the fort, but this meant angling across the plateau and Cuchillo doubted whether Ford would risk this, fearful the Apache had reached the *rancheria* before him.

The canyon, like the valley parallel with it some miles to the east, reached across the border into Mexico. This was dangerous territory for a lone Apache, even though the *Proyecto de Guerra*—Project for War—law no longer had official backing. Introduced in 1837 to combat Apache raids into Mexico, this legislation offered rewards for Indian scalps—one hundred dollars for that of a brave, fifty dollars for a squaw’s topknot, and twenty-five dollars for a child’s. Despite the central government’s refusal to finance such barbarity any longer, certain local lawmen and *Federale* commanders continued to offer bounties. While *banditos* were likely to kill Apaches for the sheer hell of it.

So when Cuchillo had passed the grotesquely weather-fashioned outcrop generally accepted as a border marker, he intensified his vigilance. The rearing peaks and twisted ravines of the Sierra Madre Mountains were far to the south but there were a thousand-and-one ambush spots scattered across the broken terrain of the arid wasteland that stepped into the foothills.

But he was the only moving thing in the intense heat of early afternoon. Not even a bird winged through the hazed air, and every creature whose habitat was the desert floor stayed hidden in the deep shade of rocks and cacti, mesquite and

greasewood. The stillness was awe-inspiring; only the plodding of the pony's unshod hooves and the breathing of animal and brave made it less than absolute.

For most of the time, heading south and then swinging to the east at the gaping mouth of the canyon, Cuchillo rode in an attitude of deceptive casualness, reins held loosely in his bandaged right hand with the left clutching the Spencer, barrel resting across his knee. Only occasionally did he rein the piebald to a halt and unloop the gourd from around his neck to suck frugally at its tepid contents. But whether riding or resting for a drink, his eyes and ears were constantly alert.

The waterhole at the foot of a draw which opened the way back into Arizona Territory showed a dark stain but held no water. Cuchillo used the stock of the Spencer to break the crust and waited for the muddy water to seep up from the mud. The piebald sucked it greedily and quickly.

The sky was still an unbroken dome of cobalt blue with the dazzling disc of the sun its only blemish. But the glare came from lower down, angling in to throw long, deep shadows on anything which stood in its way. The heat shimmer had thinned to offer greater visibility and although the air still burned everything it touched, the fierceness of noon was gone. *Siesta* was finished and Mexicans would be stirring, refreshed.

Cuchillo whispered placating words in Apache to his pony as he remounted and urged him away from the hole without allowing time for a new pool to form from the seepage. As he rode up the gentle slope, littered with scattered rocks, the Apache's head was never still. He looked to left and right, back over his shoulder and immediately ahead. And not until he was at least three miles north of the disputed border area did he consider himself safe from ambush. For here there were many tracks of shod horses, marking the crisscrossed trails of Army patrols sent out for the prime purpose of warning the Mexicans to stay on their own side of the border.

Thus, reasonably safe from attack, the Apache had time to indulge another anxiety. The two remaining fingers of his right hand were now much stiffer than they had been this morning. Then, he had been able to generate a small movement in all their joints. But now, as he tried to curl them around the rope reins, they would not budge from their stiff straightness. And when he attempted to force them, pressing the tips against his thigh, the pain twisted his lips into a grimace.

The cause of his concern was that he was totally right-handed. His accuracy with rifle, revolver and bow was vested entirely in his right hand, as was his skill with lance and knife. His awkwardness with the rifle back at the box canyon was a potent warning of the extent to which his effectiveness as a warrior had been hampered by the brutal sentence carried out by Pinner. And, Cuchillo had every reason to believe, his skills as a warrior were to be in far greater demand in the future than they had ever been in the past.

The sun was just beginning to change its light from the yellow of day into the crimson of evening when he came into sight of the *rancheria*. There was no longer any haze and the cooling air was crystal clear. He saw the rising columns of smoke first, then the conical tepees tinted red by the sinking sun. The scent was tranquil, extending a friendly welcome to the workers returning from the fields and the braves who had wandered further into the hills in their search for water and game.

But Cuchillo did not trust the impression. That sixth sense possessed by all Indians—and white men who chose to live for long in the wilderness—which warns of hidden danger, urged the Apache to angle his pony behind the cover of a small rise at the southern side of the plateau. He hooked the reins over the branch of a mesquite and moved quickly up the incline, dropping to his belly close to the top. A cluster of shrubby catclaws enabled him to peer down toward the untidy spread of the *rancheria* without showing his head against the skyline. Although he was better than a mile from the tepees which fringed the camp the distance seemed to be shortened by the clarity of the air.

He knew this would not be so for long. Soon, the leading arc of the sun would touch the ridges of the western range and twilight would trace shady patterns across the encampment and its surroundings.

The horse-soldiers came before this happened.

There was a troop of twenty cavalymen riding two abreast in an orderly column. At their head rode Captain Silas G. Crane. Immediately behind him was Lieutenant Pinner. Beside the junior officer rode Nathan Ford. As the troop rounded the outcrop and started down the declivity Crane barked an order which reduced the pace from a dust-billowing canter to a walk.

Apache sentries on the western fringe of the *rancheria* shouted warnings and fingered the bull-sinew strings of their bows. But none raised the weapons or touched the arrow pouches slung across their backs. Such overt signs of aggression could well provoke the soldiers into violent reaction.

Within moments it was unnecessary to spread the message further by word of mouth. For the steady beat of shod hooves against the hardpacked trail drew the attention of every eye in the *rancheria*.

“Who leads them?” Black Horse asked of a brave with the clearer eyesight of youth.

“The one called Crane,” the brave muttered with distaste.

“And how many are there?”

“More than this many, I think,” came the reply, the brave stabbing at the air twice with his splayed hands.

The old chief nodded without expression, successfully concealing his concern. A score of soldiers arriving unannounced at the *rancheria* portended big trouble. That they were under the command of Captain Crane augured even worse.

Crane was second-in-command at Fort Davidson. He was forty years old and had been a captain for too long. His military career had started promisingly at West Point and all who knew him felt sure he would rise rapidly in rank. But then he discovered the delights of wine, women, and song, and their combined attractions had proved too much of a temptation after a strict upbringing and the rigorous discipline of military training. Had it not been for influential family connections in Washington, Crane would have been discharged with dishonor before his twenty-fifth birthday. But the luck of his name had cast him in the role of one of the many crosses which the army was forced to bear.

He was an ugly man, made more grotesque by his excesses. Small of stature, he had a bulbous stomach that swelled out and drooped down over his belt. By comparison, his legs appeared puny and incapable of supporting such obesity. His arms were overlong for his build. Captain Crane’s face was almost a perfect circle,

heavily fleshed by over-eating and blotched by the effects of too much alcohol. His mouth was just a puckered indentation in the flesh. His bulky cheeks seemed to be on the point of burying his snub nose between them and also encroached upward to confine his watery, red-rimmed eyes to mere slits.

Laziness had kept him out of direct contact with the Indians most of the time, but those Apaches who had been unfortunate enough to incur his displeasure had found Crane to be as bigoted as Pinner, to whom he was related by marriage.

At the edge of the *rancheria*, the fat captain signaled the troop to halt. Then, on a second command, the men divided. One section filed to the left, the other to the right. In position, spread out along the entire eastern flank of the encampment, the soldiers dismounted, unbooting their rifles as they slid from their saddles. Crane, Pinner, and Nathan Ford stayed astride their horses. The dying rays of the sinking sun struck the silver buttons of the officers' uniform tunics. But the anger in the eyes of the three mounted men shone brighter.

"We've come for the brave called Cuchillo!" Crane shouted. He was drunk again—his voice high-pitched on some words and slurring others. He moved his head slowly to left and right, raking his slit eyes across the entire *rancheria*.

The braves and squaws standing beside their tepees returned his examination blankly, then swung to look toward Black Horse. The old chief sighed and moved slowly forward. Those who stood between him and the officers stepped deferentially out of his path. Black Horse was grateful that White Dog and his blood-brothers were still out hunting. He halted ten feet short of the center of the line of soldiers.

"Was he not punished enough?" he asked. "The will of Major Anson was done."

Crane had few teeth left in his head. Those remaining were stained a deep brown by chewing tobacco. He showed those in a triumphant grin. "Forget about the major," he told the chief, and encompassed the whole camp again with a narrow-eyed stare. "The major's gone East. I'm in command of Fort Davidson now."

The Indians greeted the news in utter silence. But the tension created by Crane's announcement was almost palpable. It smelled of fear.

"I pay my respects to the new chief of the soldiers at the fort," Black Horse said. "It is to be hoped he will be as honorable in his dealings with die Apaches as Major Anson was."

Pinner leaned to the side and spat. Crane fixed Black Horse with a penetrating stare.

"You guys do like you're told and there won't be any trouble. First off, surrender the brave called Cuchillo into my custody."

Black Horse struggled to stem his anger. "I request to know the reason for this."

"I think we should go in and take him, Captain," Pinner said, very loudly.

"Night's young," Crane replied, and winked at the lieutenant. Then, to Black Horse: "Cuchillo is wanted for murder." He paused, expecting a reaction from the silent Indians. But they remained as impassive as ever. It annoyed him and he raised his voice. "He killed the son of this man. He lured Armstrong Ford into the mountains and murdered him in cold blood."

Almost two hundred pairs of dark eyes were swung toward Nathan Ford. They seemed to generate an invisible power that thrust the storekeeper upright in his saddle. He gave a sharp nod, confirming what Crane had said.

"There is proof of this thing?" Black Chief asked.

"I say it!" Crane snarled. "Get him, or we come in and take him."

"Take aim!" Pinner commanded.

The line of soldiers spread out at each side of the trio of mounted men had been holding their rifles diagonally across their chests. Now they snapped the stocks up to their shoulders and leaned their cheeks against the smooth wood, their eyes lining up behind the back sights. Three Apache sentries found themselves staring into the muzzles of leveled Spencers from a distance of only a few inches. Sweat beaded their foreheads, but they held their positions.

A confrontation of this kind was what Black Horse had always dreaded. Such a force of soldiers, armed with rapid fire rifles, would be able to wipe out the *rancheria* in a matter of moments. A few might die by arrow, lance, or tomahawk. But what was this compared with the death of every brave, squaw, and child in the camp, their twisted bodies scorched by the blazing fires of burning tepees? It would provide ample proof of what Black Horse had always maintained: That no Apaches would be left alive to witness the horrific example of the white man's power over the Apache's weakness.

"Fetch Cuchillo here!" the Chief barked in his native tongue to the sentry nearest to him.

The sentry nodded, spun around and loped between the tepees and the silent watchers. The soldiers curled their fingers around rifle triggers and wondered which of them would die if Crane did not get his way. The two officers waited impatiently, confident that there was to be no fight. Pinner was more than a little disappointed by this. Nathan Ford licked his lips and massaged the center of his palm with the butt of the holstered Remington. He felt a strong need to pee.

The sentry returned and stooped down to whisper to the chief. Black Horse listened without expression and then looked up at Crane.

"Cuchillo left the *rancheria* at midday. He told no one where he was going. He has not yet returned."

"You going to believe that, Captain?" Pinner snarled.

Black Horse ignored the interruption. "When Cuchillo returns, I shall order him to surrender himself at the fort," he promised.

"Let's go in and check he's not home," Pinner suggested.

Black Horse continued to hold the gaze of Crane. He saw anger, but behind this there was fear. Apart from being lazy, the captain was also suspected of cowardice. His harshness against the Indians had always been enacted in the safety of the fort, committed on lone or small groups of braves and surrounded by Davidson's full military strength. The old chief guessed Crane was regretting that he had not brought more troopers with him.

"Lieutenant," the superior officer said at length.

"Sir?"

"Take four men to the tepee of the wanted man. Arrest the man's squaw. She will be held hostage to ensure Black Horse keeps his word." He cleared his throat. "We'll cover you."

Pinner seemed about to make an acid response to the order, but he bit back the words. Crane had been flexing the muscles of command throughout the day and half-a-dozen enlisted men were already cramped into Davidson's tiny cells for talking out of turn. The lieutenant was not sure that his commission or relationship ties would be protection against Crane's newly acquired power.

He pointed to the quartet of men on his immediate right and waved them forward. The men returned their rifles to marching order and started into the camp. Pinner heeled his horse in their wake. As he went between the first pair of tepees, the lieutenant purposely urged his mount into a half wheel. The animal's flank collided with a tepee and its hind hooves trampled the sagging hide on the canting tripod.

Black Horse saw the anger flare across the face of the brave whose home had suffered. And he heard the low, ominous murmur of rising rage from those braves who had seen the act of wanton destruction. "The squaw of Cuchillo will come forward!" he shouted in his own tongue.

The murmuring ceased abruptly and anger was shocked into suspension.

"He's told the dame to come peaceable, sir," a man who understood Apache shouted.

"Hold it, Lieutenant!" Crane ordered.

Pinner had been about to ride his unwilling horse directly into the rear of a tepee. The rifle-toting troopers halted first. Then the officer.

Chipeta had been crouching in the entranceway of the tepee, clutching her baby to her breast. As she straightened and moved to do the chief's bidding, a neighbor held out her arms, offering to take the sleeping child. But Chipeta shook her head resolutely and strode forward. Her way was blocked by the soldiers. They eyed her arrogantly, ignoring her delicately formed features and lusting after the firm, womanly body which was outlined by the tight-fitting calfskin robe.

"Return to the line!" Crane barked.

The troopers turned immediately. Pinner hesitated, holding the squaw's frightened eyes with a menacing stare. When he had turned, causing his horse to knock a crippled elder to the ground, Chipeta followed him meekly to the edge of the *rancheria*. She stood beside Black Horse, as if hopeful of his protection. The chief pointedly avoided looking at her.

"I have your assurance this squaw will not be harmed, Captain?" the old man asked.

Pinner wheeled his horse into line and made a sound of disgust.

"I'm making no promises about any damn thing," Crane replied. "This woman is a hostage. If she was going to be kept safe, they'd be no point in taking her."

"But—" Black Horse began.

"Mount the men, Lieutenant," Crane cut in. "Detail a man to carry the woman and her child."

Pinner gave the first order and the men complied. They kept their rifles at the ready, Black Horse unfolded his arms and rested a hand on Chipeta's shoulder when Pinner pointed to a scarfaced sergeant.

"Let her be!" Crane rasped. "She'll be held until sun-up tomorrow. If her husband turns himself in by then, or before, she'll be set free. If not, I'll hang her. You can send for the kid."

"But we do not know where Cuchillo has gone," Black Horse pleaded. "We do not know—"

Crane had taken a plug of tobacco from his tunic pocket. He bit off a chunk and spoke around the mess in his mouth. "Then you'd better damn well find out, hadn't you!" he barked. "And damn quick."

"Go with them," Black Horse told the squaw in Apache. "Trust us."

"What'd he say?" Crane yelled.

"Told her to trust the Apaches, sir," the man who knew the Indian language replied.

The sergeant did not dismount. He reached down and hauled Chipeta, side-saddle, in front of him on the horse.

"We get any trouble, she's the first to die," Crane warned Black Horse. "Then the kid."

"I will tell my people," the chief said, his voice tremulous with checked emotion.

Crane nodded and backed his horse, then wheeled him. Nathan Ford followed suit, then Pinner. As these three led the way up the sloping trail, the soldiers filed into the double column behind them. None looked back. Chipeta alone surveyed the *rancheria*, seeing as well as feeling the impotent anger of the Apaches as they stared after the departing soldiers. She did not understand English and was therefore unaware of why she was being taken by the white eyes. She knew only that she had heard her husband's name voiced often in the conversation between Black Horse and the officer. But it was the way of an Apache woman to do as the menfolk instructed.

It was not the way of an Apache woman to submit meekly to the intimate caresses of a white-eyes—unless there was no alternative. And as the sergeant's fingers probed the firm cone of her breasts, she had no alternative. For to struggle against his advances would have put her baby in danger.

"She feel good, Sarge," the man riding beside the non-com whispered.

The sergeant grinned. "Better than Annie Colbert, that's for sure," he replied in the same low tone.

"Guess so," the trooper said. "Save some for me. I like my meat red and rare better than well done."

"Ain't none of us gonna get a slice of this," a man muttered from behind. "Reckon Crane and Pinner figure to carve her up between 'em."

The Apache-speaking trooper, who had been a trapper in Apacheria before enlisting, and who knew Indians better than any man serving at Fort Davidson, listened to the comments with a thoughtful frown. During the exchange at Borderline, he had not stared blankly out from behind the sight of his Spencer. He had looked into the faces of many braves standing close to his position and had seen the depths of their silent anger. And during the brief period when they gave vocal outlet to it, he had heard the extent of their hatred. He knew the Apaches had been within a hairsbreadth of a violent reaction to this latest outrage committed against them; that a single word from Black Horse would have set the hand of every brave toward killing the white men. And now, as the column crested the slope and snaked out of sight around the outcrop, the trooper sensed that danger had not been averted—merely delayed. Major Anson had known exactly how far to push the Apaches of Borderline and had thus retained control of the

situation. Between them, Crane and Tinner had far overstepped the mark and now it was Black Horse whose hand was on the powder keg. All the old chief had to do was ease up on the pressure; or allow a younger brave to impose his will, and the lid would blow off.

But how could the trooper warn the two officers about this? They would rate such advice as insubordination and toss him in the cooler. And the trooper had no wish to be confined in any way at all when the powder keg blew and exploded Apache vengeance.

From the crest of the low rise, Cuchillo had watched the *rancheria* during the whole time the soldiers were there. But he was too far away to hear what was said and when darkness descended the encampment had become heavily shadowed, so that he was unable to recognize anyone engaged in the exchange beyond the stooped, feathered figure of Black Horse. He was able to assume, from the comings and goings, that the soldiers removed an Indian from the camp. But he was unable to see who was taken.

Logic told him that the visit could well be connected with the death of Armstrong Ford, but he refused to accept the possibility that the soldiers had taken a hostage to force him to surrender. Major Anson would not agree to such a tactic. But what had happened down there?

He heard a sound behind him and it galvanized him into action. He rolled from his belly on to his back in the batting of an eye, the Spencer springing up to cover the intruder.

White Dog was frozen into a crouch, both his hands held out in front of him, fingers splayed as a sign that he intended no harm. Cuchillo looked beyond the brave, down to the foot of the slope where White Dog's five blood-brothers were grouped beside the piebald. Their eyes were wide in alarm at the sight of the gun pointed toward White Dog's heart.

"You can start to breathe again," Cuchillo muttered, lowering the rifle. "You're not dead."

"Where did you get the rifle?"

"I got it."

White Dog straightened as Cuchillo got to his feet. "Why you watch *rancheria* like an enemy of the Apaches?"

"The soldiers were there. They took one of the people."

Anger twisted White Dog's features. "Our chief allowed them? Like with you?"

"Twenty soldiers," Cuchillo said, starting down towards his pony. "All with rifles aimed. He had no choice."

White Dog folded his right hand into a fist and smashed it against the palm of his left. "There is always a choice," he snapped. "To surrender or to fight."

The braves had formed a hunting party. Their ponies were grouped some yards away, laden with jack rabbits.

"What is happening?" the brave called Red Tail demanded.

White Dog told them quickly. Cuchillo listened impassively, his mind running and re-running the events at the *rancheria*. He realized he had to accept a hostage had been taken. There could be no other explanation. And if it was he the soldiers had come for, who else could they have taken but Chipeta. He had known this all along, but had fought to deny it in order to placate the instinctive rise of his

temper. Now he had to use sheer willpower to remain calm as the braves regarded him, sensing the subtle change that had come over him. There was a silent question in each pair of dark eyes. The demand for an answer was strengthened by the way in which the braves fingered the bow strings drawn taut across their shirt fronts.

“Go to the *rancheria*,” Cuchillo told them, his eyes flicking from one to the next in regular turn. “Find out what has happened. If it is the way I think, the peace is over.”

The questions were washed from the eyes by a rising tide of excitement.

“It is past time!” White Dog exclaimed. “There are many who feel so. They waited only for you to voice it.”

“Go!” Cuchillo instructed, and pointed to the near full moon hanging against the star-sprinkled clearness of night. “When it is directly above the highest point on the west ridge, I will approach. Those who would join us must be ready.”

White Dog cast an experienced glance at the position of the moon. “It is long enough,” he said, and beckoned to the braves to follow him as he went to where the ponies waited.

They mounted and thudded in their heels to command instant speed from the animals. The ponies snorted a protest and broke into a gallop. Cuchillo watched until the dust of the start had settled, then directed his brooding gaze toward the moon.

“Grin, old man,” he muttered harshly. “Your face is the same color as that of the white-eyes. Will your smile be so bright when the flesh of the white-eyes turns red with the stain of their own blood?”

Chapter 6

WHEN THE MOON had edged into the position designated by Cuchillo, the young Apache brave mounted his pony and rode out onto the plateau from the cover of the rise. Less than thirty minutes had been sliced from time since the six braves had ridden for the *rancheria*. But it was long enough for a great change to have come over the encampment.

As the lone Apache rode slowly across the broken ground, his dark eyes witnessed the end of an era. For a decade the *rancheria* had been there on the plateau. At first it had been small, composed of no more than a dozen tepees. Then, it had in no way been a refuge. Black Horse had selected the site for his people because the surrounding country provided adequate game, the stream offered enough water for their needs during three-quarters of the year, and the hills to the north acted as a barrier to the worst of the winter weather. And the proximity of Fort Davidson deterred the Mexicans from attempting to attack the *rancheria* in retaliation for Apache raids upon them.

There had been many changes since then. Borderline, so christened by the white-eyes, had enlarged many-fold, the newcomers gravitating from eastern Apacheria where, because of the savagery of Mangas Coloradas and his followers, all Indians went in fear of their lives. Cuchillo had been one such Indian: an

Apache who wanted peace and saw the promise of it among the people of Black Horse. And he had found such peace during the four years he had lived at Borderline. Not precisely as he would have wished it, for with the expansion of the *rancheria* the soldiers of Fort Davidson had grown fearful. Although content that a handful of Apaches were camped nearby, there had nonetheless always been an attitude of distrust between the white and the red man.

And as the *rancheria* grew stronger in terms of the number of braves gathered there, so the distrust hardened and extended into fear. Out of this fear emerged hate and with men like White Dog and Lieutenant Pinner exerting their influence on each side, the hate was never allowed to recede under the gentle leverage of continued peace.

Now the chance had been lost, and Cuchillo's heart was heavy as he viewed the tangible evidence arrayed before him.

The fires were out and the tepees had been dismantled. A great many ponies were heavily laden with bulging parfleches, saddlebags, and tepee packs. Many braves and elders stood beside the ponies. Squaws sat astride other ponies which waited patiently between the shafts of loaded travois. Cuchillo eyed this group without resentment, even though he knew it represented perhaps three-quarters of the *rancheria*—the majority unwilling to follow him. He reviewed the smaller group with the same lack of emotion. It was comprised of fifteen braves, mounted on the fleetest ponies from the corral and encumbered only with the weapons of war.

White Horse was positioned a few feet in front of the small group; Black Horse waited in a similar manner before the other. Cuchillo rode to within twenty paces of where the spokesmen for the two factions sat astride their ponies. He noted the arrogant self-satisfaction inscribed upon the face of the young brave, and the deep sadness clouding the usually bright eyes of the old chief.

Cuchillo maintained an impassive silence after he had halted his pony, allowing Black Horse his privilege of opening the council. White Dog, having succeeded in attracting such a strong band of warriors to his cause and forging an alliance with Cuchillo, could afford to be generous in the matter of Apache etiquette.

Black Horse forced himself erect in the decorated pad saddle, hiding the pain that knifed through his stiffened muscles. "You must know that the Borderline Mimbrenos attach no blame to you for this, Cuchillo," he opened. "The soldiers came and accused you of a cowardly murder. We do not ask if you committed such a crime. They took your wife, Chipeta, as a hostage. Chipeta chose to take the child with her. Such a thing is a cowardly crime. We who know you consider you incapable of doing what the white-eyes accuse you of. And even if the harsh treatment of you by the soldiers had moved you to vengeance, we know you would willingly exchange your life for that of your wife. That you have chosen to take the warpath is evidence of your innocence and the white-eyes' evil."

He paused, waiting for a response. Cuchillo noted that White Dog had begun to show signs of impatience. He ignored the brave.

"Cuchillo is grateful for the faith of his brothers," he said. "And his heart is heavy that the elders consider it necessary to move the *rancheria*."

"You understand the reason for this?" Black Horse asked.

Cuchillo nodded. "Those who wait behind you have acquired the habit of peace. It is a good habit and I have no quarrel with it. When Fort Davidson is attacked

there will be no peace here. The soldiers will seek bloody revenge against all Apaches.”

“It is the way of the white-eyes,” Black Horse agreed.

“Where will you take the people?”

“To the north, then to the east,” the old chief replied, raising a scrawny arm and pointing with an age-shaken finger. “I fear there are few parts of Apacheria where we will be able to enjoy the degree of peace we were able to achieve here. And if we fail, it will be better to fight under the leadership of such a skilled warrior as Mangas Coloradas. He and our brother Mimbrenos are to the north and east of this place.”

White Dog found it impossible to contain himself any longer. His voice was loud against the cold, still air of the plateau. “The people should stay here!” he bellowed. “It is here that Cuchillo and White Dog with their warriors will plant the seed from which will grow the reality of Black Horse’s dream. When Fort Davidson is burned to the ground and the buzzards are feeding on the flesh of the dead soldiers, the chiefs of all the Apaches will see it as a sign. From here will the word spread to rise up in concert against the white-eyes on our land.”

The braves grouped behind White Dog nodded in agreement and muttered their affirmation.

“I ask the great spirit to make your words come true,” Black Horse replied, his tone lacking conviction. “If you succeed with such a thing, the faith the people have had in me will be justified. But I am doubtful, White Dog. The soldiers are strong with weapons. And if every warrior of the *rancheria* chose to follow you, the soldiers would still be stronger in number.”

“Enough of this!” Cuchillo said firmly, addressing White Dog. Then he swept his eyes over the faces of the warriors clustered behind the spokesman. “The words of your leader are brave. But those of our chief are wise. My quarrel with the soldiers is mine alone. I am ready to settle it on my own. You feel you have scores to settle and I welcome you to my side. But know this. Might is more powerful than right. Death is likely to be the reward for your courage. Your courage is foolish and your death will serve no purpose. Think of this and if you decide to rejoin Black Horse, I will not view your act as a dishonorable one. Nor will any other brave, squaw, or elder.”

His expression became challenging as he swept his eyes from the warriors, to White Dog, to Black Horse, and to those Apaches who had already realized the suicidal nature of the proposed raid. The silence pressed down over the plateau, disturbed only by the restless scratching at the ground by unshod hooves and the nervous snorting of the ponies. Squaws whose menfolk had elected to join the war party looked with imploring eyes toward the smaller groups. White Dog wanted to turn a smoldering gaze upon his warriors, but felt himself trapped by Cuchillo’s level stare. A full half-minute slid into history.

“Go now, Chief Black Horse,” the young brave announced suddenly. “And if we should die in failure, ensure that all our people throughout Apacheria know the reason for this thing.”

Black Horse seemed about to say something, perhaps to renew his efforts to dissuade the braves from gathering to Cuchillo’s cause. But he confined himself to a hand signal of farewell, then wheeled his horse and veered away. The people fell

in behind him, forming a slow-moving, well-ordered column. Some braves hung their heads, as if in shame. Others eyed Cuchillo with contrition. The squaws of the braves who stayed attempted to transmit final, imploring messages with their dark eyes, first directing the plea to their husbands, then to Cuchillo.

Finally the two groups were completely divided, the larger moving inexorably toward the ridge at the northern extreme of the plateau while the smaller remained in stoic immobility, waiting the orders of Cuchillo. They were back-to-back and nobody turned. Only Cuchillo watched the departure, seeing the scouts gallop their ponies ahead and to the sides before the individual people and animals became merged into a single blurred shadow almost obscured by the dust cloud which they themselves raised.

"We ride for fort now!" White Dog said suddenly, his tone making it almost a demand.

Cuchillo fixed the brave with a penetrating stare. "Soldiers have your squaw?" he asked softly.

"You know not." White Dog moderated his tone.

"Then my need is greater than yours," Cuchillo told him. "I make plan and I lead raid. Afterwards, if we are alive to make it matter, we decide which one of us becomes leader."

White Dog hesitated for a few moments, then nodded. Cuchillo raked his eyes across the faces of the warriors and they made their agreement known in unison. Cuchillo realized they were prepared to follow anybody, providing the attack was against the soldiers of Fort Davidson.

"How long we wait?" White Dog wanted to know.

Cuchillo looked toward the diminishing dust-billow which marked the progress of the departing Indians. "Until Black Horse and his people are safe from retaliation," he replied, then glanced around at the moonlit desolation of the plateau.

Now that the *rancheria* had been uprooted, the surrounding flatland seemed larger, and the small group of braves clustered at its center were diminished in size and strength by the vast emptiness. The moon shone down brightly upon them and in its cold light they were vulnerable; the deep shadows lurking among the craggy mountains surrounding them were ominous. Cuchillo knew that the threat of danger existed only in his mind. The Borderline Apaches had lived in servile compliance for too long and it was many years since surveillance of the *rancheria* had been extended beyond visits from routine patrols. Even after such an act as had been committed tonight, the soldiers would be confident enough to consider it unnecessary to post observers.

Nevertheless, the braves were formed into a war party which, although not yet daubed with the paint of the vengeance-seekers, was armed with the weapons to bring death to the white-eyes. And the braves' minds were filled with the prospect of the attack to come. It was in the nature of Apaches resolved to take the warpath that they assumed danger to be ready to pounce at any moment.

So, as he watched the braves, Cuchillo was not surprised to see them casting furtive glances to left and right, ahead, and behind. Perhaps deep down they, too, realized that the danger was imagined rather than real. But they were in no mood

to accept this and would have little respect for a leader who kept them in such an exposed position for longer than necessary.

"We will wait at Hole-in-the-Rocks," he announced. "There we will consider our strength and make our preparations."

He wheeled his pony to face the start of the trail which curled over the hill crest towards the fort.

"You will tell us no more, Cuchillo?" White Dog asked.

Cuchillo eyed him quizzically.

"The waiting is easier when one knows how long it is to be," White Dog elaborated.

"Dawn is a bad time to die," Cuchillo replied.

"And a good time to kill," White Dog said pointedly. "The soldiers have set such an hour to hang your squaw."

"Then the soldiers must die before they see another sunrise," Cuchillo responded without emotion.

He thudded his heels into the flanks of his pony and the braves urged their mounts in pursuit of him. The dust cloud of their progress was smaller than that which had been raised behind Black Horse and his people. The war party crested the rise and went from sight behind the outcrop of rock. The dust settled and the plateau was left in utter silence, the moonlight falling upon a desolate landscape robbed of all movement, all life. Soon, the weather would erode every sign left by the *rancheria* and all traces of the departure of the Indians who had lived there. Nothing would be left to show that here a group of 'savages' had endeavored to live peace with the white-eyes invaders.

History would recall only the bloody results of the failure of this experiment in co-existence.

Chapter 7

THE THUD OF hoofbeats drew John Hedges' attention away from the two troopers digging a grave for Armstrong Ford at the side of the store. He moved slowly from the doorway of his tiny house and peered through the light of the post along the street and out on to the trail. The anxiety lining his unhandsome face was fleetingly diminished when he saw that Captain Crane, Lieutenant Pinner, and Nathan Ford rode at the head of the same number of troopers who had left the fort earlier. So there had been no fight at the *rancheria*. But what of Cuchillo?

He waited, holding his breath, for the riders to draw nearer, straining his eyes to look past the leading riders and into the center of the uniformed figures jogging along at a steady trot. But it was not until the riders entered the area of light from the windows that he saw it was a woman, holding her baby, who had been taken by the soldiers. And only when Crane had called a halt, with the head of the column between the saloon's bat-wing doors and Hedges' house did the schoolteacher recognize the woman as Chipeta.

"Jess Grainger?" Crane yelled.

Pinner glowered at Hedges, who held his ground despite his nervousness. He tried to capture the attention of Chipeta—to offer her the small comfort of a smile in her misery—but the squaw stared unseeingly ahead. Then the Indian Bureau agent slouched into the doorway of the saloon and swallowed a great gulp of beer before speaking.

“You want me, Mr. Crane?”

The Captain sent a stream of tobacco juice into the dust. “The Injun we want wasn’t around. So we got his woman and brat. We’re holding her hostage to make sure he turns himself in. That all right with you?”

Grainger swallowed some more beer.

Crane licked his lips, dry with trail dust.

“Sounds like a mighty good arrangement, Mr. Crane,” the agent allowed, and belched. “Only thing is, it seems to me this is a civil matter; seeing as how it was a civilian got killed, and not on Army property. Reckon, that being so, I ought to keep the squaw prisoner. Me being the Bureau agent.”

“Well, I don’t know about—”

Grainger winked as he cut in: “With the permission of Nathan here, we plan to hold a wake after the funeral.”

The schoolteacher’s concern deepened, as Grainger and the two officers looked at Nathan Ford and received a curt nod of approval. The saloon owner, one Edward O’Regan, had started the Fort Davidson tradition of holding wakes for the dead—after the interment—when a fellow Irishman, a Dragoon corporal, had accidentally shot himself while cleaning his carbine. The wake had progressed into a wild orgy, with Annie Colbert dispensing her favors freely in return for a share of O’Regan’s vastly enlarged profits. Since that occasion, every death at the fort or post had been accompanied by a wake, irrespective of the deceased’s religion.

Grainger’s blatant wink and the ill-concealed glee with which Crane and Pinner greeted the suggestion of handing Chipeta into the custody of the Indian agent was obvious in its meaning.

“Captain Crane!” the schoolteacher shouted.

The fat, blotched face was turned toward Hedges. “You want something?”

“Maybe an invitation,” Grainger chortled.

“The woman is innocent of any crime,” the schoolteacher said, having to struggle against a threatened tremor which hovered behind each word. “I ask that you place her into protective custody and make her as comfortable as possible.”

Crane moved the quid of tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other and hung a thoughtful frown on his face, as if giving Hedges’ suggestion careful consideration. He even fooled Pinner, who looked at the senior officer in awed expectancy. The enlisted men and non-coms waited disinterestedly. Only officers attended wakes.

The captain nodded, as if in agreement with what Hedges had said. But then his obese features formed into a scowl. “I ask that you mind your own fucking business, Injun-lover!” he snarled.

“Give the squaw-bitch to the agent, Sergeant!” Pinner ordered.

Grainger swung open the bat-wings and swaggered out of the saloon, holding his arms wide. “Come on, sweetheart,” he crooned. “The Great White Chief set up the Indian Bureau to take care of folk like you.”

“Her baby!” Hedges implored. “Let me take care of her baby?”

Pinner showed him an evil grin, his lips curling back and his eyes narrowing to glittering green slits. “That’s woman’s work, schoolteacher,” he rasped.

“Reckon Annie Colbert can handle it. She won’t be needed to handle anything else tonight.”

A laugh ripped from his lips.

Chipeta was not so well-schooled in the Indian art of inducing a trance to offset suffering as were the braves, but she had retreated part-way into a detached state during the ride from the rancheria. But she was thrust back into reality by a violent shove from the sergeant. She cried in alarm and clutched her baby tighter to her as she slid from the horse and stumbled into Grainger’s arms.

“You will represent the Army at the burial, Lieutenant,” Crane instructed, as Nathan Ford urged his horse out of the group and moved to examine the grave which had been dug to receive his son’s body. “I’ll join you later.”

Pinner saluted. Crane responded, then raised an arm to signal the troopers to follow him down the street, over the plank bridge, and into the compound of the fort. Many of the men glanced with lustful envy as they rode past the saloon entranceway, where the grinning Indian agent held the helpless squaw hard against him. His clawed hand thrust long fingers into the swell of her breast.

Hedges tore his eyes away and gazed out along the trail which snaked up toward the pass on the far side of which lay the *rancheria*.

“You’ve got no horse, schoolteacher!” Pinner taunted, capturing his helpless attention. “And ever if you could get one, you’d never make it. I’ll be watching you. If you so much as set foot on the trail, I’ll consider it as intent to assist an Apache murderer. And I’ll kill you, you Injun-loving bastard. Okay?”

The scowling Pinner waited for a nod of acknowledgement. The bat-wings squeaked as they closed. Hedges looked past the hind-quarters of the lieutenant’s mount and saw Grainger urging Chipeta into the depths of the saloon.

“I said okay!” Pinner rasped.

Hedges’ throat was constricted by fear, but it seemed terribly important for him to establish himself beyond Pinner’s authority. “Okay...” he growled, and quickly added as he moved forward. “...if I buy myself a drink?”

He didn’t wait for a response and before Pinner had time to phrase a new command, Hedges’ stubby legs had carried his paunchy frame across the narrow street and into the saloon.

“Bastard!” the lieutenant muttered to himself, then heeled his horse viciously forward to clatter over the bridge. On the edge of the compound he brought the animal to a rearing halt and slid from the saddle. “You!” he yelled, pointing to an enlisted man slouching across from the arsenal. “Feed and water him.”

The man was armed with a rifle and wore a belt with a buttoned-down holster. Several other men were leaving the arsenal with similar weapons, heading toward various points on the perimeter ditch.

“I’m posted for extra guard duty, sir,” the man replied. “Orders from the captain.”

Pinner’s angry eyes raked around the perimeter and as the new men took up their positions he could see the sentry strength had been trebled. “Carry on,” he allowed, and led his horse toward the area in front of the stables where the men

who had been to the *rancheria* were unsaddling their horses. He gave his mount into the care of a corporal and strode to the headquarters building. The window of the commanding officer's office was squared with light. As he was about to enter, the door opened and the trooper who had sensed the full extent of the resentment lurking in the hearts and minds of the Borderline Apaches stepped out.

When he had saluted and veered away, Pinner entered the office. It was as spartanly furnished as all other quarters in the remotely situated fort. A desk, three chairs, and a set of file drawers. On one wall hung a map of the Arizona Territory and another of the entire Department of New Mexico. A portrait of President Lincoln decorated another wall.

The fat Captain Crane sat behind the desk pouring himself a drink from a bottle of French brandy. Pinner knew the bottle had been stolen from Major Anson several months previously. Crane had managed to lay the blame for the theft upon an unfortunate Apache who happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. The major had ordered the brave to be flogged. Pinner had carried out the sentence-tying the Indian to a wagon wheel, stripping him naked and then lashing him from calves to neck with a length of knotted rope. No skin had been broken, but the brave had suffered many hours of agony from the swollen and discolored bruises that covered his torso, buttocks, and legs. He had been left on display, bound to the wheel, for a full day.

Crane and Pinner had enjoyed many small slugs of the fine liquor since then. But the captain's fleshy face showed no sign of pleasure as he sucked from the glass now.

"Something wrong?" Pinner asked.

Crane fixed his second cousin with a pig-eyed stare. "You know Apaches better than me. You feel anything special out at Borderline tonight?"

"Special?"

"That trooper who just went out. Says he understands Indians better than most whites. Used to be a trapper here. Reckon we pushed them too far tonight. Reckons they're about to turn hostile."

Pinner curled back his lips to show a scornful grin as Crane poured another slug of brandy and downed it at a gulp. "We made them mad, Silas," he replied. "But they know they can't do a thing about it. I've told you my theory about Indians often enough."

Crane nodded. "I know it. But that trooper seemed pretty certain he knew what he was talking about. So I've trebled the guard. You think I should send out a couple of men to scout the *rancheria*? Make sure the bastards stay where they're meant to be?"

Pinner shrugged. "Why not, Silas. If it makes you feel easier. You're in command now. You can make the decision. What have you got to lose?"

"Detail two men," Crane said after a slight pause for thought. "But I don't want contact made. Just to scout the *rancheria* and report to me on the situation there."

"Right," Pinner responded, his green eyes roving over the blotchy face of Crane.

The captain was drunk again. He had been unable to mount his horse unaided at the start of the ride to Borderline. He had sobered a little on the outward leg. The tension of the confrontation and the cold snap of night air on the return had accelerated the process. But the shots of brandy he had tossed against the back of

his throat had quickly reactivated the stale alcohol polluting the blood flowing into his brain.

“You’ll foin the wake, Silas?” Pinner asked.

Crane glanced around the cold, impersonal office and shivered, not entirely from the chill air. The stark martialized nature of the design and furnishing seemed to epitomize the loneliness of a command for which Crane knew he was not competent. If there was to be Indian trouble, he had no desire to be alone. He took one more drink and replaced the bottle in a desk drawer as he stood up.

“Think I’ll come to the funeral,” he said.

Pinner concealed his amusement as he pulled open the door. He was well aware that the captain was so scared that even Dutch courage could not help him. Crane sensed his second-in-command recognized the scent of fear.

“Be less than respectful if the commanding officer of Davidson wasn’t present,” he justified as he doused the lamp and stepped outside.

A corporal and an enlisted man were just emerging from the stables, the last of the returning troopers to finish attending to their horses. Pinner ordered them to him and passed on Crane’s instructions to scout the *rancheria*. Both listened impassively to the orders, not daring to grimace their discontent until the lieutenant and captain had turned their backs, heading for the bridged exit from the fort.

Inside the stable they cursed the officers and further vented their feelings by the tardiness with which they saddled fresh mounts. Not until they were outside in the compound again, swinging into their saddles and wheeling the horses toward the bridge, did they become conscious of a certain urgency about their mission. For they detected a subtle tension in the cold night air. This was most apparent in the strength of the sentries surrounding the fort’s buildings and the alert stance of each man at his position along the defensive ring. But it did not end here.

The off-duty soldiers were quiet in the bunkhouses and a group of junior officers were clustered in front of their quarters, talking in low tones. Two sergeant gunners were taking shells from the arsenal and stacking them beside the four howitzers which guarded each approach to the store.

Because they had spent such a long time in the stables, the men assigned to the scouting mission were the only soldiers in the fort who had not heard the prediction of Indian trouble. But the smell of fear and the knowledge that the only possible enemies were the Apaches urged the scouts to set aside their resentment toward their officers and heel the horses into a gallop once clear of the tiny street through the post.

As the clatter of the horses’ hooves diminished into the distance, the plain pine casket containing the body of Armstrong Ford was lowered into the grave. Edward O’Regan, wizen-faced and pot-bellied, spoke the Lord’s Prayer as he and Nathan Ford played out the ropes supporting the box. Crane and Pinner looked on with complete lack of emotion. The lieutenant had found it necessary to remind the captain to remove his forage cap. The moment the prayer was completed and the dead man was in his final resting place, the four mourners turned and headed into the saloon. The two dour-faced troopers assigned to the burial detail stepped forward and began to shovel the fresh-dug earth back into the pit. Knowing they had to be outside, the men were glad of the work. It helped to keep out the night’s

cold, which had intensified with the springing up of a biting wind scything along the valley from the north.

Warmth reached into every part of the crudely-furnished saloon from a stove at the center, which glowed red hot. But it was the sweat of fear, not over-heating, which oozed from the open pores in Chipeta's flesh. She sat at one of the four tables spread around the stove, her delicately pretty face set in a mask of useless defiance. Jess Grainger sat across the table from her, with a glass of beer in one hand and a Colt revolver in the other. The big, blonde, and very unpretty Annie Colbert leaned provocatively against the front of the bar which extended along the rear wall of the saloon, jutting out her hip and thrusting forward her enormous breasts, half-exposed by the low neckline of her stained and patched, once fine, flame-red gown. She was taking small sips from a shot glass, her small blue eyes regarding the squaw's beauty with envy. John Hedges sat at a table on the other side of the stove from Chipeta and Grainger, nursing the sleeping baby on his knee. It had not been easy to get the squaw to surrender her child, but Hedges had spoken to her persuasively in her own tongue and she had surfaced from her shock to recognize the schoolteacher as the tutor of Cuchillo and a friend to all Apaches. She had seen the gentleness with which Hedges handled the child and been convinced of his good intentions when she saw the way he rocked him back into his disturbed sleep.

"You were told Annie was to have the brat!" Pinner snarled from the doorway as the four mourners burst in through the bat-wings, anxious to escape the freshening cold of the night.

"Come on, folks," O'Regan said as he hurried to the end of the bar and went through the flap, anxious to set the drinks flowing and the money into his cash drawer. "Like always at my wakes, the first round's on the house."

Ford was the first one to belly up to the bar, eager to drown his genuine sorrow at the loss of an only son—and to calm his jumping nerves, agitated by fear of the consequences his false accusation threatened to unleash. For he had sensed Crane's fear and seen the activity at the fort.

As Crane hooked a heel over the bar rail, the grinning O'Regan slammed down a half dozen shot glasses and upended a bottle of whiskey over them.

"I wouldn't soil my hands on an Injun brat!" Annie Colbert growled as she slid her empty glass along the bar.

O'Regan filled it and slid it back.

Pinner stood over Hedges, glowering down at him. Chipeta made to rise, but halted the move when Grainger banged the butt of the Colt against the table top. The men at the bar downed their free drinks, then dug into their pockets and slapped coins and bills onto the counter top.

"Grainger's calling the tune, Lieutenant," Crane said without turning around, as he watched O'Regan pour fresh drinks and extract payment from the piles of money.

Pinner's expression became challenging as he swung to face the grinning Indian Bureau agent. Grainger had a hawk face and a lean body. At first glance, his liquid brown eyes had a personable look and he had the kind of mouth which smiled easily. But all that knew him were well aware of the mean streak which ran through him, likely to rise to the surface at any time, especially when he had

poured a great deal of beer down his scrawny throat. Now, his mouth held the smile, but his eyes turned from liquid to ice.

"Annie and me are good friends," he said softly. "I wouldn't want her to do anything she didn't like."

"Unless you paid me," the whore muttered acidly.

"Come and take a damn drink!" Crane called.

Pinner swung angrily away from the table and strode to the bar. Hedges gave Chipeta a reassuring nod, then became aware that Grainger had swung the revolver to cover him.

"Tell the squaw to fetch me a beer, nursemaid," he rasped.

Hedges tried to swallow his fear as he held the agent's level, demanding gaze. He opened his mouth to protest, but Grainger spoke first, altering the aim of the gun.

"Before you say anything," he warned, "this revolver's got a sensitive trigger. Just need to have a little accidental jolt of my hand. Bang! Another funeral. Small box. Apache kid. Named Hole-in-the-Head. Maybe No-Head."

The agent's matter-of-fact tone added validity to the threat.

"He wants you to get him a drink," Hedges said to Chipeta in Apache. "He says he'll kill your baby if you don't obey."

The pretty young squaw did not hesitate. She had seen the gun pointing at the sleeping child and the transformation of Hedges' expression into the twisted lines of horror. She stood up stiffly and walked to the bar with her shoulders slumped and head bowed. The plain calfskin dress molded the lines of her body and its hem caressed her bare legs. The men at the bar turned to watch her with a mixture of scorn and lust.

"You gotta pay for new drinks, Jess," O'Regan reminded.

"Oh yeah," the agent responded, digging into his pocket and bringing out a fistful of bills.

The saloon owner directed Chipeta's attention toward Grainger and the agent crooked a finger at the woman. She returned to the table and he stood. The fingers of his gun hand clawed over the neckline of her dress and the muzzle of the Colt forced her chin up. His shining eyes locked with the woman's dull ones as he plunged a hand inside her dress and dropped the money into the warm valley of her unfettered breasts. His fingers made exploratory probes before he withdrew the hand. Chipeta stood woodenly before him, forced to submit to his intimate touch.

"Don't hog it all to yourself, Grainger!" Crane slurred, gathering up his money and staggering to a table.

The agent used the barrel of the Colt to turn her head so that the squaw looked toward the outstretched hand of the captain. There was more movement and her eyes roved the room as Pinner and Ford crossed to sit down, holding up handfuls of money. The whore looked at the squaw with spiteful eyes. O'Regan trembled in anticipation of retrieving the money.

"You understand why I must do this thing?" Chipeta said dully to John Hedges.

He nodded, pathetic in his impotence. "And you know I cannot help you. Just try to keep your baby safe."

"Thank you," Chipeta replied, and moved from table to table, submitting to the humiliation with stoic calm.

Her dress was held in at her narrow waist by a belt of plaited hair. The bodice swelled and became heavy with bills and coins. At the bar, the slaver O'Regan delved a filthy hand into the neck of the dress and withdrew a single bill after much exploring of the firm, sweat-sticky flesh.

"Reckon I'll just take payment when it comes due," he said with a high-pitched giggle. "She's got the kind of bank I like to visit a lot."

Hedges knew the men would not confine the humiliation of Chipeta to this level, and knew just as surely that he was powerless to help her. All he could do was sit and watch as the squaw moved back and forth between bar and tables, delivering drinks to the customers and allowing O'Regan to root inside her dress for the money to pay for them. The men became drunker and Annie Colbert's eyes grew heavier with spiteful envy. But throughout, Pinner—who was the youngest and fittest man present—stayed less noisily inebriated than the rest. He made it plain that he knew of Hedges' wish to help the Indian woman and spent more time watching the schoolteacher than in lusting after the squaw. His holster was unbuttoned and whenever Hedges spotted the careful surveillance, the lieutenant dropped his palm over the Colt butt.

The orgiastic wake had been in progress for almost ninety minutes, during which time it had been necessary to replenish the money inside Chipeta's dress on three occasions, when the drunken whore dropped the reins on her temper. For too long, she had been the only woman in the midst of more than a hundred men, such an imbalance of the sexes completely negating her ugliness and overweight. It was, perhaps, natural that she should view the introduction of the squaw as an unacceptable intrusion into her exclusive domain—irrespective of Chipeta's unwillingness to do the men's bidding.

But to Annie, the reasoning did not matter. Her anger flared into the open and her attack was impulsive. Chipeta was just turning away from the bar with a brimming glass of whiskey in each hand. She was near exhaustion from the fear and the strain of stemming her emotions. The stink of sweat and spilled liquor was fogging her mind and her eyes stung with the acrid blue of cheroot smoke. She was unaware of any movement behind her.

The whore hooked a big foot around the squaw's ankles and gave her a violent shove in the small of her back. Chipeta emitted a cry of alarm and pitched forward to the sawdust-spread floor, both glasses flying from her hands. Liquor hissed and vaporized on the glowing stove. With a yell of triumph, Annie Colbert launched her considerable weight on to the prone slimness of the squaw.

Hedges started to rise, then froze. Pinner had leaned forward, drawing his Colt, and thrust the muzzle against the nape of the schoolteacher's neck.

"If nursing babies is men's work, fighting must be women's," the lieutenant whispered with low venom.

Chipeta's instinct was to struggle against the enormous weight of her attacker and fight back at the blows pummeled over her head and back. But the horrifying thought that her baby would be harmed because of her retaliation urged her to submit limply to the beating. She lay utterly inert, unable to breathe because of the great weight bearing down upon her and struggling against the need to cry at the pain that each powerfully delivered punch jarred through her.

Grainger, O'Regan and Crane leaned forward, waving aside the clouds of tobacco smoke, their stinking breath coming in short gasps of excitement as they peered at the one-sided fight. But, because of the squaw's refusal to defend herself, the novelty was short-lived. Even the sight of the whore's pendulous breasts, shaken free of her dress by the exertion, failed to hold the men's interest for long. But it triggered an idea in Grainger's alcohol-addled brain.

"Strip her, Annie!" he yelled. "We've all had the feeling. Let's see what kind of assets we invested our money in. Strip the bitch!"

The whore, her anger intensified by Chipeta's meek acceptance of the violence, did not hear the first words the agent yelled at her. For her rage had set up a roaring in her ears which drove all other sounds into the far distance of another, saner world. But the final command penetrated her writhing brain and she accepted it as the opportunity to vent her spite in a more satisfying way than beating against apparently unfeeling flesh.

Her fleshy fists unfolded and her dirt-grimed fingers clawed at the top of the squaw's dress beneath the long, jet-black hair. But the tough calfskin refused to tear under the power of her enraged strength. She cursed and reached down a hand to hoist up her dress. The hemline rose to expose a flabby, vein-bulged thigh. A knife sheath was held against the scaled flesh by a leather thong. With the smoothness of an expert, she drew the short-bladed dagger and hooked it under the top of Chipeta's dress.

"No cutting!" It was Crane who shouted the warning. Despite the vast quantities of cheap whiskey he had poured down his throat, there was still a tiny knot of dread which refused to be loosed from the back of his mind. From it he drew the warning that he would be safer with a ravished squaw than a wounded one. Lust blocked the logic of this. The tawny flesh of Chipeta's naked back expanded the lust and swamped the dread.

The whore took heed of the warning as she drew the dagger downward, raising herself from the prone squaw and rocking back on to her heels. The finely honed blade slit easily through the soft leather of the dress, the chemise, and breeches. She leaned forward and flicked each side of the tattered garments away from the inert body, exposing the vibrant young flesh from shoulders to heels.

"Stand her up!" Grainger roared, his voice harsh with expectancy.

The whore first returned the dagger to the thigh-sheath. Then she stood up, stooped, and gripped Chipeta under the armpits. Only Hedges did not fasten his eyes on the tableau. Pinner, while continuing to press the gun muzzle against the schoolteachers neck, felt himself drawn to watch the unfolding of the Indian woman's complete nakedness.

As Annie Colbert's great strength raised the squaw, the ruined clothing fell from her body. Chipeta screwed her eyes tight shut to avoid meeting the lustful stares of the men and seeing their saliva-run mouths. But it was long moments before any of the men directed their attention to her face, covered with sawdust which was held against the skin by sweat and run with blood from gushing nostrils and a tooth wound in her lip. For it was her lithe body which held their rabid concentration, their eyes raking from the twin cones of her dark-crested breasts, down over her flat stomach, and then feasting upon the dark triangle of hair pointing into the secret place between the firm swells of her thighs.

O'Regan rushed out from behind the bar to join the gaping audience. "Will you look at that!" he yelled in delight, his grizzled features split wide by a grin. "Indian dames is the same as whites!"

"What did you expect?" Grainger muttered. "Feathers?"

"Maybe a little paint," the saloon-owner replied gleefully, crouching down amid the scattered money on the tattered clothing, craning forward to stare closely at the base of the squaw's body.

"Paint's for war," Grainger hissed, standing up from the chair and dropping his hands to his belt buckle. "This is one Indian gonna surrender peaceable, I reckon."

"Stop this, Captain!" Hedges roared, not daring to turn to look at Crane, fearful a sudden move might jolt Pinner's finger against the Colt's trigger.

"On the floor again, Annie!" Grainger ordered. "Right side up this time, uh?"

Chipeta continued to keep her eyes tight closed and her body limp. With a vicious grin, the whore stepped backwards and released her grip. The squaw's naked body collapsed to the floor.

"Captain!" Hedges screamed as Pinner increased the pressure of the gun against his neck. "Stop it!"

Grainger moved forward, towering above the helpless squaw. He used the toe of his boot to spread-eagle the woman's legs. First one, then the other. Despite herself, Chipeta began to tremble. The quaking of her flesh only heightened the anticipation stirring in the loins of the men looking down upon her open body. The agent sank to his knees, releasing his pants. He lowered himself forward, onto and then into the tremulous, enforced receptiveness of the woman. She gasped her horror. He grunted his joy.

Hedges recognized the utterances for what they were. He hung his head in shame at his helplessness. A tear escaped his eye and splashed on to the forehead of the sleeping baby. The child continued to sleep on through his mother's torment.

Pinner sensed that there was no longer any threat of interference from the broken-spirited Hedges and holstered the Colt, waiting for his turn to expend himself into the body of one of the Indians he hated so much.

"Close your eyes, and it's just like the meat's white," Grainger said as he raised himself from Chipeta and O'Regan threw himself into the vacated place.

"Good as me?" the whore demanded harshly, no longer enjoying the evil she had instigated.

"Cheaper," Grainger taunted, flopping into his chair and grabbing his drink.

The whore turned her back on the men and helped herself to a free drink while O'Regan was occupied elsewhere. Nathan Ford's expression changed as he watched the obscene display, his contempt for Apaches swamping the earlier desire for a woman's body. He turned suddenly to face the table and concentrated on his drink. It was the prospect of using the woman after O'Regan's filthy body had attacked her which caused Crane to lean to the side of his chair and empty his stomach on to the floor. His lust was drained along with the regurgitated liquor. The violent retching and the stench of the vomit brought Pinner back to his senses.

Thus as the giggling O'Regan emptied his loins into her body, was Chipeta spared further assaults.

“Another round, gents?” the saloon-owner yelled as he stood up, fastening his belt.

“Nobody else?” Grainger asked in surprise, looking from the grim-faced Pinner to the ashen features of Crane.

“Wake’s over,” Pinner croaked, and received a weak nod of agreement from the captain. “Every part of it. We’ll take the prisoner to the fort.”

“What about you, schoolteacher?” the agent yelled.

Hedges remained with his head bent, arms folded tenderly around the baby.

Grainger spat on the floor. “And we always thought he was an Indian-lover!” he taunted.

Only he and O’Regan laughed.

“Can you make it, Captain?” Pinner asked Crane.

The commanding officer of the fort hauled himself to his feet, using his hands on the table to lever his obese body upright. He looked around with glazed eyes, then staggered over to the door. He leaned against the frame, breathing in deeply from the fresh, ice-cold, wind-driven air.

“I’ll take the kid,” Pinner said, stepping in front of Hedges. The schoolteacher snapped his head up, eyes flaring. “You bring the squaw,” Pinner said hurriedly. “Find something to cover her with.”

Pinner’s expression warned against disobedience. But there was no harshness in his tone and when he lifted the baby into his arms, his movements were awkwardly gentle. “Get a blanket for her,” the lieutenant snapped toward O’Regan, who scuttled into his living quarters behind the bar and produced what was required.

Chipeta seemed to be unconscious, but Hedges guessed she had plunged into a self-induced trance. She neither struggled against him nor helped him as he dropped the blanket over her nakedness, then wrapped her in it before lifting her in his arms.

Annie Colbert stayed hunched over the bar, and Nathan Ford stared into the bottom of his empty glass. All humor was gone from the dull eyes of Grainger and O’Regan. Crane and Pinner moved out into the face of the biting wind with a shuffling gait. An aura of shame hovered almost tangibly over the bowed heads of all who had participated in the act, made more evil because the occasion had been sacrilegiously dedicated to the memory of a newly-dead man.

“What the hell’s happened to those scouts I sent out?” Crane slurred, clamping his hat to his head as he peered along the trail.

Pinner had forgotten about the two men. This abrupt reminder, coupled with the fact that the troopers had failed to report, opened up the possibility that the former trapper may have been right in his appraisal of the mood of the Apaches. The lieutenant took the lead in heading for the bridge into the fort, noting that the ring of sentries had remained at their posts, despite the cold which had turned their faces as blue as their uniform topcoats.

He had to look hard to see the men on duty at the rear of the fort, for the light level had severely deteriorated—the moon filtering only a slight glow through the clouds scudding in from the north and banking in the south. The valley slopes were spread with vast patches of deep shadow.

"I reckon it won't be long before we find out, Captain," Pinner belatedly replied, experiencing a warm sense of anticipation far more potent than that which had aroused him back at the saloon. That had been simple lust. This was blood-lust.

Chapter 8

THE CORPORAL'S NAME was Hagen. The enlisted man was Lyall. They were tired and they were hungry and felt hard done by. The earlier ride out to the rancheria, coming as it did at the end of a day during which they had been assigned more than their fair share of headquarters duties, should have been enough for any soldier. But an army which put officers like Crane and Pinner in positions of authority took no account of such factors. Hagen and Lyall had been available when something needed doing; ergo, they did it.

Once into the high country, with the lights of the fort obscured by the bare rock ridges, the two troopers were no longer affected by the strange sense of tension that hung over Davidson. They were riding a familiar trail through country they knew well from the experience of countless patrols. It was an area known as Davidson's Backyard, and since the fort had been built the trail and the surrounding terrain had been host to no other dangers beyond the occasional disturbed rattler. Apaches? Apart from a handful of young braves testing the wings of youth, the Borderline Mimbrenos had shown, by the mere fact of living at the rancheria, they had no stomach for fighting.

"You know something, Lyall?" the corporal said as he turned up his coat collar against the bite of the newly sprung wind.

"What?"

"Crane's an old woman."

"Everyone knows that," the enlisted man replied sourly, controlling his mount with knees and heels as he rubbed at his ears with gloved hands.

Hagen shook his head. "Not everybody, Lyall. Not the officers at Fort Marcy."

Marcy was the headquarters post for the Department of New Mexico, situated at Santa Fe.

"Don't matter whether they know it or not," Lyall pointed out. "They sure as hell know his name. And because it's Crane, ain't nothing can shift him from command now he's got it."

"Post as big as Davidson ought to have at least a major in command," Hagen reflected.

"So they'll promote him," Lyall growled.

The trail was running through a narrow ravine with high, steep walls of sandstone. The men's voices, counterpointed by the clop of hooves on the hard-packed ground, echoed between the cliffs. At the far end of the gorge, on the right, was the deep cave which the Apaches called Hole-in-the-Rocks. It was at a point where the rim of the cliff had crumbled to shower down a fall of boulders which had piled into a natural wind-break across the greater part of the cave mouth.

Most of the soldiers at Davidson knew the cave. Many had used it during harsh winter weather, choosing to hole up in its relative warmth rather than ride into the teeth of biting winds or struggle through waist-high snow patrols.

As the heap of rocks marking the cave came into view, the two soldiers eyed it wistfully. At the side of the rocks, it was possible for two men to ride abreast through the entrance.

“How about a smoke?” Lyall suggested.

The corporal gave the idea a moment’s thought, then shook his head. “We wasted a lot of time already. Be at Borderline in ten minutes. We step it up, take a quick look and make it fast back here, maybe then we’ll take a rest. Let old mother Crane sweat once we know everything’s okay.”

The implied doubt that all might not be well caused Lyall to recall the unfamiliar tension gripping the fort. Hagen saw his companion’s reflective expression and a pinprick of nervousness stabbed into his mind.

“Hell, why shouldn’t it be okay?” he growled, as much to shake himself free of doubt as to convince Lyall. “Black Horse and his people are used to getting the treatment. Why should they kick now?”

“Apaches are people,” Lyall pointed out. “And people can only be pushed so far.”

Hagen shook his head. “No. Apaches are animals who happen to look like people.”

Behind the rocks at the mouth of the cave, Cuchillo, White Dog and four braves crouched in readiness. Behind them in the dark depths, the rest of the war party calmed the ponies into silence. The Apaches had been thus positioned ever since the soldiers had entered the ravine, the echoing voices announcing their arrival. Now, as the two men were about to come into view around the boulders, Cuchillo raised the rifle and the other braves drew back their bow strings. Arrow heads rested against strong fists folded around curved ash wood. Eyes were narrowed for the first sighting and ears were cocked for an order from Cuchillo.

“It’s that kind of thinking that puts Indians on the warpath,” Lyall said as the two men walked their horses into view. “Men like Crane and Pinner are the animals.”

Hagen became angry, and pulled his minor rank. “Soldier, you’re out of line,” he snarled. “Pinner and Crane are white men. No matter what kind of men they are, they’re better than any no-good Injun.”

Cuchillo’s voice was a whisper, hidden behind the far off howl of the wind through the peaks: “Kill young one. We talk with other man.”

Five bow strings twanged and the arrows hissed. Lyall screamed once, not loud, but amplified by the rebound between the rock faces. Three arrows sank deep into his chest from a range of less than twenty yards. The heads ripped into his heart and he fell sideways from his saddle, sending a gush of blood across the neck of his horse. Hagen’s cry was louder and longer. He took an arrow through each upper arm. The head of that which pierced him on the left missed the bone and burst clear at the back. The flight feathers prevented the shaft’s exit. The force of impact powered the corporal backward from his saddle and his boots came free of the stirrups. He hit the ground hard and was stunned for several moments. He saw the crumpled, blood-soaked form of Lyall and the hindquarters of the bolting

horses through a blurring mist of pain. Then his vision cleared and he stared up in horror at a ring of impassive Apache faces.

“Recapture the horses,” Cuchillo ordered in Apache, and two of the braves broke away from the circle and loped in pursuit of the frightened animals. In English, he said to Hagen: “To die sometimes best thing. Young soldier lucky, mister. He say good things about Apache, so I make him lucky.”

All Indians looked the same to Hagen. But the Spencer aimed at his head and the bandaged hand folded around the barrel marked out the tallest brave as Cuchillo.

“Oh... my... God!” the corporal croaked as Cuchillo beckoned two of the braves forward and then stooped to haul the injured man to his feet.

“He help them who help themselves,” Cuchillo growled. “Not mean way soldiers help themselves to what is Apache’s.”

Fear and agony struggled to gain possession of Hagen’s grizzled features as he was backed against the pile of boulders with his arrow-pierced arms spread out wide on each side in the grip of his two captors. With a grunt of delight, White Dog lunged towards him, released his belt with holster and ammunition pouch, and backed away. He grinned broadly as he fixed the belt around his own waist. The Indians who had remained in the cave now filed outside as those sent in pursuit of the runaway horses returned with their prizes. They had claimed the Spencers which had been in the boots. One of them was Red Tail.

The braves formed a menacing half-circle around the terrified Hagen, except for the scar-faced Ugly Indian who had seen the newly-acquired weapon of White Dog and sidled furtively over to the crumpled form of Lyall. He quickly removed the dead man’s gun belt. He also jerked out the killing arrows and placed them, still dripping blood, into the pouch at his back. He rejoined the others.

“You will say where my wife, Chipeta, is being held, mister,” Cuchillo demanded.

Hagen’s frightened eyes swung to left and right. The hatred he saw in the dark faces caused his breeches to fill with the warmth and stickiness of uncontrollable terror.

“Grainger claimed the woman,” he rasped. “The agent. He took her into the saloon.”

Cuchillo did not betray his dread. At the fort, even with Crane in command, Chipeta might have been granted a modicum of respect as an innocent hostage. But in the custody of the Bureau agent in the house of depravity run by O’Regan, and accessible to the Indian-hating Ford, Chipeta could expect little consideration.

“The officers allowed this?” Cuchillo demanded.

“They went with her,” Hagen replied quickly, anxious to offer the brave some comfort in the hope it would temper whatever plans he had for his prisoner.

“My son?”

“They let her keep him. Look, why you starting trouble? Turn yourself in. You’ll get a fair trial. We can bury Lyall. I’ll tell ’em he deserted.”

Cuchillo was not listening to the plea. And his concern for Chipeta and the baby slammed down the shutters on the many more questions he had intended to ask the prisoner concerning sentries, the times they were relieved, and where to find the keys to the arsenal. With his family in such evil hands, speed of attack was suddenly more important than detailed planning.

“You have done with the white-eyes?” White Dog asked. “He say what you want to know without torture?”

Cuchillo eyed his fellow brave with scorn, detecting the disappointment in his voice. “He has told me.”

“We kill now?”

Cuchillo looked sadly at the terrified Hagen, regretful that the man’s life was in his hands. At least the two soldiers had been armed when he ordered the death of Lyall. But, he reasoned, he had spoken the words which formed the war party. There could be no recantation of such a decision.

He nodded. “Quickly. We must ride at once.”

Hagen did not understand one word which was exchanged between the two braves, but he sensed from their tones, and the expressions on the faces of all the Apaches, that his fate was being decided. And Cuchillo’s nod, his sad eyes, revealed what the decision was.

“No!” he pleaded, forcing himself down onto his knees despite the struggles of his two captors to hold him erect.

“All will kill,” White Dog ordered, sliding an arrow from his back pouch and fitting it to the bow. All the braves imitated his actions, except for Cuchillo, who was armed only with the Spencer. He leveled the rifle, which was already cocked.

“Mother!” Corporal Hagen screamed.

It was his final word. Bowstrings were released. Arrows hissed and thudded. Bone and metal heads sank deep into the flesh of the helpless soldier. His chest bristled with feathered shafts and the braves who had held him now let him go. Blood fountained from many wounds to form a single stain on the thirsty ground. He fell forward, into the fast-drying pool. Shafts snapped under the dead weight of his body.

The rifle in Cuchillo’s steady hands had remained silent.

“You have not yet killed,” White Dog said into the stillness, his words echoing between the ravine’s walls. The tone was critical.

“Time is plentiful,” Cuchillo replied, breaking from the group to lead the way inside the cave.

All except one brave followed him. This was Ugly Indian, who drew his knife as he approached Hagen’s blood-soaked body. He knocked off the dead man’s forage cap, slit open the skin at the top of the forehead and wrenched off the scalp with a vicious tug. The sound was like that of tearing paper. Then he went to Lyall and performed the same mutilating operation. He hung both prizes on his stolen belt.

Cuchillo eyed the blood-soaked locks with repugnance as he led the braves and their ponies out of the caves. White Dog saw this show of emotion.

“Cuchillo need reminding the taking of scalps is Apache custom?” the brave taunted. “He forget because he learns too much of white-eyes’ ways?”

Cuchillo felt his temper rising, but he quelled it. His reply was spoken softly as he gathered up the reins of the troopers’ horses and heeled his pony into a gallop along the ravine. “Learning is finished. Time for me to teach lesson.”

The war party streamed after its leader.

Chapter 9

CUCHILLO HALTED THE braves on high ground overlooking the fort and trading post from the cover of a gully that cut into the valley northwest of the cluster of buildings. He had angled away from the trail short of where it crested the final rise and ran down the slope in full view of the posted sentries.

He dismounted and crept forward to a point where he could study every part of the windswept settlement. No lights showed anywhere, either within the defensive circle of the ditch or over the plank bridge among the buildings of the trading post. But enough phosphorescence permeated the night through the straggled clouds to show Cuchillo what he wanted to see.

The dispatching of scouts to the *rancheria* had indicated that Crane suspected the Apaches might give trouble. The fact that the fort was ringed by eighteen instead of the usual six sentries confirmed this. Further evidence was provided by the stacks of shells beside the howitzers. But the artillery pieces were unmanned and there was no sign of forward observers outside the perimeter or defensive activity within the guarded circle. Davidson was on a precautionary alert, the commanding officer probably awaiting a report from his scouts before committing himself to a greater or lesser degree of readiness.

Cuchillo withdrew to where the braves were waiting. He spoke softly to Ugly Indian. White Dog hurried forward to listen to the orders, and sought to assert his position of authority in the eyes of all the lesser braves with a series of nods, confirming his agreement with Cuchillo's plan. The leader of the war party ignored his second-in-command until after Ugly Indian had taken the reins of the army horses and led them back down the gully on foot.

Then: "You will join me, White Dog. And Red Tail. Man Without Horse. Soft Tongue. Spotted Face. Rest stay here. Only come if called."

He looked around at the braves. Those he had not named grimaced their resentment, but nodded that they understood what was necessary. Cuchillo grunted his satisfaction, then turned and led the way back to his vantage point.

The ground sloping down into the valley was mostly formed of rock, with just the occasional patch of soil from which sprang tough sagebrush. But it was not smooth rock. Several million years of fiercely hot days and freezing cold nights had contorted the surface, cracking it, rearing it up, and shattering it. Thus, while a man could not walk upright without risk of being seen from the fort, he could snake from one secret place to another on his belly and be in small danger.

This was the way Cuchillo led the braves, using elbows, knees and the toes of his moccasined feet to propel himself from one area of cover to another. No brave made a sound, as watchful for loose rocks as for signs of alarm below. They reached the valley floor at a point which placed the buildings of the trading post between themselves and the fort. But there was an area of completely open ground to cover, two hundred feet across. It was a dangerous gulf and Cuchillo held the braves back, watching the sky as a particularly dark patch of cloud was scudded toward the moon. When one obscured the other, he raised into a crouch and skittered across the area of no cover, pulling up short against the wall of the saloon. The braves clustered around him and there was no cry of alarm.

Like all other buildings of the post and in the fort, the saloon was just one story high. It had no window or door in the side and Cuchillo elected to go to the back rather than the front, where a parked wagon offered a scant token of cover. He ordered the raiders down on to their bellies with a hand sign, and peered under the wagon, between the rear of the Ford Store and a stable toward where those sentries in sight stamped their feet, flapped their arms, or blew on their hands as they attempted to combat the bitter cold. The Apaches were cold, too, beneath the scant covering of buckskin shirts and leggings. But excitement and tension created an impression of warmth that did a great deal to extend mind over matter.

Cuchillo bellied his way to the saloon's rear door. It looked solid and he guessed it was probably both locked and bolted. He turned his attention to the window and saw it was the kind that did not open. The pane was held in place by beading.

"Knife?" he whispered to White Dog, and took the offered weapon.

The blade had a keen edge and a needle-sharp tip. The wood strips were rotten in some parts, and well-preserved in others. The knife made short work of all four sections, sinking into the cracks and prizing loose the pins. As Cuchillo eased out the pane and rested it against the wall, he heard a man snoring, and another sleeper muttering. He swung a leg over the sill and slid silently into the room. The braves followed him, White Dog taking back his knife. Six pairs of eyes quickly dilated to the almost pitch darkness in the room. Cold air streamed in through the gaping window, swallowing up the last vestiges of warmth from the dying embers in the stove.

Edward O'Regan and Annie Colbert slept on in the big double bed, drawing heat from each other's bodies. Their drunken stupors deadened senses which might otherwise have warned them of danger. Cuchillo rested the side of his good hand against his throat and nodded to White Dog and Soft Tongue. The two braves seemed to float to the sides of the bed. Each held a knife, which he lowered against the throat of the sleeper closest to him.

"Quiet!" Cuchillo hissed, leaning around White Dog's taut body.

Cold steel had roused the saloon-owner and the whore. Bleary-eyed, they stared up at the faces of the Apaches, mouths pulled wide to scream. It was the pressure of the knives rather than Cuchillo's warning which caused them to clamp their lips together.

"Say softly," Cuchillo whispered. "Where Grainger and squaw with baby?"

O'Regan was petrified, unable to reply. The whore swallowed hard and managed to gasp a few words.

"Grainger's gone home..." She was going to continue; to tell him Chipeta and his son were at the fort. But she paused to gulp more air into her lungs.

Cuchillo straightened and said in Apache: "Quickly."

White Dog and Soft Tongue bore down hard on their knives and drew the blades across the punctured flesh. Great gouts of jugular blood flowed on to the filthy blankets. More poured down the victims' throats, turning the death rattle into gurgles.

"You still without blood on hands!" White Dog rebuked in a whisper.

Cuchillo watched as he and Soft Tongue ripped off the scalps from the corpses. Then, tensely: "Grainger live in house across street. Only safe for one man to cross. I go."

White Dog nodded grimly as he attached the whore's blonde hair to his belt. Then he led the braves in following Cuchillo out into the saloon. The tall Apache shot the bolts silently and cracked open the big door. His narrowed eyes raked over the facade of John Hedges' adobe house, and settled on that of the Indian Bureau agent next to it. He opened the crack wider, went down on his hands and knees and snaked out under the bat-wings. He peered along the street and saw the sentries at each side of the bridge into the fort. They were moving back and forth in a shuffling gait, flapping their arms against the cold. Their faces were white, featureless blobs against the dark background of upturned coat collars and pulled down forage caps. He waited until they had turned, the whiteness obscured, before launching himself forward. His back was arched and his moccasined feet made only the faintest sound as he ran. His form merged against the black bulk of the tiny house. There were no cries of alarm.

The door was closed, but unlocked. As he cracked it and slid inside, he realized he had no knife—just the rifle and his bare hands. He looked around. The layout was precisely the same as the house of the schoolteacher. But the house was dirtier. Grainger's regular breathing sounded from the bedroom. No woman or baby could be heard. Cuchillo flitted across the living room like a shadow. The agent's long, lean frame was outlined by a blanket covering the bed. Cuchillo towered over the sleeping man. He aimed the Spencer and struck Grainger a sharp blow with the muzzle against his jaw. The agent was shocked out of sleep and into the harsh grip of waking fear.

"Where squaw and son?" the Apache rasped.

"Fort!" Grainger croaked. "Crane and Pinner took them. Christ, what're you doin'?"

"Looking for what is mine," the Apache replied, swinging the rifle away from the agent's head. Then he launched it back again, on a lower trajectory. The end of the barrel smashed into Grainger's temple and the white man plunged into unconsciousness with a low moan.

Cuchillo sensed the presence of an intruder and whirled around, leveling the Spencer. But he stayed his finger on the trigger as he recognized White Dog framed in the doorway.

"You have no stomach for killing," the newcomer rasped, reaching the bedside in three strides, knocking aside the rifle barrel and drawing his knife, still wet with the blood of the whore. Cuchillo was held in a frozen stance as his fellow Apache plunged the knife into the closed right eye of the unconscious man. It made a squelching sound as he withdrew the blade. Cuchillo moved into the living room as White Dog claimed another scalp for his belt.

The power of White Dog's contemptuous stare drew Cuchillo's attention. "You are not fit to lead warrior band," the other accused. "A brave who cannot kill! Such a brave did our people think would one day be chief! You are not a brave, Cuchillo. You are a squaw!"

There was no stirring of Cuchillo's temper as he faced the soft-spoken insults. Just self-disgust that the words of his accuser were true. A harder blow at Grainger would have smashed the man's skull and killed him. But the swing had been pulled. He had purposely used less than his full strength.

“But your plan is good,” White Dog went on. “I will lead, but I will use your plan.”

Cuchillo nodded his consent. But his shame-faced expression was suddenly wiped out by a look of grim determination. “My instructions about John Hedges will still be observed,” he said tersely.

White Dog seemed on the point of dismissing the comment.

Cuchillo hardened his expression and the words he spoke seemed like chips of granite hurled at the other Apache. “I will kill the man who harms him. For such an act, I have the stomach, White Dog.”

White Dog gave a curt nod. “So be it. Your squaw and child are at the fort?”

Cuchillo nodded.

“Then I will give the signal.”

Cuchillo responded by turning toward the tiny kitchen of the house. In here was a window of the kind that opened. He pushed it wide and slid through, pressing himself full-length to the ground. Above him, White Dog leaned out and struck a store-bought match, cupping it in his hands to conceal all but the fringes of the glow from the fort. Cuchillo bellied away, suddenly realizing why he had not been able to yet claim his first death.

Chapter 10

UGLY INDIAN SAW the short-lived flare of the match before the north wind blew it out. The scar from which he had derived his name made his face more grotesque than ever as its shape was altered by a grin. He was standing between the two army horses and as he saw the signal he released the reins and stepped back. His arms rose and fell, the palms of his hands striking a stinging blow at the rump of each horse. The animals snorted, kicked and lunged into a gallop.

Their nostrils were flared, picking up the familiar scents of the fort. Their hooves beat frantically against the trail. Ugly Indian made no sound as he ran back to join the waiting group in the gully.

The ring of sentries heard the urgent approach of the horses and swung their rifles to readiness, peering across the roofs of the trading post buildings at the dark shapes rushing down the trail.

“Get Cook!” the sergeant yelled at the enlisted man standing closest to him. “Two riderless horses. Shod and saddled. They gotta be Hagen’s and Lyall’s.”

Brevet Lieutenant Joseph Cook was the duty officer. He was supposed to remain alert. But he was dozing in Crane’s chair in the office of the commanding officer. He had reasoned that if his superior officers were not worried by the non-appearance of the scouts—or at least gave the impression they were not—there was no need for him to lose sleep over it. So, reassured by the strength of the guard, Cook had undertaken his duty in the usual relaxed manner.

It was a harsh return to waking when the trooper pounded on the door, burst in, and blurted out the message. The man’s loud, frightened tones carried far beyond the confines of the office. The voice, combined with the clatter of hooves on

the bridge and the shouts of the sentries as they tried to catch the panicked horses, was more than adequate to wake all but the soundest sleepers in the bunkhouses and officers' quarters. Lamps sprang into brightness and doors jerked open. Partially dressed officers and men spilled out into the compound. Stabled horses sensed human fear and snorted, kicking against their stalls.

Cuchillo gave a low grunt of satisfaction and snaked quickly from the cover of one small house to the other. He reached the one closest to the bridge—in which Nathan Ford lived—and waited. A stack of trash gave him a concealed vantage point from which he could see the furor of noisy activity in the compound.

"There's blood on this horse!"

"It's Hagen's nag!"

"Hagen's dead. So's Lyall!"

"Jesus, the Apaches!"

"Murderin' skunks."

"Let's go get 'em."

Mostly, the voices were a high volume babble. But occasionally a comprehensible snatch could be heard. And screamed commands from officers and non-coms trying to restore order—which for a long time were ignored. Cuchillo knew he must make his move soon, and he raised himself into a crouch to lunge forward.

Above and behind him, a window was thrown open: "You ain't goin' nowhere except to Hell, Injun!" Nathan Ford rasped, thrusting the Remington toward Cuchillo.

The din from the fort had roused the storekeeper from his drunken, grief-stricken sleep and as he jerked up in bed, a movement outside the window had caught his attention. He had run into the living room, snatched the gun from the holster on the table, and peered out through the window overlooking the rear of the house. The tall figure of Cuchillo was unmistakable.

The Apache stared into the face of death, represented by the awesome black hole which was the gun's muzzle. Ford grinned and squeezed the trigger. The hammer jerked and jammed. Fear contorted Ford's features as he stared down at the gun and saw he had picked up the wrong weapon. This was the revolver which had been broken by the rifle shot in the box canyon.

The uproar from the fort was not loud enough to mask a rifle shot. Something sparkled faintly on the periphery of the Apache's vision and as he threw himself toward the man at the window, he released his grip on the rifle and reached into the heap of rubbish with his left hand. His fist folded around the smooth neck of a broken bottle. He swung his arm, the jagged, needle-pointed shards of glass directed for a silent kill.

Ford was an instant too late in shaking himself free of the immobilizing surprise and fear. As he brought up his head, the awful blow struck home. A dozen keen edges of glass pierced through the scrawny flesh of his jaw and throat. Blood spurted, outwards and internally. Such was the power behind the stab that the victim was lifted bodily from the floor. The top of his head was smashed against the window frame lintel. His skull caved in as shards of broken glass were washed into his lungs by a rush of blood.

Cuchillo lowered the body to the floor and released his grip on the bottleneck. He crouched behind the trash pile and picked up the Spencer, his mind easy. Now he had claimed the first death and there was literally blood on his hands. His reasoning had been proved correct. He did have the stomach for killing, but the need had to be strong. The need to kill Ford had double-strength: to satisfy a thirst for personal vengeance; Ford's lies were responsible for Chipeta's capture. And for self-preservation; Ford died or Cuchillo died.

Some semblance of order was being brought to the melee in the compound of Fort Davidson. The biting wind had driven many men back into their quarters to don protective clothing. Crane and Pinner were examining the loose horses while other officers ordered men into ranks. Many frightened eyes raked over the high ridges as nervous hands caressed rifles. Cuchillo angled away from the rear of the houses, snaking along on his belly. Only one pair of eyes followed his progress but the mind behind them decided to take no action. John Hedges got back under his bed covers. He did not own a gun. He stared up at the dark ceiling and tried to still his trembling body. He did not succeed.

Captain Crane's head was pounding with a persistent ache from the effects of the liquor he had swallowed earlier. He listened fearfully as Pinner, more composed and clear-headed, outlined the alternative courses of action open to the fort commander. Crane would have liked to believe Hagen and Lyall had been slaughtered by a small group of renegades, perhaps from Borderline or maybe intruders into the territory. He would have liked to believe that the Apaches at the rancheria slept blissfully unaware of what had happened. But he knew he was long overdue a piece of the dirty end of life. It was a strong possibility Black Horse had ordered all his warriors on to the warpath. But would they attack Davidson, or were they waiting to ambush troopers sent to investigate the reason for the loose horses?

By the time the entire strength of the fort was arrayed before him, the men's faces set in expressions of grim expectancy, the captain had decided which of Pinner's suggestions to accept.

Twenty troopers under the command of Brevet Lieutenant Cook would be dispatched at all speed to the Borderline *Rancheria*. If they met slight resistance, they were to fight. If the whole tribe were stirred up, they were to return.

Cuchillo was in the dry ditch at the extreme southern perimeter of the fort as the men assigned to the scouting detail ran across the compound to the stables. While all eyes had been focused upon the obese figure of Crane, the Apache had made a wide swing to the west and south of Davidson. Had the sentries been ordered to return to their posts, he could not possibly have reached the cover of the ditch without being seen.

Once this preliminary objective was attained, he was able to make faster time. He raised himself on to all fours and loped along the bed of the man-made gully, completing a quarter of its curving length, which brought him to the eastern side of the fort, with the buildings between his position and the ranks of soldiers.

Crane was addressing the men who were to remain at the fort, ordering them to draw extra ammunition, detailing gunners to man the howitzers, and urging the utmost vigilance.

Cuchillo could see several men between the gaps which separated the buildings and knew he could not chance leaving cover yet.

Pinner gave the command which broke the men from attention and sent them running toward the arsenal.

The tall Apache hauled himself out of the ditch and powered forward into a flat-out sprint. He reached the rear wall of the headquarters building and stretched up to push the Spencer onto the flat roof. He found a foothold on the window ledge of Crane's office and hoisted himself aloft. Only the lookout for the Apaches waiting in the high gully had sufficient elevation to see the buckskin clad figure flattened on the roof. He conveyed the news to the braves in a hissing whisper, vibrant with excitement. The braves began to daub their faces and chests with warpaint. At the trading post, White Dog in Grainger's house and the other braves in the saloon had already made this preparation for battle.

Cook veered his mount to the head of the column of troopers and at a nod from Crane, raised his hand and pushed it ahead of him. "Foorward!" he yelled, and the detail clattered across the bridge.

Hoofbeats were loud between the facades of the trading post buildings, but no civilians emerged. This fact nagged at Cook as he stepped up the pace to a canter. Back at the fort, Crane and Pinner were too busy with superintending the defenses to be concerned with the inhabitants of the post.

By the time the thud of hoofbeats had diminished into the distance and the back-marker of the column had gone from sight over the crest of the rise, most of the men left behind were in position. More than half of them were entrenched in the bed of the ditch, with rifle barrels resting on the outer rim. The rest, apart from the four gunners crouched behind the howitzers, waited tensely in the cover of the buildings.

Cuchillo, pressing his long body flat to the tarred roof, inched along until he was above the section he knew to be devoted to the punishment cell. More than one Apache had been forced to languish in the over-heated, cramped room with bars across the tiny windows and a heavy padlock on the stout door. It was logical to assume that Chipeta and her baby were being held in the cell. A low, childish whimper confirmed this.

In the silence which had fallen into the valley after the detachment of troopers had ridden out of earshot, the small cry of distress sounded awesomely plaintive. Emotion threatened to overwhelm the Apache on the roof as he heard the soft humming of Chipeta, seeking to calm the baby back into sleep. But he forced his mind to concentrate upon what must be done—coldly, calculating, knowing the risks but ignoring them.

He rolled on to his back and stretched up his good arm, thrusting the Spencer skywards. He did not squeeze the trigger. The sign was an adequate call to arms.

"Jesus, they're coming!" a terrified voice shouted.

Ugly Indian led the mounted braves out of the gully and screamed the first whoop of battle. The others took up the cry. The sound seemed to hover, palpably, in the air above the band of galloping riders.

"Fire, for Christ' sake!" Crane bellowed. "Blast the bastards!"

The men at the northwestern arc of the ditch sent a volley of shots toward the rushing advance. The Apaches in the trading post remained silent and out of

sight. The eastern sky became streaked with the first gray fingers of a new dawn. Cuchillo rolled over on to his belly again and stayed flat.

The galloping, whooping Apaches were out of accurate rifle range. A lucky bullet smashed into the painted forehead of a brave and cartwheeled him out of his pad saddle. Ugly Indian veered the band to the side.

Crane ran across the compound, ordering two of the howitzers to be lined up on the hostiles. Officers in the ditch sections not under threat of attack raked the valley terrain through field-glasses and failed to spot the slightest movement. Arrows showered up from the attackers. Many fell short. Two troopers were flung against the rear of the ditch, one dead as the other tugged at the shaft buried in his stomach.

“Every man to this section!” Crane roared between fusillades of shots.

Ugly Indian was leading the braves back and forth along a line about a hundred yards long, all the warriors letting fly with arrows from the gallop. Only as a brave wheeled his horse in a tight turn at each end of the line was he unable to jerk out an arrow, fit it to the bow and release it. When a brave pitched to the ground, gouting blood from a bullet wound, the survivors leapt their mounts over his body.

Soldiers leapt from inactive sections of the ditch and streamed across the compound in response to the captain’s order.

White Dog screamed an order. All braves at the post had rifles, looted from the civilians. A volley of shots exploded and six of the running soldiers pitched to the ground. Their blood sprayed their comrades. Agonized screams and cries of terror quivered against the wind which wafted away the acrid gunsmoke. Men dived for cover and a hail of lead was sent crashing into the buildings of the post.

Cuchillo saw his chance had come. The entire northwestern section of the ditch was thick with blue uniforms. It looked like a raging river, the puffs of gunsmoke the spume. Men threw up their arms in agony and collapsed amid the tumult.

Crane half rose to turn, seeking his second-in-command. White Horse took careful aim from behind the pile of rubbish which had hidden Cuchillo earlier. The side of the captain’s head exploded in a spray of blood and tom flesh.

Cuchillo moved to the front edge of the roof. He peered over it and caught his breath: the door of the cell hung open. A scream cut across the pandemonium of gunfire and groans, whoops and shouts. It was the scream of a woman, bursting out into the night through the open doorway.

Pinner had been in his quarters when the attacking Apaches were sighted. He had rushed outside and watched contemptuously as Crane panicked in the face of such a small-scale raid. When enough damage had been done—enough men had been killed or wounded—to establish the captain’s incompetence without doubt, he had made his move.

The key to the cell door padlock was in the captain’s office. He had obtained it, then moved quickly along the front of the headquarters building. As the door swung open, Chipeta had risen, clutching her baby hard against her naked breasts beneath the blanket.

Pinner knew precisely what he was going to do. The terrified squaw cowering before him was a hostage, held to ensure Apache good behavior. The Apaches were fighting and killing. The response was clear-cut.

The sneering lieutenant crossed the threshold of the tiny cell. Chipeta pressed herself against the wall. Pinner drew the golden-hilted, bejeweled dagger.

He lunged.

Chipeta screamed.

The first ray of morning sunlight stabbed between twin peaks on the eastern rim of the valley. It pointed, like an illuminated finger, at the center of the compound. The wind dropped.

Pinner had forgotten about the baby, concealed by the blanket the squaw clutched around her. The blade of the knife slit without a tremor of resistance across the soft skin of the infant throat, then plunged into the heart of the mother.

It was as if the scream was a thousand words, describing a vivid impression of Chipeta's death. Cuchillo's mind was filled with the word picture. He could not look beyond it, neither could he move for vital seconds.

Then Pinner burst through the doorway. The blanket had fallen away from Chipeta's body and she was naked as she lay in the officer's arms. In turn, her own arms were locked in a death grip around the tiny form of her son. Both bodies were stained with their life blood.

"Here, you bastards!" Pinner roared. "Here's what you came for!"

He flung his burdens to the ground. Mother and baby rolled over like a combined rag doll and became inert. The jewels in the golden hilt of the dagger caught the early rays of sunlight and looked like a bright, multi-colored fire against the flesh into which the blade was sunk.

The soldiers started to turn toward the source of the bellowed taunt. But the attacking braves had already seen the result of Pinner's brutal act. Their war cries rose to a crescendo. Those under the command of Ugly Indian followed him in turning toward the fort and racing at the mass of defenders. And those at the trading post, excepting only White Dog and Soft Tongue, broke from cover and fired on the run.

Cuchillo lunged out of shock into a powerful leap, his mouth drawn wide to emit a blood-curdling war cry as his feet hit the ground. From the ditch, the soldiers sent a murderous hail of rifle fire toward the charging Indians. At the center of the compound, Pinner whirled, stark terror contorting his face. Cuchillo raced toward him. The officer fumbled desperately at the fastening on his holster.

Cuchillo deliberately hurled the rifle to the side. To kill Pinner with a bullet was not enough. The Apache had to avenge his wife's murder with bare hands.

Red Tail, Man Without Horse and Spotted Face were bowled over on their suicidal run as more than a dozen bullets tore into each of their bodies. An equally lethal wall of lead was laid against the mounted braves. Men and ponies toppled, mingling their blood.

"Help me!" Pinner roared.

The towering figure of the Apache was less than ten feet from him and the officer knew he would be unable to get the Colt free. He whirled and launched into a run for his life.

The soldiers in the ditch swung around as the charging Indians fell. White Dog and Soft Tongue broke from the trading post and raced up the broken slope toward the gully where the spare horses were waiting. More than forty pairs of

eyes seemed to generate a physical power which slammed Cuchillo to a halt beside the corpses of his wife and child.

“Kill him!” Pinner screamed, still running, unaware that the Apache was no longer chasing him.

Through his terror, he realized he was in the line of fire. With still more than twenty yards separating him from the men, he hurled himself flat to the ground, clutching his hands to his head and protecting his face with his arms. A sob exploded from his fear-twisted lips.

The Apache knew his enemy was safe. Rifles were brought up to the aim and the two howitzers swung towards him. The dagger—the inanimate instigator of all that had happened—sparkled.

He whirled into a stoop, gripped the hilt and tugged the blade free of the sucking flesh as he powered into the first stride of a run. Both artillery pieces spoke in unison. It was the first time they had been used in the battle. The two shells exploded into the dead bodies. Blood-dripping, unrecognizable pieces of charred flesh were hurled into the air and rained down through the thick, drifting smoke.

Rifle fire crackled.

Cuchillo ran, zig-zagging and swaying his lithe body. Bullets whistled by his head and dug up spurts of dirt about his feet. Another fusillade of shots hissed after him. But he was around the angle of the end wall of the headquarters building. Glass shattered and wood splinters flew. The soldiers clambered out of the ditch and charged in pursuit. The Apache reached the lip of the, ditch and powered himself into a gigantic leap which carried him across. He landed sure-footed and regained his stride smoothly. He angled up the valley slope to the east, running for the rising sun. The soldiers tried to peer toward him, but the harsh brightness dazzled them. A few wild shots chipped at the rocky incline. The soldiers did not carry their pursuit across the fort’s perimeter.

“Pinner!”

It was less than fifteen minutes since the Apache had run from sight into the dazzle of the new day’s sun. Now, the distant shout caused the soldiers to halt in their duties of re-establishing Davidson’s defenses and attending to the dead and wounded. They peered up and saw him, a tiny figure on a ridge slightly to the side of the eye-frying orb of the sun.

“*It is I,*” the Apache bellowed, his hands cupped around his mouth and the natural acoustics of the valley carrying his voice down to the startled men below. “*You have not escaped. You will die at my hand. As will any white-eye who stands in my way.*”

In the gully on the far side of the valley, White Dog sneered as he addressed Soft Tongue. “He is a squaw. He has no stomach for killing.”

The two warriors turned their ponies and rode out of the gully.

“*I will do this thing!*” the lone Apache on the high ridge continued. “*And know that my revenge will be delivered under the name you gave me, White-Eyes Pinner. I am Cuchillo Oro!*”

He thrust high his injured hand and the jewels set in the gold created the impression of a flaming torch. Then the Apache sun around and strode from sight.

